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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Sex Worker Activism and the Regulatory Liminality of Rights

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Social Sciences

by

Alisson Rowland

Dissertation Committee:
Assistant Professor Erin Lockwood, Co-Chair
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2025

DEDICATION

To

all the badass organizers who continue to fight

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- Hyder, M., El Kurd, D., Gray, F., Cantwell-Chavez, D., & **Rowland, A.** (2022). Things that Can Go “Wrong”: Finding Our Own Way in Graduate School. APSA Preprints. doi:10.33774/apsa-2022-m1g8c

Other Publications

- Rowland, A.** (2024, December 3rd). Sex, Work, and Care. *Care Talk: Revaluing Care in the Global Economy*. <https://www.revaluingcare.org/sex-work-and-care/>
- Rowland, A.** (2023, June 15th). What the 48th International Sex Worker Activist Day Says About the Status of Human Rights. *Australian Outlook*. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/what-the-48th-international-celebration-of-sex-worker-activism-says-about-status-of-human-rights/>

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- Sex Workers are Researchers/Organizers! Insights for Engaging SWers in Research*, panel, International Studies Association, San Francisco, CA, 2024
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Sex Worker Activism and the Regulatory Liminality of Rights

by

Alisson Rowland

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Irvine, 2025

Erin Lockwood, Co-Chair

Cecelia Lynch, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines sex workers' political practices, showing how sex workers use informal and formal strategies to combat criminality and stigma. I develop the concept of regulatory liminality to describe valences of discursive power, legal ambiguity, and intersectional power hierarchies that mediate sex workers experiences in the world. Utilizing participant observation and interviews with sex workers and sex worker rights activists in the US, UK, and Australia, as well as textual analysis from academic, legal, and public media on sexworker-led organizations, my research highlights the understudied relationship between discursive practices, advocacy, and human rights in the context of sex work.

My dissertation first outlines why an intersectional approach is required to understand sex workers' political practices. I discuss the issues that many sex workers are organizing for, and some of the practices they use to do so. I also discuss my data collection methods, which include

field work in the US, UK and Australia. These field sites represent the three ideal-typical forms of regulation based on these frames: criminalization, legalization, and decriminalization respectively. Next, I discuss how the conflation of human trafficking with sex work stems from the “white slave hysteria,” which perpetuated views of sex workers as either criminals or victims. In Chapter 3, I turn to sex worker-led organizations to analyze the formal strategies sex workers draw upon, resist, or otherwise navigate the overlapping and often incongruent regulatory environments produced by these discursive frames. This includes public education and political advocacy. In Chapter 4, I turn towards their informal strategies such as mutual aid, information sharing and relationship building. Finally, I discuss both the impact of regulatory liminality on organizing, and how organizers are working to reimagine the stakes of organizing in ways that configure abolitionist visions of an anti-carceral world. This project locates sex workers’ organizing in a global lineage of grassroots mobilization from other criminalized and stigmatized communities, including queer, transgender, and civil rights movements.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The last few years have been marked by severe local and global threats to human rights. A global pandemic resulting in massive halts in the provision of public safety, anti-Black police violence sparking civil protests, and global declines in safe migration pathways are amongst just a few of these threats. These social issues are not isolated incidents. The perpetuation of state violence from all spheres impacts the most marginalized, including Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, transgender people, disabled people, neurodivergent people, and other marginalized communities. The interconnected nature of these social problems makes it apparent that marginalized communities cannot allow the state to forcibly remove them from public life; rather, their very societal precarity necessitates active and lively involvement in political and social debate. Community organising serves as an avenue for people targeted by the state to fulfill the deficits of formalised and centralised governance models. Community organising (re)imagines alternatives to state violence and policing rooted in notions of reciprocity, restorative justice, and mutual aid. Among the groups targeted by this violence, sex workers occupy a high level of precarity vis a vis the state not only due to the criminalised status of their labour in many countries, but due to many workers' overlapping identities which also are targeted by the state. Yet, sex workers are at the forefront of many social movements, and creatively mobilise to advocate for their rights.

This dissertation asks the following questions: how do sex workers navigate hostile regulatory environments? What strategies do they use to do so? In this chapter, I provide the theoretical framework to address these questions. I argue for an intersectional approach to understand sex workers' political practices by discussing how these practices both conform and

diverge from conventional forms of political participation. I also discuss how sex work is conceptualized, and how this impacts its regulation. Then, I provide an overview of the array of methods sex workers use to organize. Finally, I introduce the concept of regulatory liminality, which I develop throughout this dissertation to explain sex worker organizing strategies.

The rest of the chapter provides insight into the qualitative methods utilized to answer this project's research questions. These include how I collected data, the organizations participants were recruited from, and an overview of the data analysis process. I conclude the chapter by discussing the importance of the theoretical framework advanced in this chapter, and the structure for the following chapters of this dissertation.

An Intersectional Approach

Sex work refers to the consensual exchange of sexual services for money or other survival needs, including but not limited to housing, transportation and medicine (Fuentes, 2022). The regulation of sex work, as well as the societal treatment of sex workers, is structured via a system of power asymmetries, or what bell hooks referred to as the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (1984). hooks contends that these previously distinct spheres of power --colonial power, racial power, class power, and gender power-- feed into and sustain one another. These intertwined power hierarchies shape people's lived experiences, what Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to as intersectionality (1989). Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* identifies four interrelated domains of power that shape human action (1990). This matrix of domination includes the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power. These domains categorize how power hierarchies are socially (re)produced through hegemonic ideologies. These ideologies impact our social institutions (the structural domain), our social policies and practices (the disciplinary domain) and our microlevel, everyday interactions (the

interpersonal domain). Taken together, these hegemonic ideologies impact all levels of society and determine, among others, who is extended legal protections, whose rights are observed/or not, and who experiences exclusion and precarity. Black Feminist scholars such as hooks, Crenshaw, and Hill Collins refer to people of color, people experiencing poverty, queer people, and anyone who deviates from the Western white-cis het norm as experiencing systemic state violence due to the hierarchical organization of power.

Sex workers, as people deviating from many of these hegemonic norms, are a community subject to state surveillance and precarity. Many sex workers eschew capitalist and patriarchal values while still benefiting from them. Heather Berg's *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* argues that porn is at once work and a repudiation of work, a way to pay bills and a way to avoid the drudgery of a "straight" job. She conducts over eighty semi-structured interviews with porn performers and people who work in the industry to gain insight into how people think about their work, and how they intervene to "hack it". Many workers discuss the precarity they experience and describe the strategies they use for navigating and subverting it. For example, some performers take great pleasure in performing in porn. They discuss that by enjoying the work they do, they subvert the idea that they are victims of extraction. Others highlight the flexibility, high pay, and subversion of traditional boss-worker relations that allow them to skirt more conventional worker relations, and are beneficial enough to engage in porn.

Additionally, sex workers are often people who are already marginalized due to their citizenship status, disability, race, and other identity markers (Fuentes et. al., 2025; Jones 2022a, Jones 2022b; Blewett et. al., 2022). Exact demographic data on people engaged in sex work is difficult to collect because people often move in and out of the industry, are afraid to disclose being a sex worker, or are otherwise hesitant to report their status. However, some researchers

have conducted surveys that ask for demographic data. Among these, a community research report by Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf from Hacking//Hustling included a survey of 98 sex workers that reported 78% of respondents identified as LGBTQIA (2020). Additionally, their study reported that common reasons given for engaging in sex work included mental illness, chronic illness, and disability, as well as being a single parent and/or being a full-time student. A 2008 survey of 6,400 trans adults found that 39.9% of people who participated in the sex trade were Black and/or multiracial, making this group the highest in sex trade participation, with Hispanic or Latina/o respondents making up 33.2% of participants (Fitzgerald et. al., 2015). These identities are hierarchical, conferring more power and privilege to some at the expense of others. Existing spheres of power mediate the extent of their vulnerability by shaping social institutions, practices and behaviors.

Advocacy efforts for the rights of sex workers are historically linked to the organizing of Black, brown, trans, queer, and disabled folks, as their oppression is intertwined. Contemporary social movements are informed by centuries of work to gain socioeconomic and legal protections and to occupy public spaces. The Western sexual liberation movement, as it has been taken up within global governance initiatives, has been harkened by many sex workers as erasing these roots in place of whiter, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied origins (moon 2021; Kempadoo and Doezema, 2018). For example, Shawna Felkins demonstrates that white and otherwise privileged sex workers uphold systems of power, whereas multiply marginalized sex workers experience microaggressions by other sex workers (2022). Felkins states that neoliberal “empowerment” discourse within activist spaces is especially harmful for disabled sex workers. Given that sex work is treated as a reflection of how women in society are valued (Kirby 2022), the presence of anti-blackness, homophobia, sexism, and other hierarchies of oppression within

the movement for liberation is unsurprising. But it serves as fuel for organizers to not only push for the right to engage in the industry, but to center the lived experiences and knowledge of those most marginalized in the movement.

Healthcare is one axis that illustrates the imperative of intersectionality in sex work organizing. Sawicki et. al. (2019) assert that the misunderstanding of full service sex work by trusted organizations, such as the Center for Disease Control, indicates the need for a deeper understanding of the sex industry and who is participating in it. The perpetuation of culturally insensitive myths about sex work furthers stigma and impacts sex workers ability to receive care. Given the overrepresentation of people of color in the sex industry, the harm Sawicki et. al. (2019) documents are more severe for multiply marginalized people, including discrimination in the housing market, workplace, educational settings, healthcare and the criminal justice system. Additional harms come from mass incarceration, policing, and the surveillance state. Within the US context, but increasingly globally, mass incarceration disproportionately affects Black and brown, low-income, disabled, transient, and other marginalized communities. Incarceration is framed as an issue of criminality, but more often than not is about desirability politics and the extent to which a person's right to occupy public space is considered legitimate (Rodriguez 2022). Through a "queer critique of corrections" Rodriguez (2022) expands notions of criminalization to consider how processes of gentrification employ a disposability politics weaponized to exclude "undesirables." In societies across the world, sex workers are overwhelmingly "undesirable," evident in their legal status, social treatment, and interactions with carceral institutions. This makes it easier to exclude their needs from consideration when creating policy platforms around issues of gender equality and labor rights.

Fuentes (2023) employs a Black feminist disability framework to highlight how sex workers can push back against power hierarchies and the exclusion they entail. She combines Black feminist studies with Critical Disability studies to focus on the experiences of sex workers beyond the conventional cisgender able-bodied white woman. Fuentes builds on critiques that workers with marginalized identities such as trans/queer, Black, and brown workers have a fundamentally different experience than their white cishet counterparts. This framework is useful for understanding how intersectionality impacts the lives of sex workers, particularly how criminalization operates within larger systems of oppression. Fuentes' study emphasizes the role intersectionality plays in complicating workers' relationships with each other. While shedding light on various dimensions of criminality, she offers insight into the ways sex workers overcome stigmatization. Further, Fuentes (2021) documents how information sharing between sex workers can be a fruitful tool to mitigate harmful effects of whorephobia, or the fear and hatred of sex workers. Information sharing includes any information that supports sex workers in implementing safer and more effective working practices, such as how to vet a client or where to advertise services.

The efforts of sex worker researchers and organizers make it clear that sex work is intersectional¹. It is necessary to consider race, gender, disability, sexuality, and all other hierarchies of power if the goal is to work towards sex worker liberation, as the intertwined nature of sex worker oppression necessarily requires the liberation of all people. Only through the provision of human rights to people regardless of their relationalities --type of labor, gender, and/or race-- will we achieve a more equitable society.

¹ See this blog post for a more thorough conversation about the various social policy realms sex workers operate in, and the ways they work collectively to advance human rights: [What the 48th International Celebration of Sex Worker Activism Says About Status of Human Rights](#).

Whorephobia in the Law

The sex industry is referred to as the world's oldest profession. While sex work is not new, sex workers continuously find themselves fighting to establish the legitimacy of their very existence. Regardless of the status of sex work in the law --from completely criminalized, to a spectrum of legality, to decriminalized-- there is a constant tension between sex workers seeking to live their lives separate from carceralism and the systemic enforcement of the whorearchy.

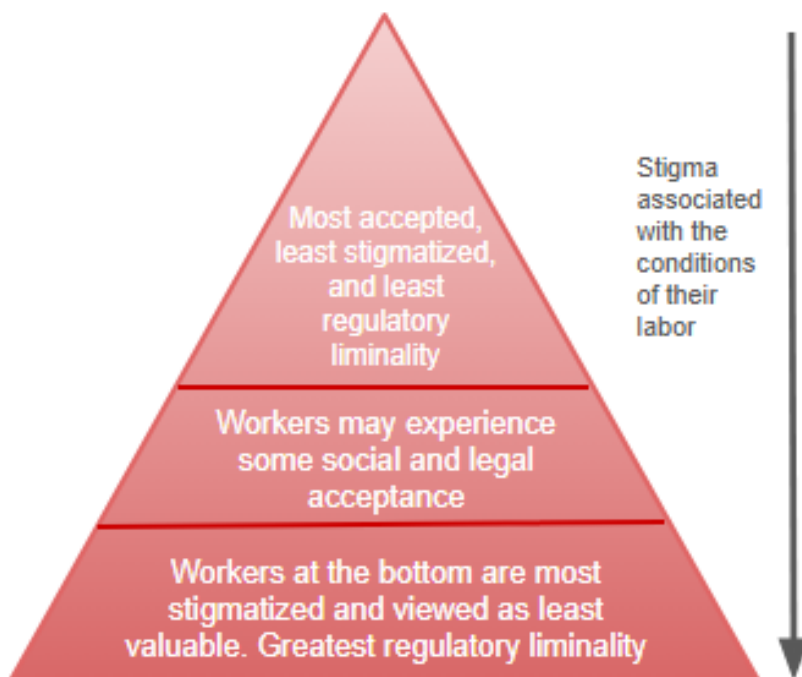
The whorearchy refers to the differential impact of stigma based on hierarchies of power amongst sex workers (Sawicki 2019). Its original context referenced the classism at play in the moral and legal stances of the industry; amongst the various forms this labor takes from cam work to full-service, the more client-based interactions a sex worker has, the “lower” her standing in the hierarchy. This not only represents public perceptions of sex work but becomes internalized by the worker herself. It also helps to explain why certain types of sex work are legalized and not others (Cox 2023). Whorephobias presence in legal systems is not simply about the social stigma that sex workers face, though it is about that too. Using the terminology “whorearchy” allows reference to the broader structural constraints workers face, and how these impact people's ability to navigate the world differently based on their relationalities.

Figure 1.1 below depicts the whorearchy and where sex workers map onto it. Workers at the bottom of the hierarchy experience the greatest stigma whereas those at the top are most socially accepted. While there are not fixed positions within the whorearchy, factors that impact a sex workers position include the level of client contact, a person's identities (race, gender, class), as well as the laws on the books about the kind of sex work someone engages in². This hierarchy has as much to do with the type of work a person engages in as their positionality, as

² For instance, in a location where some forms of sex work are legal and others are not, the worker operating “legally” may be less stigmatized because they are not explicitly engaged in criminal activity.

sex workers who are more privileged-- white, cisgender, wealthy, educated -- often experience the least stigma within the industry.

Figure 1.1 The Whorearchy



The whorearchy and the installation of whorephobia in the law also impact who is seen as a more worthy advocate. Amongst other workers and elite officials, sex workers are never viewed as experts over their lived experiences. Much of the whorephobia they experience are based on perceptions, but in most cases that is enough to justify their exclusion. Thus, Cooper (2022), a disabled dominatrix, published an autoethnography of their experiences to explore the linkages between disability and professional sex work. While they provide more detailed discussions of mobility aids and technology that allows them to perform their work in a fulfilling way, they continuously echo the need for greater attention to the axes between sex work, disability, and healthcare systems.

Like any industry, there are work-place abuses that tend to affect most heavily already vulnerable workers. Well-documented instances include unsafe working conditions, grooming, and a lack of consent (Kirby 2022). In sex work, consent is pivotal. When a worker's ability to consent is removed, it is no longer work. This is the dividing line between assault and sex work (Sawicki et. al., 2019). Simpson and Beer (2022) further illuminate the relationship between stigma, social safety and mobility. Their study draws on the experiences of student sex workers in the UK and Australia and gives insight into how the whorearchy operates in higher education. Many of the sex workers they engaged with were white, middle class, heterosexual, cisgender women. While they faced great hostility in their university stemming from whorephobia, their position within the whorearchy overall was relatively privileged due to their race, class, and other identity markers. Simpson and Beer demonstrate that while all sex workers in their study experienced whore stigma, their experiences still differed depending on their position within the whorearchy. Being young, white, able-bodied, educated, cisgender women are sources of social privilege that, along with the status as a student, acted as protective factors against stigma. Claiming the status of “student” shifted how others perceived them and reduced both the feelings and stigma of devaluation.

Given the legal standing of sex work, it is beneficial for sex workers to have other social statuses to mitigate the effects of whorephobia (Simpson and Beer 2022). A method to do this is for sex workers themselves to have a “vanilla job,” or to have proximity to non-sex workers. For example, sex worker activists seek alliances with non-sex workers to promote legitimacy of their grievances (Jeffreys, 2018). Examples of this include sex workers allying themselves with the labor rights movement, or working with health professionals to advocate for frequent testing and protected sex. Jeffreys’ (2018) analysis of sex worker partnerships with allies highlights the

difficulties such relationships entail. Due to stigma, moral policing, and the power asymmetries in knowledge-production, relationships with non-sex workers tend to reproduce the whorearchy rather than dismantle it. Jeffreys describes two case studies where sex worker activists were invited to speak in a public forum-- including in an academic setting and on a public broadcast-- and were met with hostility. In each of these instances, assumed allies actively sought out sex worker activists to invite and then combatted and negated their experiences. Additionally, Jeffreys et. al. (2011) describe organizations claiming to want to help sex workers who advocate for forced entry into sex worker workplaces and police involvement in the regulation of brothels. Often, these organizations take the perspective that sex work should be abolished to end gender-based violence. This is in direct opposition to what sex workers are organizing for. While this does not negate the potential benefits of such partnerships, it does push many sex worker organizers to create worker only spaces in their efforts to center their experiences and expertise in the work they do to dismantle stigma and oppression.

As I've argued, sex workers often sit at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Their criminalized status in most global labor markets, combined with the societal stigma they experience, heighten any existing precarities. Systems such as racism, sexism, classism, and transphobia invariably affect sex workers' experiences. Those who are cisgender, white, middle- or high-income, and have other privileges often experience less stigma and are less targeted by law enforcement. Some sex workers are able to leverage their privileged identities to assuage harm, but many others cannot. Because of this, sex workers do not experience the same levels of state violence. This can make it difficult to create a unified movement based on oppression. An intersectional approach to organizing is one method to reconcile the differential impacts of violence and harm against sex workers.

Understanding Political Practice

In this section, I first discuss how social movements are built and sustained. I use social movement to refer to the process of community-organizing that seeks wide-spread social and/or political change. Community organizing refers to “a process that is people-centered and geared towards [the] continuing capability building, self-reliance, and empowerment” (Manalili, 1990, page 65). While political opportunity, leadership dynamics and membership recruitment are all important for building a social movement, recent literature emphasizes intersectional solidarity as crucial for sustaining efforts. Then, I discuss how an attention to care as a political practice is both useful and necessary for expanding the scope of consideration for what is “political”. Though not often legible as a political practice, caring practices nonetheless seek to disrupt configures of power and reconfigure them anew. I conclude by discussing the stakes of a broader understanding of political mobilization to understand why and how sex workers mobilize.

Organizing and Sex Work

Social movement scholarship attributes successful collective action to the opening of political opportunity structures, leadership dynamics, and membership recruitment (Springer, 2001). Opening of political opportunities refers to public evidence of institutional weakness or vulnerabilities. This can include greater ability of the public to participate in politics, evidence of ruptures amongst elites and/or new alliances (Tarrow, 1994). For example, during the civil rights movement there was a political climate that encouraged marginalized communities to build upon the wins of each other in order to advance greater rights. There was also a widening in forms of political participation and protest that encouraged greater alliances and coalition-building between movements. This can be seen in the bridging of gay and lesbian rights groups toward

the umbrella of LGBT, which prior to the civil rights era often were segregated by biological sex (PBS, n.d).

Leadership dynamics also play a central role in whether a social movement is successful or not. Organizations are guided and sustained by their leadership, whether that leadership structure is informal or formal or hierarchical or collective (Springer, 2001). A clear leadership model can help sustain an organization. Otherwise, the potential for diffused leadership among members and factionalism emerge. Social mobilization is most likely to occur in settings where leadership has stable and significant financial resources, as well as ample time to devote to maintaining organizational longevity. In cases where a social movement develops organically and is led by informal grassroots organizations, it can become difficult to sustain due to a lack of both time and resources by leadership.

In addition to greater options for political participation and the role leadership dynamics play, the emergence and longevity of social movements is depending upon the ability to recruit membership. Social mobilization often relies on preexisting interpersonal networks (Springer, 2001). Through friends, relatives, and colleagues, people may be encouraged to attend general meetings, participate in rallies, or otherwise become involved in organizing. This is distinct from leadership dynamics, which impacts how an organization is structured and functions. Rather, this has to do with how a cause or social issue becomes more widely taken up within the public. Through interpersonal networks, an issue distinct within a community can have larger buy-in from other societal actors. For example, undocumented activists have been able to encourage their friends, family, and other members in their social circle who are naturalized and birth-right citizens to publicly speak out condemning the Trump administration's harsh employment of anti-immigration policies.

Among the documented tools and conditions useful for social mobilization are social media, political education, and interpersonal networks. In the 21st century, digital technology plays an integral role in activism (Jackson et. al., 2020). Marginalized communities utilize social media in order to form communities, spread awareness, and create counter-narratives. Education is also a common strategy for communities who have been historically marginalized, delivered through workshops at college campuses, academic conferences, and in informal settings (Combahee River Collective, 1977). For example, student organizations demonstrating for Palestine utilized teach-ins as a method to encourage the study body to learn more about the on-going genocide and become politically active.

Conventional strategies of social mobilization often rely on several factors internal to a movement, which includes leadership dynamics and the interpersonal networks of group members. In terms of strategies of political mobilization, organizations seek to educate the public on social issues and spread awareness of these issues through social media and other public avenues. Education can take on the form of workshops, in person or virtually. Spreading awareness can look like peaceful protests, or more disruptive demonstrations, depending on the leadership and organizational goals. To sum, a successful social movement is predicated on there being a window of opportunity for political action, a strong leader, and sustainable member recruitment. Movements draw on various strategies including political advocacy, public education, and interpersonal networking.

While these are important factors and strategies, intersectional organizing has been increasingly emphasized as necessary for sustaining social movements and encouraging the largest potential gains. Davies et. al. (2024) coined the term “deliberative marginalization” to describe how the most vulnerable groups come to be excluded from policies seeking to redress

harm. Their research considers local reparations cases and the promises and limitations of policy to meet the demands of reparations as a social movement. Fuentes et. al. (2025) discuss a similar phenomenon with LA-based policies seeking to reduce sex work criminalization. While intending to benefit sex workers, policies are often crafted so that the most marginalized workers' needs remain unmet.

This exclusion within policy can be mirrored by exclusion within organizing spaces. A successful social movement requires solidarity to be sustainable, defined as “the process of mutual association” (Fantasia 1988; p.11). Davies et. al. (2024; p. 5) argue “solidarity is forged through friction,” meaning that solidarity cannot be built without attention to within movement divisions across power and privilege. Sex workers are not a monolith, coming to the industry with significant differences in background and lived experience. Creating solidarity within the sex worker’s rights movement requires attention to these lines of difference through intentional solidarity-building.

Care as a Political Practice

Care has long preoccupied feminist thinkers as an essential feature of social life. Care is both how people feel, and what people do. As a site of mind-body connection, care --what it is, how a person enacts it, and how it sustains our lifeworld-- has important implications for both scholars, practitioners, and organizers invested in creating a more equitable world. I contend that an intersectional approach to care provides a framework for understanding the political roots of sex worker mobilization.

An emphasis on care in academic literature emerged as an alternative to the gendered bias that existed within studies of moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan’s perspective on care emphasized a preoccupation with sustaining social relations and interconnectedness, highlighting

networks of relationships over time. Gilligan's explanation of a care perspective was rooted in a refutation of universalizing "masculine" definitions of morality, but the extent to which care itself is a gendered concept continues to be a subject of debate.

Scholars that conceptualize care as rooted in motherhood connect it to feminine attributes. Care as a gendered practice determines assigned female at birth (AFAB) people are predisposed to "care for" society due to maternal biological imperatives (Noddings, 1984). This assumes AFAB people are predisposed to self-sacrifice and to adjudicating situations circumstantially rather than by a universal standard. As with the way motherhood is viewed as a social obligation, care itself becomes an obligation for AFAB people to perform given their attunement to preserving relationships and communities.

A companion to this perspective builds upon a gendered notion of care to emphasize the often unpaid and unrecognized labor involved in performing care work (Federici, 1975). The sexual division of labor imposed by the patriarchy assigns responsibilities to AFAB people to care for, i.e. manage, the household. Since care work is gendered, the value and labor of it is socially and economically devalued. The goal in elaborating care as a gendered form of labor comes from the desire to recognize it as a form of work, and to have its value recognized within a capitalist system. Such recognition both legitimizes care work and offers women an opportunity to integrate more fully into the existing system. This conceptualization of care hinges on a gendered analysis of power that seeks to bring attention to the maintenance of social inequality through practices of care.

There have been critiques of gendered perspectives of care for reifying gender essentialism or overemphasizing gendered power relations (Spelman, 1988; Hoagland, 1991; Tronto, 1994). Despite these critiques, the underlying analysis that care work is over-performed

by AFAB people, and that their work is both assumed and overlooked, remains a facet of social life. Nadasen (2023) argues the care economy is an institutionalized, hierarchical system operating as an arena for capitalism accumulation. The exploitation of capitalist care relations is part and parcel of that process of accumulation. However, she also emphasizes the role of resistance in creating transformative grassroots care collectives, and the ability to create a caring world.

The previous perspectives on care inform gendered critiques of both institutions and societal practices. The gendered and racialized nature of care is well-documented through empirical research on care work (Tronto, 1993; Hankivsky, 2014; Robinson, 2011). Fisher and Tronto (2003) extend upon critiques of care work by exploring the intersections of care ethics, feminism, and power. Prior conceptualizations centered on understanding the “what”; what is care and its relationship to individuals and society. Fisher and Tronto center their analysis on the implications of care and how the dynamics of care relationships serve to explain contemporary power configurations. Their perspective establishes care as both a moral and political concept, explaining social issues such as why women and marginalized communities are often overburdened with the responsibilities of care work.

Fisher and Tronto (2003) define care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (34). They recognize the importance of social relations in impacting caring practices, defining four interrelated phases in the caring process, “caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving” (34). These phases can be understood as a process of thinking, assigning responsibility for, doing, and receiving caring activities. Along all steps of this process, there is room for power relationships to impact who is performing care, what they are caring about, and the actual practices they use to

provide care. By making explicit the ways power impacts care, Fisher and Tronto extend a gendered critique of care work to include an emphasis on the political work it does. Scholars such as Robinson (2011) further argue “relations of care in a global context are constructed by relations of power determined primarily by gender, class, and race” (p.5).

The perspective of care as both processes and practices that sustains our life world Fisher and Tronto (2003) advance is justice-oriented and necessarily political. To truly build a world where, “we can live in it as well as possible” there must be adequate attention to the intersections of power impacting both the provision and reception of care (Fisher and Tronto 2003, 34). Bridging feminist studies on the ethics of care with explicit attention to intersectional theories attends to the ways race, gender, sexuality, ability, class and more complicates our networks of relations (Hankivsky, 2014). Intersectionality is a useful framework to understand the relationship between power and care work. An intersectional approach is attentive to the different experiences people have based on their identities. Applying this to care work highlights how care is gendered and racialized; hierarchies of power impact who is expected to perform care, who receives it, and even how care is practiced. The role of power in care relations becomes evident when considering how the needs of certain groups are prioritized over others. The onus to care about societal survival and wellbeing is often put on society’s most marginalized members. In care work, an intersectional approach highlights dimensions of power and politics otherwise made invisible.

For sex workers, this is no less true. Those active in organizing spaces tend to be people whose very safety and security are dependent on mobilizing against state violence. Across regulatory environments, sex workers who are BIPOC, immigrant, low-income, and otherwise marginalized, are performing an abundance of care work. This has to do with the systemic

distribution of power, as well as with whorephobia and the whoerarchy. Many regulatory decisions are implicitly and explicitly formulated due to whorephobia. Whorearchy is related but distinct from whorephobia, referring to how sex workers are positioned within societal arrangements of power (Fuentes, 2023).

Defining care as a form of obligation, as a form of labor, and as a set of political relationships are all representative of the function of care. Care embodies a set of practices and processes with implications for social equality. Care remains a contested concept, but there is some consensus that people perform care out of an obligation to others and society broadly. Sex workers operate on socio-legal fringes, experiencing both criminalization and social stigmatization. How sex workers mobilize despite these constraints highlights the importance of everyday acts of survival. Understanding how sex workers conceptualize and enact care requires an intersectional framework that accounts for the ways power impacts care practices, and how those same practices can be used to challenge and resist these hierarchies.

How Sex Work is Conceptualized (and Regulated)

The whorearchy is sustained by stigma and criminalization. There are three ideal-typical models used to regulate sex work: criminalization, legalization (partial criminalization), and decriminalization. Criminalization refers to both the sale and purchase of sex being illegal; legalization refers to the purchase of sex being illegal, and the sale of sex being legal in certain contexts; and decriminalization refers to both the sale and purchase of sex being legal. Criminalization is the most common model used to regulate sex work, with the sale and purchase of sex work, as well as sex work organizing, being illegal in the United States (US) (NSWP). Figure 2 below is a global map of sex work laws created by the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP). All areas that are not white (any area that has red lines) criminalizes sex work.

Figure 1.2

Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws



Source: *Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP)*

While criminalization is widely utilized, there is little evidence to suggest that it is an effective model. In fact, there are many documented forms of harm inflicted upon sex workers due to the criminalization of sex work (Gilbertson et al., 2019; ACLU, 2020; Blunt and Wolfe, 2020; Weisner, 2020; Capous-Desyllas and Panichelli, 2021; Fischer, 2022). Criminalization reduces the ability of sex workers to utilize established safety and vetting procedures. This requires sex workers to forgo these procedures in order to maintain clientele. It can also push them to engage in other risky work behaviors. Legalization, also referred to as partial criminalization, removes prohibitions against sex work, but continues to criminalize clients and many of the safety practices sex workers use to engage in their work. For instance, legalization often prevents workers from working together under the guise of this constituting as an illegal brothel, which is a common safety practice. Legalization does not solve the issues of full criminalization, as many legal sex workers are still subject to police raids and arrest (Musto et al, 2021).

Though sex workers have advocated for decriminalization for decades, policymakers have yet to head this call. Decriminalization refers to the removal of all criminal penalties on the sale and purchase of sexual acts. It is distinguished from legalization, which often retains a

reduced scope of penalties on sex workers, and full criminalization of their clients.

Decriminalization has become a rallying cry for sex workers and advocates because it addresses many of the core concerns motivating the movement. These include working without fear of arrest, jail, or other forms of criminalization and full and uninterrupted access to work-based protections. Given that police abuse against sex workers appears to be routinized and naturalized, decriminalization could reduce the ability of police to coerce or extort sex workers (ACLU, 2020; Stardust et. al., 2023). Decriminalization could also increase sex worker safety by reducing the violence they experience from clients as well. Clients can take advantage of sex workers by capitalizing on their fear of arrest and lack of protection under the law. Laws such as SESTA/FOSTA passed in the US in 2018 increases violence against sex workers by conflating sex work with sex trafficking. Decriminalization could not only remove the threat of arrest against sex workers but also serve to remove all forms of discriminatory legislation sex workers currently experience.

The increased intensity of anti-sex worker legislation mirrors a transnational resurgence in anti-transgender and queer legislation, and the continual violence and neglect of communities of color (Fuentes et al, 2024; Fuentes et al, 2024b). There have been significant mobilizations within the US to adopt a Nordic Model to regulate sex work as a pathway to remedy the violence workers experience. The Nordic Model, also referred to as the End Demand model, legalizes the sale of sex and criminalizes the purchase of it. It is seen in Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Canada. Unlike conventional legalization models, it does not create licensing systems. This is a benefit, as licensing systems are critiqued for creating a “two-tiered” system of sex work where some workers are able to operate legally, and others remain criminalized. However, the Nordic model is not without criticism. While its intent is to end demand for sex work by targeting

clients, in effect it increases the risk that sex workers experience. It does so by making the clients who seek out sexual services more risky to sex workers, because clients who continue to do so are those who are willing to risk criminal punishment (Decriminalize Sex Work, 2024).

Additionally, sex workers operating in regions that implement a Nordic model claim they experience significant police harassment and discriminatory eviction practices.

In some cases, the push for the End Demand model is by well-intentioned but ill-informed civilians³, and sex workers who believe legalization will promote stronger labor laws. In other instances, it is a deliberate attempt to sacrifice the needs of the most marginalized in the sex worker community to benefit an elite few. In addition to the research that documents the harms of criminalization, there is accompanying scholarship that highlights the negative effects of legalization⁴ (Scarlet Alliance, 2022; ACLU, 2023). Legalization can cause greater harm to sex workers who are already marginalized by the state, including survival sex workers and Black transgender sex workers (ACLU, 2020). This issue is usually under the purview of national and subnational governments. However, the deferral of this responsibility to these localized forms of government allows international organizations to claim ignorance, or to otherwise halt addressing these concerns through global coordination. Sex work as a human rights issue is connected to labor rights, immigration, care work, informal labor, and more (Rowland, 2023).

Human Trafficking and the Victim/Criminal Binary

Conventional understandings of sex work often fall into a victim-criminal binary; sex workers are either victims of human trafficking, or deviants corrupting society. This false dichotomy serves to erase sex worker's agency and devalue their labor, while also drawing

³ Civilian is a term used to refer to people who are not sex workers.

⁴ Also referred to as partial criminalization

attention from actual survivors of trafficking. Popular discourses around sex work are compounded by criminalization in the United States. Though some forms of intimate labor-- an umbrella term for various professions which require touch and closeness --are legal, such as body massage and camming, other forms of sex work remain subject to hyper-policing and surveillance (Boris and Salazar Parrenas, 2010).

The United Nations (UN), as an international organization whose goal is to maintain international peace and security and coordinate international cooperative efforts, sets the normative agenda on sex work. The UN both considers sex work as a violation of human rights and argues for sex workers to have the same human and labor rights as others (UN 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others; 2023 UN Working Group guidance document “Elimination discrimination against sex workers and securing their human rights”; see chapter 2). In addition, the UN Human Rights Council appointed independent human rights experts that advocated for all states to adopt the End Demand Model, which seeks to eliminate clients' demands for sex as a method to eliminate trafficking and violence against women. These UN Special Rapporteurs did so in a report they released a report which conflated sex work with sex trafficking (OHCHR, 2024). This perspective conflates sex work with sex trafficking.

This conflation makes it difficult for sex workers to access the full spectrum of rights afforded to other workers since it does not acknowledge it as a legitimate form of labor like any other form of exploited labor. The spectrum of coercion and consent that exists in the industry is flattened in order to increase policing and surveillance tactics under the guise of reducing human trafficking. In actuality, many survivors of human trafficking exist in industries other than the sex industry such as agriculture, domestic care work, and manufacturing (Musto et al, 2021).

Additionally, many human trafficking initiatives are mediated by white saviorism and negatively impact sex workers (Kempadoo and Doezema, 2018). White saviorism is not only a state of mind whereby (white) westerners perceive themselves as more capable, intelligent, and thus “developed”. It is also a concrete unequal power structure between the North and South based on white supremacy and exploitation (Sondarjee and Kanakulya, 2023). Critiques of human trafficking initiatives white saviorism problem gesture to westerners desire to treat trafficking as an issue “over there” rather than one perpetuated by capitalist overconsumption domestically. Anti-trafficking agendas are often motivated by savior complexes rather than a genuine interest in addressing core issues resulting from labor exploitation. Rather than advance sex workers’ rights, human trafficking movements increase surveillance and criminalization of sex workers through police raids, deportation, and other forms of targeted violence.

Carceral models of regulating sex work position the criminalization of workers as necessary for promoting public safety (Jeffreys 2023). This view conflates sex work, a consensual practice, with human trafficking, a condition of forced labour (see chapter 2). This conflation is not only inaccurate, but materially harmful for both workers and trafficking victims. Many policy efforts to reduce trafficking do not have their intended outcomes (Rowland 2023, Stardust et al. 2023, Community Legal Centres Queensland 2022, Stardust et al. 2021). Instead, criminalising measures to “end demand” for sex work increase the criminalisation and stigma sex workers experience (O’Brien 2015). Stardust et al (2021, p. 143) defines stigma as “a social process of exclusion...shaped by the exercise of social, economic, and political power.” Stigma operates on all levels of our social world and shapes our laws, practices, and behaviours. Due to the stigmatised nature of their labour, sex workers must navigate overlapping and contradictory regulations in order to meet their needs. Even efforts which allow for limited instances of legal

sex work erode existing safety practices for workers by limiting the number of clients willing to face imprisonment or other punitive measures. States that pursue criminal frameworks, and even legislation frameworks through licensing, impose carceral methods of surveillance and policing, which create increased risk for sex workers.

The popular narrative around age verification bills and bills like the 2018 Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (SESTA/FOSTA) are that they protect children. This bill package amended Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act to make internet platforms liable at the state and civil levels for content posted by their users. While the stated intent was to address sex trafficking, in actuality it conflated sex trafficking with sex work (Fuentes et. al., 2025). This negatively impacted sex workers by exposing them to further online censorship, removal of their online accounts, the closure of their online payment processors, and increased surveillance experienced online. However, the ways regulations are imposed at national and sub-national levels are often counterintuitive to this goal. Firstly, these laws have not been proven to result in a reduction of minors accessing adult content (Free Speech Coalition, 2024). Age verification can take many forms, from simply clicking an “above eighteen” option, to being required to upload a photo of an ID. VPNs can be used to evade age checks, some websites might not fall into the legal purview of “adult content” but still have mature material on its site that young people accidentally access, or minors may simply click the “over eighteen” option and access the content anyway. Rather than protect children, these laws enforce censorship and make businesses wary of hosting any kind of adult content on their websites. For instance, Onlyfans, one of the

most well-known adult content sites, faced significant pressures related to its usage by sex workers and almost banned the content from its site completely⁵.

In December 2023, the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls released a guide on the human rights of sex workers. This document was created due to a call for input by the UN's Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls regarding prostitution and violence against women and girls (see chapter 2). It referred to the criminalization of sex work as a human rights violation and made an explicit distinction between sex work and sex trafficking. This is a marked shift in the global conversation on sex work. Previously, global discourse has conflated human trafficking with sex work, and proliferated the criminalization and surveillance of sex work (see chapter 2). Anti-trafficking discourse can be traced to international agreements in the late 19th and early 20th century that perpetuated moral panic and white slavery hysteria (see chapter 2). This discourse was proliferated by anti-trafficking NGOs, and impacted national and subnational legislation on sex work. As long as anti-trafficking initiatives continue to be conflated with sex work, sex worker organizers will confront an uphill battle that requires them to perform the legitimacy of their work in order to receive rights and recognition. Sex work scholars and activists refer to this phenomenon as the “happy hookers” stereotype which requires sex workers to flatten the nuances of their experiences and act as if the sex industry was always empowering (Allan, 2004). So rather than be able to discuss the very real exploitation and violence that occurs in the industry, like with most precarious jobs, sex workers are unable to acknowledge this without

⁵ On August 19th, 2021 OnlyFans announced it would ban “sexually explicit” content on October 1. This was due to the site's founder and chief executive Tim Stokely claiming banks are refusing to process payments associated with adult content. Stokely mentioned BNY Mellon, Metro Bank, and JPMorgan Chase were blocking intermediary payments, preventing workers from receiving earnings, and penalizing businesses supporting sex workers. Six days after this announcement, it announced it suspended the policy change after banks assured the company adult content would not be penalized. Though sexually explicit content was never banned on the platform, content creators were infuriated by its actions and some either lost subscribers or left the platform. (Barry, 2021)

risking bad actors taking that as evidence that sex work should be abolished and/or criminalized.

Sex Work as Labor

The uptake of antitrafficking initiatives and efforts to “save” sex workers has had punitive effects. In Los Angeles alone, these efforts have corresponded to increased surveillance and criminalization of sex work (Gilbertson et. al, 2019). This is due to the inherent assumption within human trafficking conceptualizations that sex workers cannot consent and lack agency. As such, their actions are coerced, and their victimhood is evident by virtue of their engagement in the industry. Sex workers and allies have largely pushed back against this perspective through the rallying call that “sex work is work.” The term sex work itself was coined by Carol “Scarlot Harlot” Leigh, a sex worker activist and co-founder of the Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network (BAYSWAN). She first suggested it as an alternative to the use of “Sex Use Industry” in the 1978 Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media conference, stating that “Sex Work Industry” more aptly described what women were doing rather than what was done to them. Shifting this terminology from “sex use” to “sex work” allied the industry to worker movements and highlighted the agency of the people within it.

Since its introduction in the late 1970s, the use of the term sex work has been broadly taken up in feminist and activist spaces, as well as scholarly ones. This conceptualization opened up the possibility to enfold the issues and criminalization of sex workers within a broader labor rights movement, along with domestic and informal workers. It also lent itself to particular objectives for activists, who sought to conform the industry to more formalized and established ones. This included pushing for the legalization of sex work and, eventually, its unionization.

Referring to sex work as work allowed greater engagement by Marxist-feminists in allying sex work to other issues within the feminist movement, such as Wages for Housework.

Federici and other Marxist-feminists highlighted the ways unpaid reproductive labor (including sex) served the interests of capital (Federici, 2003). Fortunati furthers this analysis and likens both paid and unpaid reproductive labor, arguing that in both instances sex is work (1995). A Marxist-feminist analysis of sex work thus contends that sex can be labor whether it is paid or unpaid, and that ultimately the criminalization of sex work serves to bolster capital interests and perpetuate existing power hierarchies. Understanding sex work as work highlights the function sex plays in social and economic reproduction within a capitalist system. It serves to ally the plight of sex workers with other exploited workers. It also allows for understanding sex work as a form of *care work*. Like other forms of intimate and body labor, sex workers make their living through touch (Boris and Salazar Parrenas, 2010). Similar to these other forms of care work, what they do is part of the day-to-day work that keeps society going.

While the initial interjection that sex work is work was a petition for legitimacy in the capitalist system, for some sex workers assimilating into capitalism is undesirable (moon, 2021). Increasingly many workers and activists have taken an anti-work approach to sex worker rights. It is a way of participating in work while at the same time refusing it. For those taking up this perspective of sex work, the push for decriminalization becomes a more effective means to interrupt violence against sex workers than legalization, as the latter would maintain capitalist violence rather than ameliorate it. Though sex work is regulated and conceptualized as distinct from other forms of work, the reality is it is a job like any other. Conceptualizing it as such allows discussions of the industry to be *un-exceptionalized* and the potential for exploitation and harm to be recast into a broader critique of work under capitalism; survival sex work exists because people are forced to work to meet their basic needs (Berg, 2021). Heather Berg utilizes interviews and participant observation to portray how, “every porn scene is a record of people at

work.” (2021). Berg extends on previous Marxist-feminist analyses to offer an antiwork critique of sex work. She highlights the subversive and sometimes anti-hegemonic actions of porn stars at work, how they are able to “steal back” time and money from their bosses and find pleasure and meaning outside of capitalist accumulation. People who enter the industry often do so because they are unable, or uninterested, to work traditional jobs. It allows people who are gender non-conforming or transgender, who are disabled, or who are otherwise excluded from “standard” employment relations to make a living. Many sex workers have also spoken about the role pleasure has played in their work, and how it offers a window into creative exploration.

Why Sex Workers Mobilize

Sex workers have long petitioned for greater rights and safety. Although sex workers are not a monolithic group, there are commonalities in what sex workers mobilize for. Sex worker organizing is informed by the mobilizations of Black, trans, queer, disabled, migrant, and others that have built robust forms of survival and resistance (Fitzgerald et al, 2015; Capous-Desyllas and Loy 2020; Blewett, Jones, and Osbourn, 2022; Jones, 2022). Many sex workers occupy multiple identities targeted by the state. To resist and alleviate this harm, sex workers root their practices in communities of care- providing and protecting one another when the state not only fails to do so, but actively commits violence against them. In this way, building communities of care is an essential survival tactic. The care sex workers provide one another, and to those allied with them, is one pathway to reimagine social organization.

Two common issues sex workers mobilize around are decriminalization and greater labor protections. While decriminalization has been advocated for by key actors at all levels—including sex workers themselves, human rights organizations, and even the UN—it has been adopted in few countries. For instance, Amnesty International, the Human Rights Watch,

and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have all advocated for governments to adopt a decriminalized model of sex work regulation (SWOPLA, 2023). To date, however, only New Zealand, Belgium, and parts of Australia (including New South Wales, Victoria, Northern Territory and Queensland) have adopted decriminalization. Most sex workers still operate in criminalized environments. To increase the safety for all sex workers, and not just a few, policies that employ intersectional frameworks are needed. Through an intersectional approach to sex worker organizing, there can be recognition for the differential impact of state violence and for the need to attend to issues that are not necessarily sex work oriented. For instance, migration is an issue that affects sex workers but is not considered a traditional realm for sex worker organizers' intervention. Increasingly, this is being addressed as more sex workers concentrate on the linkages between labor exploitation and other forms of exploitation (Fuentes et. al., 2024; Scarlet Alliance, 2023; ECP 2015).

An example of this is the stigmatization sex worker parents experience. Fuentes et. al. (2024) conduct interviews with sex working parents, finding that they experience high levels of stigmatization and precarity. For instance, many sex workers were afraid to disclose their work-- regardless of whether they engaged in legal or illegal sex work-- out of fear of losing custody of their child. This also meant that they would be less likely to report poor workplace experiences for fear of this outcome. Another example is the advocacy of a London-based sex worker organization, the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP). The ECP connects the poor working conditions of sex workers in London and the conditions of immigrant workers, claiming that anti-trafficking laws in the country have negative impacts on both groups including increased policing and harassment, and forced deportation (ECP, 2015). For sex workers who are also immigrants, this impact is compounded. An intersectional approach to the study of sex work

demonstrates that increasing the safety of sex workers increases safety for all.

Overpolicing and state neglect have forced sex workers to seek out alternative forms of care. Sex work is a dangerous industry for many, and this is attributed to its criminalization. This leads to greater interaction with the law, and heightens the precarity of already marginalized workers. Yet, these dangers do not negate the necessity of sex work for many. Sex work allows for earning among people who would be otherwise unable to secure employment, maintain a steady income and provide for themselves and their families. Additionally, sex workers are not passive recipients of state harm. Sex worker rights advocates and scholars have documented various ways sex workers take care of one another (Taormino et al., 2013; Hassan, 2022). Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation discuss the strategies sex workers utilize to advocate for greater rights and autonomy, including mutual aid, creating counter-narratives, and other social, legal, and economic strategies. This reality requires a nuanced approach to sex work and community care, which an intersectional framework provides.

In this dissertation, I draw on the expertise of poor, queer, trans, disabled and nonwhite people engaged in sex work who argue that while criminalization perpetuates violence, racist, sexist, classist, systems of power will mean multiply marginalized people will continue to be harmed even when sex work is decriminalized (moon 2021). As moon (2021), a Black disabled sex worker who is on the board of SWOP USA, states in an introduction to a special law review issue: “attaining decriminalization and reducing harm is only the first of many steps to procure justice. Sex work legislation intersets with a wide variety of concerns that belie the political fallacy of the “single issue”.” (p1083).

In addition to decriminalization, many sex worker rights advocates seek to extend existing labor protections to the sex industry. “Sex work is work” has become a common

perspective from both sex workers themselves and allies. This approach to sex work assumes that it is a form of labor like any other, and because of this, should not be criminalized. All countries have some degree of labor protections—whether or not they observe them. These include fair labor standards such as laws against wrongful discharge, family and medical leave, anti-discrimination policies, and more. By linking sex work to other forms of economic provision, organizers can draw upon these existing regional frameworks to extend the rights of sex workers. This can be a successful approach in countries with rigorous labor laws.

A labor-rights approach to sex work arguably reduces the stigmatization associated with this form of labor. It also makes criminalization obsolete, as no other form of regulated labor is considered illegal. By tying the rights of sex workers to the labor movement, organizers can capitalize on existing gains. However, not all forms of sex work can draw upon labor rights frameworks, as many forms of sex work are not housed under one employer, nor do they fall under a unified entity. The labor rights movement is associated with sex workers who are operating in legal forms of sex work, such as stripping and online sex work such as camming, but are considered independent contractors rather than employees. Although sex worker organizers critique anti-trafficking agendas, there is broad recognition of the harms within the industry. The lack of robust labor protections means workers operate without any form of state protection should clients commit violent acts. In addition, there are few financial, health, or other resources to support their work. These issues result from the criminalized status of sex work.

While there are common barriers and experiences in sex work, there are also significant internal tensions and ruptures. Some sex workers view decriminalization as an endpoint, whereas others approach it as a stepping stone to address further issues within the community. For example, even in a world where sex work is decriminalized, Black trans women may still be

arrested and harassed while engaging in street-based work due to discrimination and profiling. In that sense, marginalized sex workers' material conditions are not altered by decriminalization. For those who are equally concerned about social stigma, decriminalization would be a necessary but insufficient step to achieve that goal. Ignoring these complexities flattens the reality of sex workers' experiences.

How Sex Workers Organize: Formal Methods

There is a rich legacy of sex workers mobilizing for greater freedom and rights. Sex worker organizing exists across the globe and both the diversity and unity of the movement are evident in the advancement of sex worker rights. To date, there has not been a systematic study that examines whether and how sex worker organizing is impacted by factors such as geography, regulatory model, and cultural practices. One goal of this dissertation is assessing potential commonalities and differences across three field sites; the US, the UK, and Australia. Do sex workers in different regulatory environments draw on similar organizing strategies, or different ones? Do organizers have similar goals in mind? While a systematic study still needs to be conducted, social movement literature discusses the role social media advocacy, political education, and public demonstrations play in raising awareness and pursuing social change (Springer, 2001;). This is not an exhaustive list but provides tangible insight into the strategies sex workers use to advocate for themselves.

Political advocacy can come in many forms and is tailored to the regulatory model organizers are operating within. Among the spectrum of ways to regulate sex work, from criminalization to full decriminalization, it is most difficult to organize in a criminalized context. Activists in the United States provide insight into organizing strategies within such a context, where the primary focus for political advocacy is to reduce and remove the penalties sex workers

experience due to their labor. Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOP LA) provides insight into how policies can be positively shifted even within criminalized contexts. SWOP LA is a peer-based community support group advancing the human rights of sex workers through advocacy, education, community building, harm reduction, and violence prevention. Through its political mobilization, SWOPLA submitted a letter of support for SB 357: The Safer Streets For All Act. This measure repealed a section of the California Penal Code that criminalized loitering with the intent to commit prostitution. This section of the penal code led to discriminatory policing practices, increased violence against street-based sex workers, and negative public health outcomes.

DecrimSWCA is “a sex worker-led coalition that uses political education, advocacy, and community outreach to promote the human rights, health, safety, and well-being of people in the sex trade” (DecrimSexWorkCA). Groups such as DecrimSWCA and Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOPLA) within the US are creating communities of care that challenge hegemonic understandings of political behavior and push for decrim. One of the issue areas taken up by these two advocacy groups is the age verification laws, as they are symptomatic of a larger right-wing push to censor content related to people of color, queer people, and anything deemed “offensive”. AB3080, or The Parent’s Accountability and Child Protection Act, was presented before the California State Judiciary Committee. It would require people to upload their IDs to any site with “significant” amounts of sexually explicit material. In an effort to get the Judiciary Committee to vote no on AB3080, SWOPLA and DecrimSWCA launched an online campaign to inform the public about the bill, explain its consequences, and provide a script and email template to people to help them voice their objection to committee members. With a catchy title-- “AB3080 wants to know what kind of porn you watch” --sex worker

organizers and allies were able to mobilize en masse to halt the latest attempt at online censorship and expansion of state surveillance. Though AB3080 was not the first or last time legislation that harms sex workers was proposed, sex workers create strong networks to combat this harm. Even if some sex workers would have been able to pivot as they did post-FOSTA/SESTA, the broader harm required communities of care to address this harm.

Political advocacy in contexts where sex work is legal often shifts attention to addressing the remaining policies that are weaponized against sex workers. For example, in Brazil, where sex work is legal, there are still many regulations that continue to impact sex workers' experiences. These include public order and vagrancy laws, as well as laws criminalizing the employment of sex workers and brothels. Although brothels are conventionally conceived as a business with a non-sex worker manager and coercive working conditions, the laws define brothels as including two or more sex workers working together in an apartment or other location. This is a common safety practice by sex workers, and criminalizing it can push more workers into unsafe conditions. Gabriela Leite, a former sex worker, became a political candidate in 2010 for the Brazilian congressional elections. This advocate for LGBTQ+ and sex worker rights decided to run for office utilizing traditional methods of political advocacy to advance the sex worker rights movement.

In addition to addressing financial and legal constraints sex workers experience, sex worker organizers also address the societal stigma impacting sex workers through political education. In the digital era, sex worker organizers have increasingly utilized social media to educate people on the issues sex workers experience and to demystify sex work. They have also used social media to build community and serve as a launching point for many organizing campaigns. Social media, and media more generally, allow sex workers to express themselves

both creatively and in their own words. SWers, like other marginalized communities, are targeted by greater surveillance and policing when congregating in physical spaces. Though this does not completely remove SWers from public life—which is a testament to their resiliency—it does alter the ways in which they form and sustain communities together. Social media as a tool of self-care and protection has a long documented history from marginalized groups who have experienced state violence (Jackson et al 2020, Gallon 2016). SWers build upon this tradition to create community and push forward their advocacy efforts. This praxis of protection and activism has allowed core issues within the SWer movement to gain global attention. It has also allowed civilians, those who are not active in the industry, to become aware of the common issues SWers experience, which would not be possible unless they developed close ties with workers in their personal life. While some are irreverent posts about sex worker’s daily lives, others seek to inform audiences about the reality SWers operate in.

One of the dominant strategies of sex worker’s social media praxis is to share information on bad laws. After all, there are no bad whores, only bad laws⁶. Social media praxis informs audiences on the regulations imposed on sex workers. This is one of many strategies SWers utilise to spread awareness, build community with other SWers, and advocate for political change. While the platforms SWers utilise vary based on fluctuating censorship guidelines and the difficulty such accounts face with deplatforming, it remains a core component of their political tool kit. Through this practice, SWers are able to create systems of care and community that mitigate state violence.

Sex workers are experts of their lived experiences; treating them as such provides essential insights that not only create a more theoretically robust critical policing studies, but

⁶ This is a rallying cry used by sex worker activists to highlight the negative consequences of sex work criminalization.

materially enacts it. Workers are at the forefront of reimagining “...institutions, ideas, and strategies, and creating new institutions,” which recenter those most vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence (Davis, 2005, 75). In order to understand alternatives to traditional frameworks of criminalisation and policing, we must be willing to prioritise sex workers as experts. Their practices enact alternatives to state-centric models of community safety.

How Sex Workers Organize: Informal Methods

Regardless of their regulatory environment, sex workers utilize both formal and informal organizing methods. The scope and scale of these tactics may vary, but sex workers use political advocacy and education along with informal methods such as mutual aid. Mutual aid refers to the voluntary exchange of resources, services, and information for mutual benefit. Mutual aid has long been utilized by Black, Indigenous and people of color, as well as queer and transgender communities, to alleviate state violence and provide material resources (Grubacic and O’Hearn, 2016; Potori, 2017; Spade, 2020; Hassan, 2022). It is a political practice based on ideas of reciprocity and community. A famous example of mutual aid in the sex work and transgender communities is the work of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. In 1970 they formed the Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in New York City, an activist organization that provided housing and other support to homeless queer youth and sex workers (Fuentes, 2023).

Other examples include providing financial support or other basic needs like food. Mutual aid does not have to be at an individual level; it can also come in the form of community fundraising or support. This is distinct from charity, as it is by community for community with the intent to leave everyone better off, rather than profit a minute few. As such, mutual aid can take on a multitude of forms based on community needs. An example of sex workers organizing for mutual aid is the Sex Workers Advocacy and Resistance Movement’s (SWARM) COVID-19

Hardship Fund. SWARM is a sex worker–led collective based in the United Kingdom that advocates for the rights of all sex workers and seeks to build a community that improves working conditions and resists violence.

Discussed above are all examples of informal organizing strategies. I define informal organizing as strategies that are community-oriented, are not directly driven by the desire to alter legislation, and seek to fulfill some deficit from the state. For the purpose of this dissertation, informal organizing can be categorized into the following: mutual aid, information sharing, and relationship building. Mutual aid is “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs” (Spade, 2020). It is predicated on solidarity, meaning that members within a community provide mutual aid to one another. It can look like direct resource distribution, financial support, and anything else that helps people meet their essential needs (see chapter 4).

Information-sharing can itself be a form of mutual aid, but it does not have to be driven by principles of solidarity. Instead, members who are not from the same community can also share information with each other. It often takes the form of exchanging information related to safety, but it can also include providing information on how to organize internally as well. For example, sex worker organizations often create bad date lists for other sex workers to submit to anonymously. These bad date lists will have the information of clients who are known to be harmful, violent, or otherwise difficult to work with. As a collective information-sharing resource, this increases the safety of sex workers by helping them avoid potentially dangerous clients. In this way, information-sharing is an informal organizing strategy, because it is community-led and community-oriented.

Finally, relationship building is also an informal organizing strategy. Scholars such as Spade and Kaba discuss how the stakes of organizing require community in order to sustain the

movement (Spade, 2011; Kaba, 2023). I discuss below the sex worker organizations I collaborate with in this research project; in all cases, the organizations are maintained due to the relationship building its members engage in. This work requires solidarity, intentionality, and attention to conflict resolution. Informal organizing strategies -- mutual aid, information-sharing, and relationship building-- may not be readily legible as political practices. However, I argue that an intersectional approach to studying political practices that is attentive to the way care operates in organizing spaces brings attention to how these strategies are an essential part of the movement for sex workers' rights.

Regulatory Liminality

Understanding sex workers' political practices requires an intersectional approach. Sex work research has primarily focused on white cisgendered women who are middle-to-high income and generally engage in online sex work (Fuentes, 2023). Though some studies have taken up the work to expand the focus of sex work research (Jones, 2022a; Jones, 2022b; Fuentes et. al., 2025), there is a dearth of information on people of color engaged in sex work, disabled people, trans/queer people, and other marginalized identities, despite these groups making up the majority of those engaged in sex work. I employ an intersectional approach to attend to variations and similarities in how sex workers organize based upon their identities. Additionally, the variation in field sites allows consideration of how the regulatory environment impacts political participation.

To address the motivation for this project -- how sex workers navigate hostile regulatory environments-- I develop the concept of *regulatory liminality*. Regulatory liminality refers to the impact of several relations of power on sex workers' ability to organize. It encompasses the following: the regulatory environment sex workers operate in, their identity markers, and

discourses which structure the perception and regulation of sex work. These three domains of power are not discrete or hierarchical. They interact with one another to produce the conditions within which workers operate.

In regulatory environments where the laws on the books and their actual enforcement are more aligned, sex workers experience lower regulatory liminality. The regulation of sex work exists on a spectrum from criminalization to decriminalization. Within this spectrum, ideal typical models criminalize both the sale and purchase of sex, legalize the sale but not the purchase of sex, or decriminalize the sale and purchase of sex. Because these are ideal typical models, many countries adopt some variation of these. Additionally, states and territories within a country also adopt their own laws regarding sex work that impacts how and where sex workers are able to operate. Due to this, sex worker legislation is often composed of contradictory legislation that makes it difficult to navigate. Sex workers may be unknowingly violating laws, or may have to violate some in order to uphold others. For example, sex workers who operate in brothels in Nevada officially register themselves in the state in order to operate legally. By doing so, they are violating national policies which maintain the criminalization of sex work.

In addition to the regulatory environment impacting sex workers' regulatory liminality, identities also do. A sex worker's identity impacts their position within the whorearchy. For example, sex workers who are people of color mostly occupy the "lower levels" of the whorearchy by engaging in full service sex work. White sex workers tend to occupy the more privileged positions within the whorearchy, such as being Onlyfans models and dominatrix's. The lower levels of the whorearchy experience greater criminalization than the higher levels do. Additionally, there is greater stigma associated with the lower levels. The higher criminality and stigma compound with other forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism. These hierarchies

of power mediate sex workers' experience with the law. Thus, a sex worker's position within the whorearchy impacts their experiences with the law, and therefore impacts their regulatory liminality.

Finally, sex workers regulatory liminality is also mediated by anti-trafficking discourse. The surge in international coordination on anti-trafficking in the late 19th and early 20th centuries spurred global, national, and subnational anti-trafficking initiatives. This discourse, and the ensuing human trafficking groups and legislation resulting from it, structures the legal environment sex workers operate in. Anti-trafficking discourse often divides sex workers into a binary as either a victim of trafficking, or a criminal engaged in it. By doing so, it justifies legislation that “protects” some, at the expense of others (see chapter 2). In Chapter 2, I discuss how this discourse emerged, and demonstrate that its codification in law has negative consequences for sex workers everywhere, regardless of the regulatory environment they operate in.

Regulatory liminality as a concept brings attention to how discourses and laws impact political practices. It highlights the “liminal” space that many marginalized people operate in due to conflicting and overlapping regulations. This is not a new phenomenon for groups that experience state violence. However, the instantiation of anti-trafficking initiatives has shifted the intensity sex workers experience by creating competing regulatory demands (ex. pushing for the criminalization or legalization of sex work to reduce “demand” for trafficking, instead of decriminalization as sex workers and human rights groups advocate for). Additionally, by applying an intersectional approach to the discussion of regulatory liminality, this project attends to how a person's identity impacts their ability to navigate the liminal spaces between de jure and de facto legislation. Sex workers who are conferred greater privilege due to their race, class, and

other social statuses will experience less regulatory liminality, because the policing and violence they experience is lessened by the systemic privilege they can access.

Lastly, I use this concept in this project to also gain insight into how regulatory liminality impacts the actual strategies people are able to draw upon. All sex workers experience regulatory liminality, though the impact of it is not experienced the same-- it is mediated also by regulatory environment and identity markers. Thus, the strategies sex workers use to navigate these conflicting regulations are not the same. Some sex workers are more easily able to manage criminality and stigma than others. For example, some of the sex workers I interview are white cisgender women in academia. Their experiences with stigma are different from other sex workers; one woman spoke about how even as a member of a sex-worker peer support organization, legislative officials she spoke with did not assume she was a sex worker. Because she was educated and white, she could alleviate the “whore stigma.”

Methods

Field sites for this project were selected across each model of regulation in order to capture any potential similarities and differences in sex worker organizing strategies due to national legislation. Additional considerations for field site selection included: researchers' language capabilities, relative international economic and political standing, internal heterogeneity of population, and the existence of public sex worker organizations. Taken together, these restrictions narrowed potential field sites to English-speaking, middle-to-high-income countries, with similar levels of internal heterogeneity across race, class, gender, and other identity markers. The latter was especially important for the theoretical framing of the project. This approach prioritizes selecting field sites where sex worker

organizations would be more likely to have diverse membership and/or to represent diverse sex worker populations.

With this criteria in mind, the field sites for this project are the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The US is a criminalized environment, the UK has a legalized approach, and Australia adopts a decriminalized approach (in some parts of the country). However, this project further reduces the scope due to limitations in time and funding. While a systematic study of sex worker organizing within each country could prove a fruitful future project, I restrict the scope of this study to a metropolitan area within each location that adopts the ideal-typical regulatory approach. Final field site selection is the following: Los Angeles, CA, US; London, England, UK; Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. In the following section, I discuss how I identified sex worker organizations to engage with for participant observation and sex workers to interview.

Data Collection

Sex workers are a difficult community to engage with using research interventions (Fuentes, 2023). Among these difficulties include distrust in institutional figures and outsiders, and a low likelihood that sex workers will self-disclose their status in the sex industry (especially in criminalized regulatory environments). The domain of inquiry for this dissertation is understanding the political practices sex workers utilize to navigate state hostility. The field sites I choose reflect this. Additionally, though, I engage with specific sex worker-led organizations in each field site. This alleviates some of the documented issues of sex worker research, and it also provides an avenue to better attend to the political practices sex workers engage in by focusing on sex workers who are already actively involved in organizing.

To select sex worker organizations in each of my field sites, I first did a general search for groups in my selected field sites. For example, “Los Angeles sex worker organizations” or “London sex worker organizations”. Within LA, there was only the Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOPLA) that showed up through this search criteria. Within London, Sex Workers Advocacy Resistance Movement (SWARM), National Ugly Mugs (NUM), Decrim Now, and the English Collective of Prostitutes resulted from this search. I reached out to all of these organizations. NUM informed me that they are not a sex worker led organization, but rather provide direct support to sex workers who have been victims of crime. They were therefore uninterested in engaging in this research project. SWARM and ECP both indicated an interest in having some of their members participate in the research study. I never heard back from Decrim Now, and therefore they are not represented in my sample. For Australia, I performed the same search. Scarlet Alliance, which is a national organization, was among the first search results. SWOP North South Wales and Vixen Collective also appeared in search results. I reached out to both of these groups, and did not hear back from either. For all field sites, I cross-references organizations from this search with the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, which has a comprehensive list of organizations operating in every country globally. All organizations I cold-emailed about the research study in order to establish first contact with.

Based on this general fielding process, I had the following sex worker organizations in my field sites who were willing to participate in this research study: SWOPLA, SWARM, ECP, and Scarlet Alliance. I created a google form for interested participants to fill out. This google form asked for the following information: name/alias, pronouns, email, confirmation age was above 18, what countries participants have engaged in sex work in, what organization participants were affiliated with, if any, prior organizing experience, if any, and then anything

else applicants wished to disclose. I sent this google form to the aforementioned organizations and asked them to send it out to their membership. Then, I compiled this information into a spreadsheet, and reviewed it for ideal criteria: above 18, work experience in one or more of my field sites, and organizing experience or otherwise politically active. Then, I reached out to potential participants via the email they disclosed and asked them to schedule an appointment via Calendly. Some participants scheduled this interview slot, and some I never heard back from. Funding restrictions have prevented me from interviewing all interested participants. For all interview participants who did schedule a meeting, I conducted a 60 minute session. All of these interviews, aside from a few during my field work trip to London, were over Zoom. The interview protocol I used during interviews is attached as an appendix at the end of this chapter. For each participant who completed the interview process, I compensated them with \$75 using Paypal, Venmo, or a Vanilla gift card. I also offered the option to donate directly to the organization they were involved with.

Below, I describe these organizations. Information I highlight includes their level of formalization (ex. Informal collective, nonprofit, charity), their organizational structure (ex. Steering committee, board of directors), their membership requirements, and the general make-up of their membership. I highlight any information specific to the organization that may be relevant to understand how they operate. Additionally, I describe the duration and intensity of my contact with them, including how many people I interviewed that were affiliated with them, and the extent of participant observation I engaged in.

Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOPLA)

SWOPLA is an LA-based peer organization for current and former sex workers. When it was originally established in 2016/2017, it was part of the national sex worker organization, Sex

Worker Outreach Project USA. However, the organization underwent an organizational restructuring in 2019 that led it to break off from SWOP-USA and establish itself as a separate entity. According to its current board members, this separation was due to a desire to be more locally-oriented without being affiliated with the national organization. It is currently an independent 501(c)(3) public benefit charitable organization. Its mission is to “pursue our human rights to bodily autonomy, racial and social justice, and mutual liberation through outreach, education, mutual aid and political advocacy” (SWOPLA, 2021). The Board of Directors leads the organization and has final say in how funds are allocated. There are six members of this board. The co-directors of SWOPLA are Lucy Khan and Tiffany Hwang. Its research and services director is Kim Fuentes, its secretary and fundraiser is Ashley Madness and its outreach and education director is Sophia Coleman. During my participant observations, board members mentioned that the board was intentionally composed to have a majority of people of color and indigenous people in leadership positions, and to also represent an array of different types of sex workers, with preference for current full service sex workers.

The Board of Directors are paid stipends through donations and grants the organization receives. For each grant that SWOPLA applies for, they allocate 10% to “overhead operations,” which is used for these stipends. Though the organization does compensate the directors, most of the work taken on are for passion projects, and thus most of the labor put into SWOPLA initiatives are unpaid. Aside from the directors, all other members of SWOPLA are volunteers and are unpaid. SWOPLA does allocate some of its funds to reimburse people for participating in strolls-- a flat fee of \$50. They will also reimburse mileage for volunteers who are representing SWOPLA at approved events.

Because the membership of SWOPLA is volunteer-based, it is not wholly representative of the larger LA sex worker community. It is a predominantly BIPOC-led organization, and most of the volunteers are as well. However, there is a wide range in the type of sex work people engage in from full service sex work, professional domming and online sex work. Additionally, being volunteer-based means that the membership is constantly fluctuating. SWOPLA has a slack which it adds members to who have attended at least one general meeting, and have been vetted by a board member. General meetings are open to anyone regardless of whether they have engaged in sex work. These meetings take place over Jitsi, a secure conference call website, because SWOPLA does not have a physical space. On this slack, there are 149 people. However, in terms of those consistently engaged with SWOPLA events since I began participant observation, there are less than twenty people including the board members.

Due to proximity to the field site, SWOPLA is the organization that I had the most interview participants from, and the most participant observation. Starting from January 2023 until presently, I have interviewed twenty-five members or people who have at one point in time been affiliated with SWOPLA. I have participated in over fifty events and meetings hosted by SWOPLA, both official and unofficial.

English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP)

The ECP is a “self-help organization of sex workers, working both on the street and in premises, with a national network throughout the UK.” (ECP, 2025). To the authors knowledge, it is the oldest organization within this study, founded in 1975 by two immigrant women living in England. The organization campaigns for decriminalization, conducts research, designs sex worker safety tools, and provides supportive services. ECP does take donations, but there is no information on their website, nor did organizers disclose, whether the organization is a nonprofit,

charity, or something else. Unlike SWOPLA, it does have a physical location. It is based at the Crossroads Women's Centre in London, along with 14 other groups that range from addressing women's rights, providing resources for sexual assault survivors, and running collectives for migrants and Global South women. Organizational leadership is also unclear based on my interviews and participant observation, and is not listed on their website. One of the women I met with during my field work, Niki Adams, has been involved with the organization since the 1990s and is a key member in the organizational structure. She is the official spokeswoman for the ECP, along with Laura Watson. However, they did not disclose further details about the organizational structure, and no information about it is available online.

I visited their physical location in the summer of 2023. During that time, there were two women, one of whom was Adams, who were present. The membership seems to be similar to SWOPLA, where there are a handful of people who volunteer their time and labor to maintain the organization, and otherwise the membership fluctuates according to the kinds of events and volunteering opportunities available. The work of Adams and its core members are in part sustained by very limited government funding, which is what allowed them access to the Crossroads Women's Centre. While in person, I was able to interview the two members of ECP present when I visited their location. Once I returned home, I was able to interview an additional two sex workers who were affiliated with the ECP.

Sex Workers Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM)

SWARM is a "sex worker led collective based in the UK...to advocate for the rights of everyone who sells sexual services" (SWARM, 2025). It was formed in 2009, and advocates for the full decriminalization of sex work. Similar to the ECP, the membership of SWARM is not publicly available like it is with SWOPLA. It is also the most informal of all the organizations I

engaged with during this study, wholly sustained based on volunteer efforts. The scope and scale of the organization is the smallest of the organizations I spoke with. Most of their events and advocacy efforts are in partnership with other sex worker collectives. There is a similarly small core group as with the other organizations, around 3-10 people who are responsible for sustaining the organization. SWARM does have its own website like the ECP and SWOPLA, where it hosts sex worker resources and events the collective is involved with.

While conducting field work in London, I interviewed three members of SWARM. I also engaged in participant observation of two informal meetings between members, which took place in public locations. I also attended one of their formal events, Sex Workers Breakfast London. This is a routine event held (most) Wednesdays that is facilitated by SWARM members. According to one of my participants, the responsibility to host the breakfast is rotated amongst members. While attending this event, I interviewed an additional three sex workers. This event took place in the London Action Resource Centre (LARC) which is “an anarchist infoshop and self-managed social centre” that is privately owned, but collectively run by activist organizations (NUM, 2023). Like SWOPLA, SWARM does not have its own physical location. Instead, they rely on rented venues, or conduct operations remotely. SWARM shares the location with other organizations that rent it out. Though it is “rented,” organizations are not charged anything monetarily. Instead, they are responsible for maintaining the building.

Scarlet Alliance

Scarlet Alliance is a national peer organization for sex workers in Australia. It was founded in 1989 and composed of current and former sex workers. It “aim[s] to achieve equality, social, legal, political, cultural and economic justice for sex workers” (Scarlet Alliance, n.d.). Its membership is made up of sex worker organizations and individual sex workers across the

country. All of their staff are current or former sex workers and they state they are “by sex workers, for sex workers”. They focus on community development, peer education, advocacy and representation. Legally, they are registered as a charity organization and operate out of New South Wales.

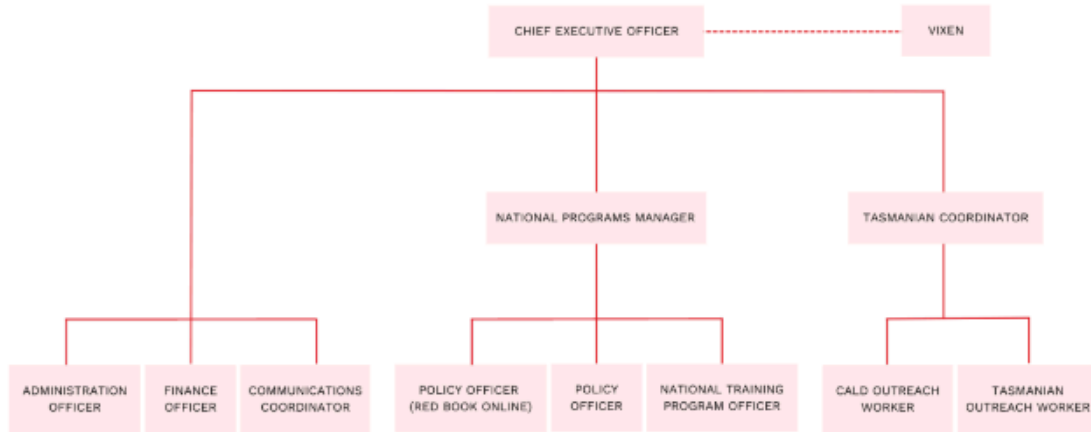
Like with all other organizations I engage with for this research study, Scarlet Alliance advocates for the decriminalization of sex work. It is funded through grants and donations, and has a paid staff⁷. The Scarlet Alliance Committee is elected by membership organizations, and carries out the governance and oversight of the organization. The committee is accountable to the membership, and reports to members throughout the year. The president is Jenna Love, a full service sex worker who is also a full time student pursuing a MA in Social Justice. The vice president is Riley Alexander, who is an online worker and was also a Vixen Collective Committee member. There is a treasurer named Tia who is a full service worker and was previously the president of the committee. There is a secretary named Moisty, who has no publicly available information, and there are five general members.

Scarlet Alliance also has staff, which consist of four members: Mish Pony, who is the Chief Executive Officer, Elena Jeffreys, who is the Policy and Advocacy Manager, Magena Green, the Operations Coordinator, and Miya Pittaya, the Finance Officer. Mish is a trans/queer sex worker with decades of sex work and organizing experience, as in Elena Jeffreys. Jeffreys also received a PhD in which she examined sex worker organization political autonomy from government and funders in Australia and Thailand. Scarlet also has two advisory groups: the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sex Worker Advisory Group, and Asian Migrant Sex Worker Advisory Group. All information regarding the membership and organizational structure

⁷ All information I include on the organizational structure and membership of Scarlet Alliance is from its website: <https://scarletalliance.org.au/about/structure/>

are readily available on their website. They also include a diagram to depict how this structure is related, Figure 1.3.

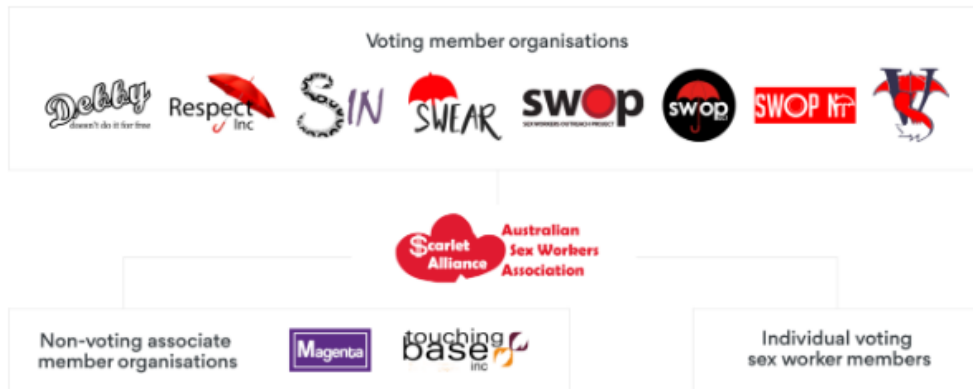
Figure 1.3 Scarlet Alliance Organizational Chart



Source: Scarlet Alliance

Members of Scarlet Alliance are other national and regional sex-worker led organizations. Members include SWOP Australian Capital Territory, SWOP New South Wales, Vixen Collective, Scarlet Alliance lutruwita (Tasmania) Sex Worker Project, South Australian Sex Industry Network (SIN), Respect Inc, SWOP Northern Territory, Sex Work, Education, Advocacy and Rights (SWEAR WA), Touching Base Inc, and Debby Doesn't Do It For Free. Each of these organizations upholds Scarlet Alliance objectives and abides by a constitution. Some members are voting members (those with 100% sex worker membership) and some are non-voting associate members. These can be viewed in Figure 4, depicting a diagram by Scarlet.

Figure 1.4



Source: Scarlet Alliance

Due to financial constraints, I did not engage in in-person field work in Australia. All interactions with Australian-based sex workers occurred remotely. Therefore, I also do not have participant observations for this field site. Through snowball sampling with Scarlet Alliance, I interviewed five sex workers affiliated with the organization.

Data Analysis

To code interview transcripts, I use close reading, coding, and memoing to ensure an interpretation grounded in the texts, with particular attention to themes of “gender”, “race”, “location”, as well as issue areas such as decriminalization and safety that sex workers seek to address through their organizing practices. I employ coding strategies from Saldaña’s (2013) coding manual with two cycles of coding. The first cycle utilizes what Saldaña calls structural and descriptive ways of coding. The former is attentive to “content based phrase(s) representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data to both code and categorize the data corpus” and the latter, “summarizes in a word or short phrase-- often a noun-- the basic topic of a passage of qualitative

data” (56). This first pass through the data focuses on how sex workers discuss their experiences at work and in organizing spaces with attention to attitudes, actions, and levels of satisfaction with their group involvement. The second cycle of coding utilizes versus codes to delve into how differences in self-identified identity characteristics have impacted experiences in sex work and organizing spaces (Saldaña, 2013). Pattern coding is used in conjunction with versus coding to identify how meaning is discursively produced. This type of coding, “pull[s] together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis” (58).

After these coding cycles, I theme the data to make sense of the coding. These themes extract significant statements and interpret the meaning-making process undergirding the data. The organization for Chapter 4 is structured to reflect the major themes within interview data. Chapter 3 is not, as it focuses on the conventional separation of sex worker organizing-- their regulatory environment (criminalized, legalized, decriminalized). The intent of structuring the empirical chapters this way is to first highlight any potential differences across regulatory environments, and then to highlight the similarities in sex worker organizing strategies. Formal strategies may be more impacted by the legal environment, because these strategies require sex workers to engage with established avenues of political participation. Informal strategies, however, do not have to do so and therefore may be more similar regardless of differences in the regulation of sex work.

Summary and What Follows

This chapter introduced the theoretical framework for this dissertation. Due to the whorearchy, the hierarchization of sex workers resulting from stigmatization, some sex workers experience greater precarity than others. This precarity is dependent on the kind of regulatory environment a sex worker operates in, as well as their identities. Sex workers are actively

mobilizing against harmful legislation in both conventional and unconventional ways. An intersectional approach to understanding sex workers organizing strategies allows this dissertation to capture unconventional political practices, which I argue are rooted from an ethics of care.

In addition to the model of regulation and personal identity impacting sex workers' experiences of precarity and violence, sex workers globally are affected by anti-trafficking discourse. This discourse perpetuates the perspective that sex workers are either victims, or criminals. In contrast, sex workers and sex work allies advocate for an approach that understands sex work as a form of labor, allying the movement for sex workers rights with the movement for labor rights, and human rights. Chapter 2 describes how anti-trafficking discourse was instantiated at the global level, and its impact on national and sub-national sex worker legislation.

In order to advance their rights and safety, sex workers draw on formal and informal organizing strategies. The former refers to activities such as political advocacy and public education, while the latter refers to practices such as mutual aid, information sharing, and relationship building. Chapter 3 of this dissertation provides insight into how sex workers in each regulatory environment are formally mobilizing. Chapter 4 draws on sex workers' informal organizing strategies to highlight how sex workers everywhere utilize unconventional political practices to navigate their regulatory liminality. In doing so, they are able to petition for the decriminalization of sex work, while providing for the needs of themselves and other sex workers. Chapter 5 discusses the stakes of sex worker organizing despite their experiences of regulatory liminality. Sex worker's political practices are abolitionist tools for building an anti-carceral world.

CHAPTER 2: HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND SEX WORK

In the previous chapter, I argue that sex workers are subject to regulatory liminality. Their “liminal” status is due to overlapping and contradictory laws and social practices that both constrain and enable their political practices. In this chapter I argue that regulatory liminality is produced through anti-trafficking discourse and laws. I provide a brief history of anti-trafficking laws at the international level and provide examples of how these laws have impacted national legislation.

In the first section, I discuss international treaties dated as early as 1904. In the wake of slavery’s abolition, racist sentiments fueled what became known as the “white slavery hysteria”. This hysteria produced a series of legislation that strengthened border control and immigration, increased state surveillance apparatus, and criminalized sex work. Eventually this hysteria born from the desire to “protect” white women morphed into anti-human trafficking sentiments. The international treaties and recommendations I discuss in this chapter form the basis of anti-trafficking discourse that continues to impact national and local level policies on human trafficking, as well as sex work.

In the theory chapter, I categorize several strands of discourses on sex work into three general domains: sex work as criminal, sex work as victimhood and sex work as labor. These domains each propose distinct regulatory outcomes --from criminalization, to legalization (also partial criminalization), to decriminalization-- and impact how sex workers mobilize. International coordination on anti-trafficking in the early 20th century fostered a conflation between sex trafficking and sex work that forces organizers to contend with anti-trafficking discourse and initiatives. Today, this conflation harms both survivors of trafficking, and sex workers. In the next two sections I describe how each of these frames are produced within

international treaties and agreements. Finally, I draw on examples from each of my field sites to demonstrate how anti-trafficking discourses have been adopted in national policies. Through a discussion of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act in the UK, the 2018 SESTA/FOSTA in the US, and the 2018 Modern Slavery Act in Australia, I demonstrate the contemporary legal impact of anti-trafficking discourse.

I conclude the chapter by discussing how United Nations experts and sex worker activists are producing a counter discourse internationally. This counter-discourse challenges the conflation of sex trafficking with sex work and advances a perspective that recognizes the need to protect trafficking victims while also respecting the rights and autonomy of sex workers. An example of this counter-discourse is a 2023 guidance document published by the Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls formed by the UN. This working group released a guidance document titled “Eliminating discrimination against sex workers and securing their human rights” that was created in consultation with sex workers. In it, its members recognize the human rights abuses sex workers can be subject to, while also advocating for their bodily autonomy and the protection of their rights. It also advocates for international bodies and states to encourage a decriminalized approach to sex work. This chapter demonstrates how anti-trafficking discourse instantiated in the early 20th century continues to impact the regulatory liminality of sex workers today.

Anti-Trafficking as a Global Priority

Human trafficking has been a global issue since efforts to abolish slavery. Slavery is the first known international flow of trafficked people and was considered legal for centuries. During this period, there were no organizations with the authority to make binding transnational decisions to globally address slavery through. At the turn of the 20th century, however, activists

became outraged over “sexual slavery” of white women (Pliley, 2019). With the end of the Transatlantic slave trade⁸ states began to identify “white slavery” as a pressing concern (Rodriguez Garcia and Gillis, 2018). White slavery is defined as the “procurement- by use of force, deceit, or drugs- of a white woman or girl against her will for prostitution.” (Giovagnoni and Van Schooneveld, 2022). Government cooperation around the issue of white slavery began in 1899, with the coordination of an international conference in Paris. By 1904, the International Agreement for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic was signed and became one of the first international agreements on human trafficking (Giovagnoni and Van Schooneveld, 2022). It was the first in a series of anti-human trafficking treaties aimed at the illegal trade of white people, and part of what scholars deem the “white slave hysteria”.

This 1904 agreement resulted from a decades-long campaign against white slavery in the 19th and 20th centuries. Most of the mobilization against white slavery occurred within Britain, with Josephine Butler and William Thomas Stead being two lead actors in the movement. Both Butler and Stead were against the trafficking of young girls into prostitution, seeing it as a failing of the state to properly protect them. Butler wrote a pamphlet titled *A Letter to the Mothers of England* in which she blamed the white slave traffic on the failure of British laws to protect young girls. Stead, who was a journalist for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, conducted an investigation following Butler and others public outrage about the white slave trade. Butler and the Salvation Army formed an investigation committee with Stead, in which Stead detailed how easy it was to traffick young girls by “staging” a procuration of a young woman on his own (Connelly, 1980). He then reported about this in a six part series through the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

⁸ The brevity of discussion here on the racist institutionalization of chattel slavery is not meant to reduce its horrors. While technically ending, white supremacy, colonialism, and racist ideology perpetuated the logics of slavery. The white slave hysteria co-opted narratives of the inhumanity of slavery to continue to surveil and inflict violence on people of color.

Due to this series, Stead was arrested on charges of procurement and trafficking. However, his series produced significant public outrage. This pressure led to the passage of a bill that raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, and spurred the creation of the British National Vigilance Association for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic. This association was headed by William Alexander Coote, who dedicated years of effort to reducing the trafficking of young white women. However, after years of leadership of this association there was little policy movement in the country. In order to shift the conversation on trafficking, he worked to establish similar associations transnationally. The creation of a network of anti-trafficking associations led to the first convening of the International Congress on the White Slave Traffic in London in 1899.

The growing prominence of this global network increased pressure on national governments to respond to this transnational phenomenon (Limoncelli, 2017). In response, the French government invited sixteen states to congregate in Paris in 1902 to create an international agreement to fight white slavery. The 1904 Paris Conference on the White Slave Trade was the first internationally coordinated event where states convened to discuss human trafficking. A nine-article agreement emerged from this meeting, ratified by the following states: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden and Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Austria-Hungary, Brazil and the US later ratified the agreement as well. By ratifying, states agreed to take the following measures: establish national authorities to coordinate information sharing on the white slave trade, keep watch of railway stations, ports, and similar locations, investigate the places of origin of prostitutes, provide government assistance with repatriation and supervise agencies employing women from abroad.

The success of this conference spurred further multilateral coordination on human trafficking, leading to other agreements building from this initial one. For instance, there was a 1910 conference in Spain where states agreed that the procurement of women under twenty would be criminalized, and over twenty would be illegal if fraud or violence was involved. During a 1921 convention on white slavery, 33 countries signed the International Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children. This raised the age of consent to 21 and created a system for monitoring international employment agencies.

In addition to this, there was the Slavery, Servitude, Forced Labour and Similar Institutions and Practices Convention of 1926 and the International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women of Full Age of 1933. The former created a definition of slavery: “slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (p. 3). It called on ratifying states to prevent and suppress the slave trade, as well as work towards the complete abolition of slavery. In part due to the difficulty of enforcing these conventions within states’ borders, private organizations were formed that would take up the work entailed in these agreements. The latter sought to prevent exploitation of women for prostitution, even with their consent. It built upon earlier agreements and sought to institute strict penalties for individuals engaged in supporting the movement of women across national borders for “immoral” purposes.

The next convention addressing human trafficking emerged after World War II, and member-nations of the newly formed United Nations adopted the United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others in 1949. Within this convention, states agree to punish people who “procure[d], entice[d], or leads away, for purposes of prostitution, another person, even with the consent of that person” (p.3). It

also punished people who kept or managed, or financed a brothel, as well as people who rented to those engaged in prostitution. Additionally, there were extradition conditions wherein states were encouraged to send back those found guilty of these offences to their home country.

Contemporary anti-trafficking initiatives developed through earlier sex trafficking movements in the 1800s and onward (Limoncelli, 2017). These anti-trafficking conventions created in the first half of the 20th century did not distinguish between sex trafficking and sex work, nor did they explicitly reference labor trafficking. By 2000, however, the United Nations had expanded the scope of human trafficking conventions to consider labor trafficking as well as other forms of exploitation. The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children was the first agreement recognizing modern-day slavery. In an interview with Open Democracy Marjan Wijers, a long-time consultant and researcher on human trafficking, shared the process of how the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (UNHCR) adopted the 2000 protocol, also referred to as the Palermo Protocol. (UNHR, 2000). As the first intra-state protocol with an internationally agreed upon definition of human trafficking, it has shaped global conversations. The purpose of the Protocol was to: “prevent and combat trafficking in persons, paying particular attention to women and children,” “protect and assist the victims of such trafficking, with full respect for their human rights,” and “to promote cooperation among State Parties in order to meet those objectives” (2). This is also known as the “3P” paradigm of prosecution, protection, and prevention.

The Protocol defines human trafficking as,

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving

of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (p. 2)

This definition is vague; while it defines trafficking, it does not specify the definition of exploitation. Rather, it provides examples of forms of exploitation. There are also subsets to this definition: a, b, c, and d. Subset b of this definition states that even if a person provides consent, if any means used in the above block quote are used to solicit this consent, then it is “irrelevant”. Subset c and d of the definition refer explicitly to children (those under eighteen years of age).

This definition of human trafficking indicates the high priority to protect women and children, which has been continuously reflected in prior conventions and agreements on trafficking. While the intent of the Protocol was designed to encourage states to adopt more rigorous regulations around the rights and welfare of precarious groups such as women and children, the protocol fails to specify specific regulations on how states should do so. The lack of clarity on how to address trafficking at the national and subnational levels have caused states to address trafficking at the expense of marginalized communities. Julietta Hua, in *Trafficking Women's Human Rights*, contends that the popular representations of human trafficking, and sex trafficking in particular, are constructed via binaries such as victim/criminal that invoke racialized sexualities (Hua, 2011). Scholars have documented how modern slavery rhetoric is weaponized by white nationalist groups who wield protecting women and children as a way to enhance state militarization (Hua, 2011; Kempadoo, 2016; Kempadoo and Shih, 2023). For instance one of the largest national anti-trafficking organizations in the US is Polars, which was founded in 2007 and operates the US National Human Trafficking Hotline. It uses Palantir, a US-based analytics company that provides data services to intelligence agencies, law

enforcement, and the US military. Palantir is known for its complicity in perpetuating Israeli genocide in Gaza by generating “kill lists” of Palestinians (Essa, 2024; BHRRC, 2025).

Walby and Shire (2024) further argue that trafficking and modern slavery is perpetuated by regimes of inequality, capitalism, and colonial legacies. Skeptics argue anti-slavery and anti-trafficking frameworks can have perverse effects arising from the potential to “mask, naturalize, and distract from racial, gendered, and economic inequality,” displacing labor and migrant rights frameworks, and deepening moralism and saviorism (LeBaron, Pliley, and Blight, 2021; summary).

Wijers recounts that feminist groups in the 1980s began focusing on trafficking due to sex tourism. International organizations such as the International Labor Organization had been grappling with sex tourism and the “issue” of sex work for decades but had failed to reach a consensus on the question of sex work as legitimate labor (Boris and Garcia, 2021; Boris, 2019). The ILO was reticent to formally recognize sex work and this lack of consideration of sex as labor furthered the long-standing conflation of sex work with traffickign established in UN conventions. Women seeking to do sex work, domestic work, and other kinds of care labor who were primarily migrants and undocumented. The legitimate concern of exploitation and abuse to migrant women was sidelined in favor of focusing on “innocent women forced into prostitution” (Wijers, 2021).

Wijers states that only the Netherlands and Germany were working on expanding the rights of migrant sex workers and trafficking, and it was not widely taken up by states internationally. On this, she stated:

Our clients didn't have rights, as women, as migrants and as prostitutes...above all, they had no rights because they were whores... 'Once a whore always a whore, who do you think will care?' -that's what their exploiters told them

She reports that when the majority of trafficking victims were women of color, the police were generally unresponsive and unhelpful. She attributes the following as pushing trafficking on the political agenda: a shift in victims from women of color to white women due to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ability to use anti-trafficking as justification for an anti-migration agenda. To her, in retrospect, the push for anti-trafficking initiatives and protocols stemmed less out of concern for the rights of sex workers and migrants rather than from an alignment with states' interests. However, at the time that she was involved in these efforts to organize in pro-rights and anti-violence spaces, she did not see the complications entailed in the trafficking movement. In her interview, she stated , “if we had known the history and the inherent flaws of the concept of trafficking back then, we never would have used it.” (Wijers, 2021).

The issues Wijers flagged with the concept of trafficking comes from how it was utilized in the 19th century during discussions of white slavery and the purity and victimhood of women. She discussed how this divided women into innocent victims in need of rescue, and guilty ones who can and should be criminalized. Its roots were also tied to racist and nationalistic uses. The vagueness of the definition of human trafficking in the Palermo Protocol, along with the lack of enforcement mechanisms and the continued conflation of sex trafficking and sex work, can be attributed to the competing factions behind the protocol's creation.

Wijer (2021) recounts that “two opposed NGO-lobbying blocks” formed during the negotiations of the Palermo protocol. This included the block she was part of, named the Human Rights Caucus, and another block under the name of the International Human Rights Network. The former group advocated for, “a broad and comprehensive definition of trafficking with coercion as the core element” (Wijers, 2021). It was composed of anti-trafficking, human rights and sex workers' rights organizations and activists. This was important because it was the first

time these three movements worked together, and the first time anti-trafficking and pro-sex workers' rights groups worked together, bridging the gap caused by the conflation of trafficking with sex work. The membership of the coalition informed their perspective that all people (women, men, children) could be victims of trafficking, that trafficking goes beyond prostitution, and that it can be both internal and cross-border.

The latter coalition was led by the US-based Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) that regarded all sex work as trafficking and wanted anti-trafficking initiatives to combat prostitution itself. This group was aligned with scholars such as Andrea Dworkin, who is famous for her scholarly work equating pornography to violence against women, and her conservative anti-prostitution views. Its membership also included the European Women's Lobby and the French International Abolitionist Federation. This coalition advocated for all prostitution to be defined as trafficking, and excluded men from this definition.

Wijer states that the outcome seen within the Palermo protocol can clearly be attributed to a compromise between these two distinct lobbying blocks. The final definition of trafficking makes a distinction between sex work and trafficking, covers women, men and children, and includes all labor sectors. However, it also explicitly mentions "exploitation of prostitution and sexual exploitation" as different and distinct from labor exploitation.

The story Wijer discusses of two distinct blocks in civil society by NGOs was refracted within the position of governments as well. The three issues dividing state discussions were: the moral issue of prostitution, border control, and rights of victims. The moral question, according to Wijer, was skirted by states stating they would only focus on coercion and abuse and not prostitution as such in the agreements. Regarding border control, richer states wanted stronger border protections, whereas poorer countries were concerned about remittances. This division

was echoed in victim protections as well, with richer countries wanting less protections and poorer wanting more since these countries tended to be the ones where people were “sent” or trafficked from (Wijer, 2021). Wijer states these divisions amongst states are also reflected in the protocol, with provisions for protections of victims not obligatory and at the discretion of the states, whereas law enforcement and border control provisions are mandatory.

In this section, I provided an overview of the last hundred years of international coordination on human trafficking. It became a global priority due to white slavery hysteria in the advent of the abolition of slavery, and was maintained through racist narratives about the threat of foreign men to innocent white women. While anti-trafficking agreements began to prioritize the rights and rescue of victims of trafficking, the origins of the movement continued to impact how international agreements were formed. Increasingly, there was a division between victims in need of rescue, and accomplices in trafficking. I discuss this further in the following sections.

Global Trafficking Discourse: Producing a Victim to Rescue

Anti-trafficking has commonly been framed through the lenses of white slavery and sexual exploitation stemming from states’ interests. In the case of the white slavery hysteria, it was rich Western countries who sought to extend border control and increase penalties for prostitutes. A driving factor of this hysteria and the ensuing international agreements made during the 19th and 20th centuries had to do with rescuing moral “good” (white) women. In this section, I argue that these agreements contributed to the creation of “a victim to rescue” within contemporary anti-trafficking movements. Due to its roots in the racism of white slave hysteria, this victimhood is primarily accessible only to white women. It is hinged upon the ability of a woman to perform as a proper victim, or otherwise prove her good moral character. I discuss

how the history of anti-trafficking agreements produced this victimhood, and the kinds of practices this made possible, and not, at the international and national levels.

Beginning with the 1904 international agreement on white slavery, states came together to identify white women as a particularly vulnerable category. This concern emerged in the wake of the abolition of slavery, in which freed Black people were still experiencing incredible violence, discrimination, and exploitation. Despite this, it was white women that preoccupied the international agenda. By doing so, international law began to create the image of the “ideal” victim deserving of inter-state coordination. So-called anti-trafficking activists petitioned the government for greater awareness of the exploitation young women were experiencing. Though the concerns they expressed were about the vulnerabilities young women face, they were primarily concerned only with white women engaged in prostitution. For example, Butler argued in her writings and public talks that women were undervalued in society, and were trained only to prepare themselves for marriage (Murphy, N.D). She believed that a greater focus on education and independence would reduce the likelihood that women found themselves in exploitative conditions. To her, there was no difference between a sex worker and a sex trafficking victim -- both were being exploited. This is because, in Butler’s perspective, women who were unable to secure a husband, or who otherwise had a marriage end, were left with no other options than prostitution. In her perspective, women having greater access to education would create greater opportunities for them rather than these two: marriage, or prostitution.

This perspective had roots in earlier feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who similarly believed women were being held back through their docile acceptance of being a housewife (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Butler dedicated her life to advocacy on behalf of women that sought to expand their rights and eradicate sexual exploitation. While this was the case, her

approach to doing so sought to protect some women at the expense of others. For instance, her perspective borrowed from the moral panic of her time and classified women based on morality and assumed virtue. A woman selling sex would never do so of her own accord, but only if she was forced into that life. While it was, and remains true, that sex trafficking and issues of exploitation and coercion exist, the perspective Butler championed perpetuated harmful narratives that erased sex worker autonomy.

Butler and Stead's efforts to address sex trafficking contributed to the 1904 conference on white slavery. Through this conference, an agreement was made to create national task forces dedicated to anti-trafficking. These task forces would collect information on suspicious subjects and surveil areas of movement such as railway stations. Additionally, it explicitly mentioned investigating places of origin of prostitutes, creating both an incentive and a mandate for members who ratified the agreement to keep a state-run centralized bank of information on known sex workers. This formed the basis of contemporary systems of state surveillance against sex workers. While these practices of surveillance have proven harmful for all sex workers, they have disproportionate impacts on migrant sex workers. In contemporary times, migrant sex worker organizations such as Red Canary Song document these harms, which include being subject to police raids, stricter immigration control, and racist policing practices (Red Canary Song, N.D). Pliley (2014) demonstrates how the US's White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, also known as the Mann Act, had racist deployment against alleged traffickers that furthered the US's carceral apparatus (Pliley, 2014)The roots of these practices were legitimated during the early 20th century when anti-trafficking activists such as Butler and Stead linked trafficking explicitly with prostitution. Additionally, by constituting the victims of trafficking as white women, women

of color were either erased from agreements providing protections to victims, or were explicitly demonized as immoral women undeserving of protection.

This creation of a deserving victim and an undeserving “other” began with the initial white slavery conference in 1904, but continued to structure early anti-trafficking initiatives throughout the 20th century. For instance, international conferences taking place in 1910, 1921, and 1926 focused explicitly on white slavery and how to protect young white women. It was not until 1933 that an international convention did not mention white slavery in its title, instead named “International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women of Full Age”. According to the certified true copy listed on the United Nations Treaty Collection online archive, states ratified 10 articles at this convention. While these articles, unlike their predecessors, did not explicitly discuss white slavery, they did expand the scope of prior articles. Most notably, Article 1 states, “attempted offences, and within the legal limits, preparatory of the offences in question, shall also be punishable.” This article served as the basis for contemporary legislation which allows state enforcement institutions to profile sex workers.

By setting the precedent that trafficking and prostitution (sex work) are the same phenomenon, early anti-trafficking conventions allowed criminalizing articles to be weaponized against sex workers. An example of this is California’s “loitering with intent” laws from 1872 on disorderly conduct, which criminalizes people simply for “looking like” a sex worker, or giving the appearance of engaging in sex work regardless of actually selling sex or not. These laws have also been known as “walking while trans” or “walking while Black” laws because they are so often weaponized against marginalized communities by law enforcement (ACLU, 2023).

In addition to this, the 1933 convention expanded earlier surveillance efforts. In Article 3, it states that:

High Contracting Parties undertake to communicate to each other in regard to any person of either sex who has committed or attempted to commit any of the offences referred to in the present Convention or in the Conventions of 19010 and 1921 on the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children (p 2)

It goes on to state that the information states are expected to share with one another include conviction records, “any useful and available information,” including descriptions and photographs and fingerprints. This established one of the earliest networks of international information sharing on human trafficking, and helped to create the current system of surveillance states utilize today. This article also reconfirmed commitments to the previous conventions, which had explicit referrals to white slavery as the primary commitment and motive for anti-trafficking efforts.

The conflation of sex trafficking and sex work has made it permissible to target sex workers under the guise of “rescue”. As Chanelle Gallant and Elene Lam (2025) argue in their recent book *Not Your Rescue Project: Migrant Sex Workers Fighting for Justice*, the “anti-trafficking industry” is a tool of criminalization and state violence. The industry is utilized to perpetuate the securitization of borders, criminalization of sex work and migration, and replicate power hierarchies such as white supremacy and patriarchy. Their book is rooted in abolitionist⁹ arguments that these hierarchies are fundamental to racial capitalism, and thus can only be counteracted by community-based efforts and movements.

In this section, I highlighted how anti-trafficking discourses produced a victim in need of rescue. These discourses were institutionalized in early anti-trafficking agreements, and proliferated once international organizations took on the task of addressing human trafficking as

⁹ Importantly, the use of the term abolition in Chapter 2 refers to two distinct phenomena with the same name. In the first instance, abolition refers to the legal end of enslaving another person as property. I use this in reference to the end of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and to discuss how the abolition of slavery spurred the white slave hysteria in the early 20th century. Prison abolition as a social and political movement today, however, refers to the end of carceral systems of punishment and the creation of alternative institutions prioritizing repair and community-based solutions.

a global priority. By conflating sex trafficking and sex work, sex workers agency is removed. States are given jurisdiction to decide when someone is a trafficking victim, regardless of what that person claims. This also allows states to take any measures deemed necessary in identifying, recording, and extraditing these assumed victims.

Global Trafficking Discourse: Producing a Criminal to Punish

Treaties and agreements made in the early 20th century created the building blocks for how human trafficking is defined and understood today. A defining facet of these early international anti-trafficking efforts was that they created an idealized deserving victim of rescue: primarily, young white women. Scholars today suggest this preoccupation emerged from white slavery hysteria, states' desires to create stricter border control, and racist ideology (Hua, 2011; Hua and Nigorizawa, 2011; Kempadoo, 2015; Kempadoo, 2016). Yet the identity of a trafficking victim-- a morally good, victimized (white) woman --can only be constituted by the existence of an immoral, corrupt (racialized) woman. In the development of anti-trafficking initiatives from the early 1900s until now, the definition of human trafficking has played a key role in developing this racialized immoral subjecthood. In this section, I discuss how anti-trafficking discourse has produced a criminal undeserving of rights, and deserving of punishment. I trace its emergence in early anti-trafficking conventions and agreements, and discuss how it manifests today.

In the original treaty created during the 1904 conference, which set the precedent for future agreements on anti-trafficking, states agreed to create agencies charged with sharing information about “the procuring of women or girls for immoral purposes abroad” (p. 86). It also stated that, “the arrival of persons who clearly appear to be the principals, accomplices in, or victims of, such traffic shall be notified” to authorities (p. 86). One of the critics of contemporary

anti-trafficking agreements is their lack of clear measures of enforcement. The roots of this issue can be seen in this original agreement. For instance, the language of this convention was vague when it described how to define trafficking. The use of the word “immoral” throughout the document lent states to define immoral by whatever means they chose when enforcing the treaty. Given the public outrage at the time towards prostitution, this often translated into finding methods to control sex workers rather than protecting victims.

Further evidence of this can be seen in Article 3 of the treaty, which allowed states to require documentation and paperwork from “women or girls of foreign nationality who are prostitutes, in order to establish their identity and civil status, and to discover who has caused them to leave their country” (p. 86). Though the stated reason for requiring documentation in this treaty is to help identify human traffickers, it nonetheless was the origin of a system that continues to this day, requiring sex workers to be registered with the state, to be subject to law enforcement checks, and to otherwise disclose their status as a sex worker regardless of whether they desire to do so. This article explicitly refers to sex workers, not trafficking victims. Thus, it sought to regulate sex work despite the stated intention of the conference to focus on trafficking. Regulating sex workers had more to do with regulation migration than protecting alleged victims (Camiscioli, 2024; Payne, 2024; Payne, 2021).

Further in Article 3, it discusses that states should seek to, “send back to their country of origin those women and girls who desire it, or who may be claimed by persons exercising authority over them” (p. 86). Through this, states were given the authority to deport sex workers. Though it stated that it was a return to the country of origin, it could be undertaken without a person engaging in illegal activity, and without their desire to do so. Earlier in Article 3 it also explicitly refers to foreign women. Singling out international workers highlights that states were

particularly interested in controlling, punishing, and deporting women of color sex workers. The ability to deport women of color sex workers is predicated on these international agreements from the beginning of the 20th century (Payne, 2024). Their impact continues to be exerted on sex workers today who are deported and routinely harassed while traveling (Mia, 2020).

The escalation of internationally coordinated anti-trafficking agreements throughout the next century built upon the foundation laid within this 1904 agreement. Despite the institutionalization of surveillance networks and the ability to monitor and deport sex workers, it was not until 2000 that human trafficking itself became illegal. This was through the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. A main contribution of the Palermo protocol is that it provided an internationally agreed upon definition of trafficking. In the protocol language, its stated goals were to develop a universal instrument that addresses all aspects of trafficking in persons (p. 1).

The core of this definition is the recognition that human trafficking is for the purpose of exploitation, and yet exploitation is not defined within the protocol itself. Rather, there is a list of examples of what exploitation can look like. In Article 3, the protocol states, “exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (p. 2). It then goes on to state that even in cases where “the consent of a victim” is given, that consent is irrelevant if exploitation occurred and it is considered trafficking “even if this does not involve any of the means set forth” in the examples of exploitation. This definition thus gives broad domain to states to decide whether a given person is either guilty of abetting trafficking, or a victim regardless of whether they identify themselves as one or not. Under either condition, the agreements give states the right to deport the person.

Unlike in preceding documents, there is only one mention of prostitution in this protocol (as listed above) and there are no mentions of white slavery. It is clear that TIP expanded the scope of human trafficking beyond what was considered in prior efforts of international coordination. However, it does dedicate an entire article, Article 5, to “criminalization”. Within Article 5, this protocol requires states to “adopt such legislative and other measures as may be necessary to establish as criminal offences” conduct which can be described as trafficking (p. 3). It further criminalizes participating as an accomplice, as well as organizing or directing other persons to commit an offense.

As I will discuss further in chapters 3 and 4, anti-trafficking initiatives do not just target perpetrators of trafficking, but often inflict criminalization on victims and on sex workers. In London where sex work is legal, for instance, sex workers can be charged with aiding and abetting trafficking if they work together. This is a common safety tactic, and so sex workers expose themselves to the potential to be arrested or deported anytime they engage in it. This is due to the language within Article 5 of the Palermo Protocol which allows states to criminalize actions which can be associated with aiding and abetting trafficking. Since earlier agreements provide a vague definition of trafficking, and this protocol does not clearly distinguish prostitution by exploitation versus prostitution by consent, it allows states to weaponize anti-trafficking legislation against sex workers.

According to Wijer, international experts like the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, and the International Labor Organization recommended not to use the words exploitation or sexual exploitation within the Palermo Protocol and instead favored concepts that were accepted and defined in international human rights law, such as forced labor and servitude. Other states, such as the US, wanted

exploitation of prostitution and sexual exploitation in the protocol independent of the use of terms such as deception, force and coercion. The compromise was to include a general enough term that was left undefined, so that states could decide for themselves how they wanted to address prostitution via domestic laws.

This compromise reflects prior treaties' preoccupation with conflating trafficking and sex work, implying that sex work is not labor. These international agreements defined trafficking by the type of work, rather than by forced and unfree working conditions as the coalitions formed with pro-sex worker rights advocated for. Wijer (2021) spoke about the impact of this law in practice today, stating that, "instead of the offender standing trial, it is the victim who has to prove her 'innocence', thus shifting the focus from the acts of the trafficker to the morality of the victim". This distinguished good women and true victims of trafficking from bad women who choose criminality. These bad women are thus deemed undeserving of protection or rights. Wijer refers to this as "sex work exceptionalism" and argued that it set up completely opposite strategies for sex workers as opposed to any other group of worker: "where everybody agrees that it's important to strengthen and support unionization, organization, etc. in order to combat forced labor...the exact opposite strategies are promoted when it comes to combatting trafficking in the sex industry". Instead, expanding criminalization is advocated for, which perpetuates greater stigma and violence against sex workers and trafficking victims alike.

Anti-trafficking discourse produces a victim in need of rescue, but it also produces a criminal complicit in trafficking. Sex workers fall into one of these categories, and if they refuse to perform victimhood they will be persecuted by the state for engaging in trafficking. The roots of anti-trafficking discourse in the white slavery movement has produced white women as most

likely to be victimized (and rescued), with women of color most likely to be criminalized. The creation of these categories continues to impact contemporary legislation today.

Global-to-Local: Impact of Conflation of Trafficking with Sex Work

Global efforts to address human trafficking have influenced international and domestic law on how states address trafficking, but have also impacted areas such as immigration and border control, freedom of speech and censorship, and the criminalization of sex workers. In this section, I discuss three examples of how this discourse has been taken up in national practices. I draw on one example per field site: the Modern Slavery Act in the UK, the Modern Slavery Act in Australia, and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) in the US.

In 2015, the UK passed the Modern Slavery Act. This act was supported by Andrew Wallis and Justine Carter, was introduced to the House of Commons by James Brokenshire, the Parliamentary Under Secretary for Crime and Security, and was sponsored by Theresa May and Lord Bates (Giovagnoni and Van Schooneveld, 2022). Wallis is the founding CEO of Unseen, which is a UK charity that runs a modern slavery hotline and provides resources to trafficking victims. Carter was a civil servant along with May and Bates, but later joined Unseen. Unseen was founded in 2008, and Wallis stated the reason for its creation were due to instances where his friends noted situations where they encountered trafficked women and children. He recounts these on the Unseen website:

While in the country he had encountered trafficking and ended up helping a woman by paying off her potential trafficker – then reimbursing her for the money she thought she had lost because she had assumed she was going to a job in the US. Some months later Kate came to me with a story of child trafficking from orphanages where she had been volunteering, also in Ukraine.

The creation of this anti-trafficking charity provided him the opportunity to chair the Joint Modern Slavery Strategic Group at the Home Office and become a member of the Inter Departmental Ministerial Group. In his capacity in these roles, he began advocacy for more stringent anti-trafficking laws in 2012. By 2013, Wallis had published findings from an investigation into modern slavery sponsored by the Center for Social Justice, called “It Happens Here”. This report was what eventually initiated the passage of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act.

The 2015 MSA defines a human trafficking offense as slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labor, and committing offences with intent to commit trafficking.

In its discussion of protecting victims of trafficking, it states that a person who is aged 18 or over and acts of their own accord could be found not guilty for contributing to slavery or trafficking (Part 5, Section 45). Taken together, these aspects of the MSA take from the Palermo Protocol the aspects of the protocol which seek to address trafficking, rather than those that conflate trafficking with sex work. Mainly, this can be seen by stating that an adult acting of their own accord will not be found guilty of trafficking, or abetting trafficking. However, the last part of how the MSA defines trafficking states that “the consent of a person to any of the acts alleged...does not preclude a determination that the person is being held in slavery or servitude, or required to perform forced or compulsory labor” (Part 1.5). By stating this clause, it allows the government to make final determination on whether someone is being trafficked or not, regardless of whether the alleged victim states they are a consenting adult. This clause keeps open the potential for anti-slavery legislation in the UK to be used to “rescue” sex workers from their work, or to deem them as criminals abetting trafficking.

While the stated intent of the 2015 MSA was to “give law enforcement the tools to fight modern slavery and to ensure that perpetrators can receive suitably severe punishments” Dr.

Alicia Heys, a Lecturer in Modern Slavery at the Wilberforce Institute, stated that there is a dearth of information on the effectiveness of the act (Home Office, 2018). Heys documents a lack of engagement with people who have lived experiences as a trafficking victim, thus making it difficult to assess the impact the MSA has on supporting victims of trafficking. Additionally, law enforcement were not required to undergo any training. This left them open to enforcing anti-trafficking legislation in biased ways. Heys documented that police bias and a lack of training are issues that have been flagged in prior reviews of the MSA that have gone unaddressed. Overall, the MSA draws from international understandings of human trafficking and maintains the vagueness of the concept of trafficking. It also does not specify enforcement mechanisms, and leaves it up to the state how to judge whether someone is an “actual” victim or whether they are knowingly participating in criminal activity.

In Australia, the government adopted the 2018 Modern Slavery Act that was similar in form and goal as the UK’s 2015 act. The act operates as a “transparency framework” requiring businesses operating in Australia to describe the risks of modern slavery within their supply chain operations¹⁰, and take action to address them (University of Hull). Additionally, businesses must create an annual modern slavery statement explaining the steps they are taking to address potential risks. While its intent is to increase transparency of how businesses contribute to modern slavery, and encourage them to take steps to reduce these risks, it does not have a strong enforcement mechanism. According to a report published in 2020 by the Australian Human Rights Institute at the University of New South Wales, 66% of companies were failing to comply

¹⁰ Corporate social responsibility has emerged in part due to the movement for fair trade and international advocacy efforts calling for greater transparency and accountability in global supply chains. While these initiatives seek to reduce the use of forced labor in production, multinational corporations are reluctant to uphold them. In this instance, sex workers laud the Australian MSA as producing demonstrable harm against sex workers including being denied or ejected from short term stays and seizure of funds and account closures from financial service providers. Reporting on MSA has also failed to indicate its effectiveness in reducing the risk of modern slavery within supply chain operations.

with the basic reporting requirement, with some not submitting reports at all (University of Hull). The lack of an enforcement mechanism is an issue that prior international efforts to address human trafficking suffered from. Additionally, Australia's MSA suffers from the problem the UK and US-based acts do, which is that the vagueness of the concept of exploitation utilized in these acts allows for states to interpret them too broadly. These broad interpretations can be used to surveil, restrict and punish sex workers who are consensually engaging in their work under the guise that they are actually being exploited. Scarlet Alliance, the national sex worker organization in Australia, warned as early as 2017 that people experiencing exploitation would not be supported by this act unless their work was decriminalized. This was in recognition that some people doing sex work may still find themselves in exploitative circumstances. However, they will not be able to receive support from the state so long as they are considered criminals. Additionally, Scarlet Alliance's chief executive Jules Kim argues that trafficking victim support must be decoupled from the criminal justice system in order to better support victims, who otherwise risk the potential to themselves be subject to criminal penalties.

Another example of a domestic policy that has been influenced by international human trafficking discourse is SESTA/FOSTA, adopted in 2018 by the US Congress. This bill amends Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, an act which protected online platforms from liability for user-generated content. The intention of Section 230 was to allow for greater free speech online and limit the need for censorship by social media platforms. SESTA/FOSTA created exemptions for sex trafficking in particular, making platforms liable for any content that facilitates or promotes sex trafficking. As seen in international anti-trafficking agreements, SESTA/FOSTA specifically distinguishes sex trafficking from other forms of labor and human trafficking, following in line with what Wijer referred to as "sex work exceptionalism". While

the stated goal of SESTA/FOSTA was to combat sex trafficking online and protect victims, there has been a surge of research and community-led responses about its negative consequences for marginalized communities (Jones, 2022a; Jones, 2022b; Fuentes et. al., 2025). I discuss further the passage of SESTA/FOSTA and the harm it has caused for sex workers in chapter 3 and 4 of this dissertation.

Though a not exhaustive list of policies, the examples of legislation in this section highlight how the notion of human trafficking institutionalized at the beginning of the 20th century continues to impact the regulation of sex work today. The conflation of sex trafficking with sex work, the binaries of victimhood and criminality, and the expansion of state surveillance through a network of anti-trafficking agencies set the stage for the regulatory environment sex workers organize within, with profound impacts on sex worker organizing, as we shall see.

Sex Work as Work: Producing an (International) Counter-Discourse

Contemporary legislation is impacted by international discourses on human trafficking. This discourse perpetuates victim/criminal binaries, conflates sex trafficking and sex work, and extends state surveillance against sex workers. In response to the negative consequences of anti-trafficking discourse, sex workers and allied groups have mobilized to challenge this harm. In this section, I discuss an example at the international level to challenge this dominant discourse: the United Nations Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls.

The Human Rights Council established this working group in 2010 originally to concentrate efforts on eliminating discriminatory laws and practices. The working group itself is composed of five independent experts from around the world. The UN Working Group chair is Laura Nyirinkindi, a Senior Managing Consultant of a human rights firm based in Uganda. The Vice-Chair is Claudia Flores, who is a Clinical Professor of Law at Yale and Director of several

human rights centers. Other members include Dr. Dorothy Estrada-Tanck, Professor at University of Murcia, Spain, Dr. Ivana Krstic, Professor at University of Belgrade, Serbia, and Dr. Haina Lu, Professor at Renmin University of China Law School. On December 7th 2023, this Working Group released a document providing guidance on how to reduce discrimination against sex workers and promote their human rights. The document was composed in preparation for the 56th session of the Human Rights Council in June 2024.

A key issue during this session was the decriminalization of sex work. This guidance document was created with the input from sex workers themselves and was intended to raise awareness of sex workers' human rights violations, to affirm international human rights standards and to make recommendations of how to promote sex workers' human rights. Among the human rights violations they note are discrimination, arbitrary arrest and detention, state violence, lack of access to healthcare and social services, and exclusion from social and political life (Guidance document, 2023, 2). The goal of the guiding document was to suggest international support for the decriminalization of sex work, as well as encourage states to shift their regulatory model towards decriminalization. By itself, it had no binding authority and was a guidance document composed of research and created with community-based input.

In the document itself, the Working Group notes the existence of the whorearchy and describes two ideological positions on sex work; as violence against women, requiring the criminalization of clients, and as labor, requiring decriminalization (3). In the guidance document, it mentions a third perspective that both recognizes the agency of sex workers as well as the constraints (social, economic, political) they face as one among many forms of exploited labor. This perspective is valuable because, "rather than discussing sex work policies in abstract... [it] looks at the human rights implications of different policies in practice" (3). This

perspective also advocates for full decriminalization as a harm reduction approach. As a way of understanding how sex workers are impacted by their social and legal environment, this third perspective supports my concept of regulatory liminality by recognizing how different regulatory environments (different experiences with laws and practices) alter sex workers levels of agency and constraint. This in turn impacts how they are able to navigate the world, including how they can organize.

The approach that the Working Group advocates completely disassociates sex work from human trafficking and recognizes the autonomy of sex workers. By doing so, it makes space to recognize that in informal forms of employment there are higher risks of human rights abuses. As stated in the guidance document, this approach is both more practically useful in discussing discrimination and violence, and recognizes that sex workers themselves can take an active role in combating the harm they experience. While on its own, this document had no international enforcement capabilities, it represented an important counter-narrative within international organizations that highlighted the need to decouple sex trafficking from sex work, and decriminalize sex work in order for people to have greater rights and freedoms.

Summary

In this chapter, I argued that human trafficking discourse mediates the regulatory environment sex workers navigate. This discourse as it is contemporarily understood began in the late 19th/early 20th century. The abolition of slavery and the advent of white slavery hysteria fomented the context within which human trafficking became a global priority. States coordinated to create anti-trafficking conventions and treaties, but these suffered from a vague definition of human trafficking and the conflation of sex trafficking with sex work. In earlier agreements, prostitution was explicitly mentioned, and states were tasked with documenting and

registering known sex workers. States were also given freedom to extradite trafficking victims and sex workers alike. These agreements also created an idealized victim, that of a moral white woman. The antithesis to this victim became the immoral racialized woman, who abetted trafficking and engaged in prostitution.

Today, anti-trafficking discourse continues to have an impact on legislation and the treatment of sex workers. At the national level, states have taken up the vagueness of how global organizations define human trafficking and applied that to their own laws on anti-trafficking. This has allowed them to target sex workers while justifying it as anti-trafficking measures. The impact of this legislation harms the most vulnerable workers, often being migrants, racialized women, and trans and queer women. States also continue to collect information on sex workers by claiming that doing so accounts for potential trafficking victims. This creates a registry of sex workers and often leads to increased police harassment.

The harms of anti-trafficking initiatives have led to some groups mobilizing to create counter-discourses. At the international level, organizations seek to separate sex trafficking from sex work. They advocate for the decriminalization of sex work as a method to ensure the rights of sex workers and better protections for victims. In the following chapters, I discuss how sex workers themselves are shaping this counter-discourse. Though anti-trafficking discourse has created a complex regulatory environment for sex workers to navigate, which I refer to as regulatory liminality, they are able to wield this liminality in order to advocate for decriminalization, advance their rights, and protect each other from state violence.

CHAPTER 3: FORMAL ORGANIZING STRATEGIES

Sex workers experience regulatory liminality due to the complex regulatory environment they operate in which is shaped in part by anti-trafficking discourses and stigma. For instance, anti-trafficking discourses (re)enforce binaries of victimhood and/or criminality that constrain how sex work is treated legally and socially. Regulatory liminality as a concept encompasses de jure and de facto regulation, as well as the broader discursive environment sex workers navigate. These conditions-- legal ambiguity and anti-trafficking discourses-- mediate sex workers experiences of (in)security. When legal ambiguity is lower, sex workers experience lower regulatory liminality. Where there is greater legal ambiguity, sex workers experience higher regulatory liminality (i.e. vulnerability). The level of vulnerability a sex worker experiences shapes their level of risk when organizing. In this way, regulatory liminality constrains and enables how sex worker organizers experience and navigate criminality and stigma.

In response to this complex regulatory environment and the state violence it perpetuates, Sex workers are mobilizing to create counter-narratives to harmful discourse, as well as petition for legislative change. In this chapter, I discuss the formal organizing strategies sex workers are using. I categorize these strategies into two broad groups: public advocacy and political education. Formal strategies utilize existing advocacy channels, seek to change legislation, and are primarily oriented towards “outside” audiences, i.e. not sex workers. For example, sex workers engaging in lobbying days is a formal organizing strategy because lobbying is a common political practice and it is aimed at those in office crafting and adopting policy.

To demonstrate how sex workers utilize formal organizing strategies to advocate for decriminalization, I draw upon my field work in the US, UK and Australia, including interviews with sex workers and participant observation with sex worker organizations. First, I discuss how

sex workers' leverage their regulatory liminality in a criminalized environment. The US has dedicated significant financial and material resources to anti-trafficking initiatives with ripple effects on national and local policy. SESTA/FOSTA is an example of this and influences how sex workers in the US organize. I also expand on how national policies like SESTA/FOSTA impact local level politics by discussing LA County's human trafficking initiatives. In 1995 the El Monte case in LA county identified 72 captive Thai garment workers and prompted the county to consolidate its human trafficking efforts¹¹. There were no human trafficking laws on the books before this case and it catalyzed the formation of the Coalition Against Slavery and Trafficking (CAST) and a nationwide human trafficking movement¹². In the decades since this case, LA county has created several ensuing initiatives and police task forces to address human trafficking. These initiatives have negatively impacted sex workers, especially multiply marginalized people of color and queer and trans folks. Sex worker organizers are using formal organizing strategies to respond to the heightened precarity these initiatives cause. This includes coalition-building with non-sex worker groups, active involvement in local and state level policy-making, and public demonstrations.

Next, I explore sex worker organizing strategies in a legalized environment. Though sex work in the United Kingdom (UK) is legal, sex workers are still impacted by regulatory liminality. The legalization of sex work has created a system of state regulations that are often at odds with the safety practices sex workers use. Due to this, sex workers are often forced to choose between operating safely and operating legally. I describe examples of this drawn from my field work, such as when sex workers choose to work together but then face arrests, property

¹¹ Los Angeles County Consumer and Business Affairs Report on Reimagining Los Angeles County's Approach to Human Trafficking (released March 20, 2024)

¹² CAST is a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization "working to put an end to modern slavery and human trafficking through comprehensive, life-transforming services to survivors and a platform to advocate for groundbreaking policies and legislation" ([CASTLA.org](https://www.castla.org)). An analysis of CAST's actions in LA and beyond is outside of the scope of this dissertation but would be a line for further inquiry.

seizure, and eviction. This is most prevalent in the case of sex workers who are already marginalized, such as undocumented and migrant workers, but is true for all workers in a legalized environment. While sex workers in this environment may have lower regulatory liminality than those in a criminalized one, they still experience policing and stigmatization. Similar to workers in the US, sex workers in the UK utilize formal methods to resist the precarity they experience. I draw on my fieldwork to highlight examples, including sex workers mobilizing against racist immigration law and police raids, and their work to destigmatize and protect sex working parents.

Finally, I discuss how sex workers navigate their regulatory liminality in a decriminalized environment. In Sydney, Australia, sex workers began a national organization as early as the 1980s. Sex work has been decriminalized in New South Wales due to decades of coordinated action by this national body. Additionally, sex work has been decriminalized in the Northern Territory, Victoria, and Queensland as sex workers have continued to apply legislative pressure. I provide an overview of the organizing in these regions that led to this policy shift. Sex workers mobilized into a national body in order to have greater legitimacy and political leverage. They also strategically focused on health promotion to gain access to financial resources and gain a more active policy-making role.

By highlighting examples of sex workers' formal organizing strategies across regulatory environments, I demonstrate that sex workers everywhere experience regulatory liminality. Though sex workers, activists, and human rights experts agree that decriminalization is a necessary step towards bettering the health, safety, and rights of sex workers, it is not sufficient (ACLU 2018; Fuentes et. al 2025). This is because sex workers' experiences with precarity and violence extend beyond de jure laws. Intersectional power hierarchies and stigma from moralized

discourses impact sex worker's experiences with law enforcement and other state institutions (ex. Child Protective Services). I conclude the chapter by discussing some of the implications of the formal strategies sex workers employ, and how regulatory liminality constrains these from being enough to protect sex workers. To fill in the gaps in safety, sex workers also utilize informal organizing strategies-- which I discuss in the next chapter.

Formal Organizing When Sex Work is Criminalized

Anti-trafficking initiatives are documented to have harmful effects on sex workers (Blunt and Wolf, 2020; Musto et al., 2021; Fuentes et al, 2025). This includes greater instances of arrest, theft of property, evictions, social media censorship and account deletion, police coercion and assault, among other negative impacts. When sex work is criminalized, police raids are also more likely to occur. Anti-trafficking initiatives devote vast amounts of financial and material resources to the state. In turn, this bolsters the ability of law enforcement to surveil and arrest sex workers. For instance, the LA County Sheriff's department received a 1.5 million dollar grant from the Department of Justice to establish a human trafficking task force (DOJ, 2015). In the following section, I discuss a set of laws passed during the first Trump administration referred to as the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA).

SESTA/FOSTA are nationally implemented laws that suspend Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996. This act stipulates that "no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider" (Decriminalize Sex Work, 2024). Attacking Section 230 harms users' ability to post content without censorship. This can be especially detrimental to sex workers because they rely on these platforms for work, and become targeted

by content moderation and platform removal for “obscenity” out of fear of civil liability on the part of the provider.

The detrimental impact of SESTA/FOSTA for sex workers across the US has been widely-documented by sex workers and researchers as it heightened the conflation of sexual trafficking with sex work and made it easier to increase censorship, as well as criminalization (Blunt and Wolf, 2020; Musto, 2021; Fuentes et al, 2025). In the next section, I discuss the impact of SESTA/FOSTA, and the organizing of sex workers to resist its passage. At the local level, SESTA/FOSTA has allowed authorities to target sex workers through surveillance, raids and arrest. I discuss the case of LA, in particular the Figueroa Corridor, because sex worker organizers in the area are actively mobilizing against increased criminalization and policing stemming from human trafficking initiatives. They use formal organizing methods to do so; political advocacy and political education. I draw on examples from my fieldwork, such as a public demonstration and the creation of community-based events, to demonstrate the formal organizing strategies of LA-based sex workers leveraging their regulatory liminality to shift legislation and public opinion.

SESTA/FOSTA

When SESTA/FOSTA was proposed, sex workers and advocates warned of the potential detrimental impacts on sex workers and for online expression more broadly. DecrimSWCA, SWOPLA, and the ACLU all submitted public comments to this effect (ACLU 2018; Ceron 2019). Other opposition groups to the set of bills included the libertarian think tank Cato Institute and the LGBTQ advocacy group Human Rights Campaign. Despite sex worker organizers and civil liberty groups raising alarm about the potential effects, SESTA/FOSTA was virtually unanimous at 388-25 in the House of Representatives and 97-2 in the Senate. Only Senators Ron

Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, and Senator Rand Paul, Kentucky Republican, voted against it.

Senator Wyden commented the following in regards to his vote:

Today I am announcing my public hold and a public warning about SESTA. Having written several laws to combat the scourge of sex trafficking, I take a backseat to no one on the urgency of fighting this horrendous crime. However, I continue to be deeply troubled that this bill's approach will make it harder to catch dangerous criminals, that it will favor big tech companies at the expense of startups and that it will stifle innovation. After 25 years of fighting these battles, I've learned that just because a big technology company says something is good, doesn't mean it's good for the internet or innovation. (Wyden 2017)

Despite the widespread government support of this bill, the majority of media reporting prior to and after its passage reflected what sex workers and activists were already vocalizing (Masnick 2018). Masnick (2018) wrote that the overwhelming government support for the bill was unsurprising, but presented a real danger. He stated that many parts of the bill appear unconstitutional, such as an ex post facto clause that would make the bill applicable to activities in the past. Additionally, he recounts that a lawyer who represents victims of sex trafficking expressed skepticism about the bill being helpful for trafficking victims. This lawyer mentioned that sites like Backpage (a client-oriented webpage to hire sex workers) were useful for finding victims and helping them get out of dangerous situations, as when her clients would disappear this would be the only way she could get back in touch.

One of the co-authors of the bill was Senator Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat. He stated that Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act was “outdated and obsolete” during a press conference about the bill (Masnick 2018). He and other government officials viewed this bill as an opportunity to “win” against US tech giants. Senator John Thune, a South Dakota Republican, asserted “the future tech companies have to understand that it's not the Wild West and they have to exercise responsibility” (Masnick 2018). While officials argue

that the intended targets of this bill were big tech companies, all public comments, media criticism and evidence point to its detrimental effects for trafficking victims and sex workers. Tech companies such as Facebook went so far as to endorse SESTA/FOSTA. Some media reporting attributes this support to the backlash Facebook was receiving at the time for the “alleged” Russian efforts to spread election disinformation in 2016.

Since its adoption, research on its impact has echoed sex workers’ warnings; SESTA/FOSTA has contributed to the removal and restriction of content deemed “obscene” or “adult”. This included workers’ websites, free or low-cost advertising sites like Craigslist personals, a well-known website for worker-client bookings called Backpage, and harm-reduction tools like screening databases and blacklists of dangerous clients. Sex workers also experienced a “chilling effect” on their free speech through online censorship (Blunt & Wolf, 2020, p. 33). Many companies changed the terms and conditions of their online services to avoid liability for sex trafficking because of SESTA/FOSTA. Skype and Tumblr, for example, banned nudity. Some social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit cracked down on sexual content, and others like Twitter and Instagram continued to shut down sex worker accounts and hide sex work-related content. Additionally, sex workers lost access to dating sites like Tinder, Grindr, and Adam4Adam, even for personal use.

Loss of access to online advertising significantly impacted sex workers’ income, which increased homelessness and insecure housing (Flynn 2021). SESTA/FOSTA also caused sex workers to have their bank accounts shut down and lose access to their payment processors (Blunt and Wolf, 2020). This too contributed to financial and housing insecurity. Furthermore, reduced spaces for online advertising forced many indoor workers onto the streets where

working conditions are more dangerous (Blunt & Wolf, 2020; COYOTE RI, 2022; Eichart, 2020; Institute for Shelter Care, 2018; Jones, 2022a; Mia, 2020; Musto et al., 2021; Tichenor, 2020).

The loss of access to online harm reduction tools like databases for screening (or “vetting”) clients and blacklists (or “bad date lists”), where workers could review clients, also decreased sex worker safety by increasing the risk of violence from both clients and police. A study by the ACLU (2022) found that in the wake of SESTA/FOSTA, 34% of sex worker participants reported increased client violence. According to Tichenor (2020), SESTA/FOSTA also led to “epistemic violence” against sex workers by silencing sex workers online (p. 105 quoting Chapman-Schmidt).

Due to increased income instability, sex workers became more vulnerable to labor exploitation. Workers experienced increased contact with pimps and traffickers, and independent sex workers were more likely to move to managed workplaces like brothels, where working conditions are more exploitative. This occurred in places like Nevada, where brothels are legal in certain counties. Moreover, knowing that sex workers were in dire financial straits, clients increasingly pressured workers to see them, pushed their boundaries, and demanded cheaper services, leading many workers to accept dangerous or unpleasant clients, offer services they were not comfortable with, and lower their rates (Blunt & Wolf, 2020; COYOTE RI, 2018; COYOTE RI, 2022; Eichart, 2020; Institute for Shelter Care, 2018; Musto et al., 2021).

SESTA/FOSTA also negatively impacted sex workers’ health outcomes. For example, 26% of the chronically ill online respondents to Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf’s (2020) community-based survey reported an intensification of their symptoms after the passage of SESTA/FOSTA, further contributing to income and housing insecurity. SESTA/FOSTA also posed significant challenges to sex workers’ mental health. In their survey, workers reported a

dramatic increase in fear and anxiety, sometimes leading to panic attacks and exacerbating existing conditions such as PTSD. Workers also experienced increased stress and levels of depression, including feelings of hopelessness, and some even committed suicide.

Finally, SESTA/FOSTA reduced sex workers' access to community, leading to increased feelings of isolation and inhibiting harm reduction practices like sharing safety tips and providing references for clients. This, in turn, negatively affected sex worker organizing, but it also increased the visibility of and involvement in the sex worker rights movement and “galvanized online sex workers” (Blunt & Wolf, 2020, p. 27). Collectively, these impacts on sex workers’ free speech, income, safety, labor exploitation, health, and community substantiate that SESTA/FOSTA, like other policies increasing the criminalization of sex workers, is a sex worker hate policy. Fuentes et al. (2025) define hate policies as intended to inflict harm on a specific population.

I co-authored this paper with SWOPLA members who conducted interviews with LA-based sex workers and a scoping review of other research on SESTA/FOSTA’s impacts (Fuentes et. al. 2025). In our article, we sought to demonstrate that SESTA/FOSTA is a de facto hate policy due to the harm it has inflicted upon sex workers. Though the conventional definition of a hate policy is one where the harm is knowingly inflicted, we argue that this definition can be extended to encompass policies that allegedly have a different purpose, but have disregarded previously known effects on a particular group or groups. Groups such as the ACLU, SWOP-USA, SWOPLA, and DecrimNY petitioned against SESTA/FOSTA, as I discussed above. Though they brought documented evidence of the negative impacts these bills would have on marginalized groups, it went on to be almost unanimously passed (Ceron 2019). This

highlights the intentional negligence by public officials to heed the consequences of their legislation against sex workers and other marginalized communities.

SESTA/FOSTA had adverse impacts on migrant sex workers, especially undocumented workers (COYOTE RI, 2022; Jones, 2022a; Musto et al., 2021; Tichenor, 2020). SESTA/FOSTA also disproportionately harmed sex workers with disabilities. Respondents to COYOTE RI's (2022) survey who reported having a disability experienced 14% more violence than all respondents, and were the most likely to both lower their rates and offer services they were not comfortable with than sex workers without a disability. They started working on the street nearly twice as often as other workers, and they had the highest rates of homelessness and insecure housing. Sex workers with multiple marginalized identities were harmed the most by SESTA/FOSTA. Angela Jones (2022a) found that transmasculine and non-binary sex workers with additional marginalized identities like sex workers of color and disabled sex workers suffered the greatest losses because of these laws, and Musto et al. (2021) found that transgender migrants and people of color experience the worst effects of SESTA/FOSTA.

In sum, while the government overwhelmingly supported the passage of SESTA/FOSTA, there has been no evidence that it meaningfully reduced human trafficking. Additionally, there has been overwhelming evidence that it has harmed sex workers, and experts indicate that it may have also made it difficult to assist trafficking survivors. Sex workers were vocal in warning officials about this outcome, but were summarily ignored, their experience-based knowledge dismissed. In its wake, sex workers have rallied even more aggressively to protect one another.

Human Trafficking Regulation along Figueroa Corridor

SESTA/FOSTA was a product of proliferating fear-mongering anti-trafficking discourses, as well as whorephobia against sex workers. As I contend in the previous section, its impacts

have been far-reaching. The ACLU has reported on these harms, such as economic instability and client-inflicted violence increasing (Moraff 2022). Its passage signified a commitment at the national level to “address human trafficking” at the expense of marginalized communities. Fiscal resources have been funneled into human trafficking initiatives at the national and local levels. In LA, this has looked like Mayor Bass and the LA City Council diverting funds to the LA police department (LAPD) and the LA County Sheriff’s Department (LASD) to create a human trafficking task force¹³. It has also meant more frequent patrolling of areas where street-based sex workers work, and higher rates of arrest for sex workers. In this section, I discuss how this diversion of resources within LA has impacted local sex workers, and what sex worker organizers are doing about it.

The Figueroa Corridor (also referred to as Fig) is a three-mile stretch of South Figueroa Street in South Central Los Angeles, from approximately 48th to 73rd Street -- though street-based sex workers can be found working even in the 100s. It is infamously known to both locals and tourists as a place where street-based sex workers operate, and is heavily frequented by both groups. Local law enforcement are also aware that this is where sex workers stroll (a term used to refer to anywhere street-based sex workers operate). This makes the dedication of county resources by LAPD and City Council authorities to anti-trafficking initiatives that increase the surveillance and arrest of sex workers especially suspect; over the years, they have increased patrolling along Fig, conducted police raids of motels along the Corridor, and arrested street-based sex workers under the guise of “rescuing” trafficking victims.

The increased international and domestic attention to human trafficking, shaped by anti-trafficking discourse, has led to the creation of local bodies seeking to reduce human

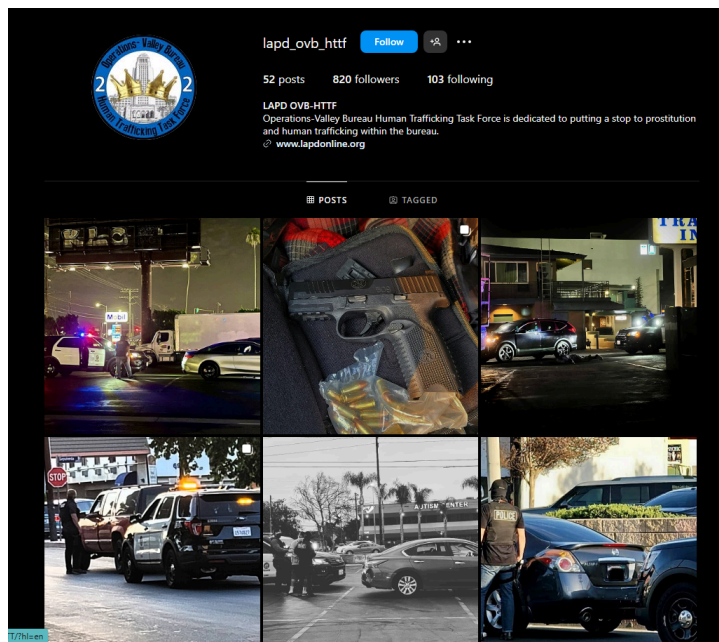
¹³ While Mayor Bass is one politician in a lineage that has increased the police apparatus within LA County, her work on anti-trafficking began in the late 1980s/1990s as a civilian when she founded the Community Coalition in South LA. It is due in large part to her actions in the city that anti-trafficking has become a county priority.

trafficking. One such group is the LA Regional Human Trafficking Task Force (LA-HTTF) formed in 2015. The LA-HTTF claims to be, “the largest co-located Task Force in the nation” (LA-HTTF, home page). It is a county-led task force with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department (LASD) as the lead law enforcement agency. Its stated mission includes identification of victims within LA county, investigation and prosecution of labor and sex trafficking cases, and provision of services to trafficking victims. Their partners include Saving Innocence, an LA-based anti-trafficking nonprofit, Homeland Security Investigations, the US Department of Justice, and the Office of the US Attorney for the Central District of California. According to this taskforce “modern day slavery or trafficking in persons, is the exploitation of human beings through force, fraud or coercion for the purposes of commercial sex or forced labor” (home page). The LASD is responsible for patrolling areas outside the boundaries of the city of Los Angeles. Despite this, they do impact the city itself. This is because they collaborate with the LAPD. While the LAPD is not an official community partner for the taskforce, they actively collaborate with the LA-HTTF to investigate sex and labor trafficking cases and act as liaisons for the task force.

The taskforce includes separate lists for common venues/industries for labor and sex trafficking. Included in the sex trafficking list are spas and massage parlors, residential or commercial brothels, escort companies, exotic dancing/strip clubs, pornography, truck stops and hotel/motels. The photo below is a screenshot of the LA-HTTF Instagram page, which shows images of law enforcement pulling people in cars over, and of guns and ammunition. It would be a privacy violation to post images of rescued trafficking victims, but the imagery included on their publicized page seems to have little to do with the victim-centered approach they claim to take. In response to the amount of arrests the taskforce makes and its impact on community

members, LAPD Deputy Chief Alan Hamilton claims, “These numbers represent a life reclaimed, a future restored and a victory for justice. Behind every statistic that we’re discussing here is a person [and] every arrest and every rescue is a step closer to dismantling the networks that prey on the most vulnerable” (Merrill, 2025).

Figure 3.1 LAPD HTTF Instagram Post



Source: @lapd_ovb_httf, Operations-Valley Bureau Human Trafficking Task Force

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), LA County Sheriff’s Department (LASD), and the Long Beach Police Department led a week-long anti-human trafficking operation from January 26th to February 1st. “Operation Reclaim and Rebuild” is a statewide initiative carried out every January as part of National Human Trafficking Prevention Month. Across the state, over 547 arrests occurred of both “suspected sexual traffickers or exploiters and suspected sex buyers” (Merrill, 2025). The number of total assumed victims “rescued” include 180 adults and minors. LA County alone accounted for over 230 of those arrests and the “rescue” of 12 juvenile victims (the number of adult “rescues” is not disclosed), and LAPD alone made 205 arrests.

LAPD Deputy Chief Alan Hamilton stated that 76 of the 205 LAPD arrests were on the Figueroa Corridor, meaning almost 40% of arrests occurred just within the three mile radius of Fig (Merrill, 2025). The remaining arrests occurred in other regions of California that had participating human trafficking task forces, including Riverside County, San Diego, Contra Costa County, Riverside County, San Bernardino County, San Luis Obispo County, Santa Barbara County, Tulare County, and Ventura County (SIB Staff 2022). In a press release about this operation from February 4, 2025, Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan J Hochman contented:

Human traffickers are essentially modern-day slave masters who should be on clear notice that we will find them, arrest them, prosecute them, and seek maximum time behind bars for their despicable acts of preying on young girls and boys. This is not a threat but a promise.

According to this statement, LA County has taken a “hard on crime” stance towards human trafficking and seeks to pursue maximum criminal penalties. Increased police presence and surveillance on its own have negative impacts on marginalized communities. Success for these initiatives is often measured by the number of arrests, but, the vagueness of anti-trafficking is often weaponized to increase state militarization at the expense of vulnerable communities. In the case of Los Angeles, many of the arrests on sex-trafficking charges are actually arrests of consensual sellers and buyers of sex. In 2014, Los Angeles County officials announced their intent to launch a “john-shaming” campaign that would publicize the names and faces of sex workers’ clients (Sewell, 2014). The city stated that the intent of this campaign was to prevent sex trafficking. This practice has been adopted by other areas of Southern California, and has been controversial to sex workers and their clients, as well as allied organizers. This is because it makes actual clients of sex workers (versus human traffickers) hesitant to hire workers in fear

that they will be “outed” publicly. This reduces the amount of clients sex workers have, reducing their financial stability. In my interviews with sex workers, many indicated that it also encouraged them to take on potentially riskier clients. John-shaming as a tactic echoes the logic of the End Demand model, which criminalizes sex worker’s clients but not sex workers themselves. This model of regulating sex work has been documented to promote negative health and financial outcomes for sex workers (McBride et al, 2020; National Survivor Network, 2022). There have also been instances during LAPD “sex trafficking busts” where they release the names of sex workers in addition to clients. This adds arrests to their records, making it more difficult to transition out of the sex industry if they desired to do so. It also puts them at risk of doxxing, which is when people's private information such as phone number and home address are released to the public.

In this section, I’ve highlighted how local authorities-- including the LA City Council, LAPD, and LA human trafficking task force- have heightened the level of surveillance and violence sex workers are experiencing in LA. The Figueroa Corridor in particular has suffered from the conflation of sex trafficking and sex work. Despite claiming to protect vulnerable groups, the efforts to combat trafficking have inflicted demonstrable harm. In order to counteract the impact of increased criminalization, sex workers are utilizing formal organizing strategies. I categorize these strategies into two broad categories of political advocacy and political education. In the following sections, I draw on examples from LA-based sex worker organizers to highlight how these strategies look through a discussion of coalition-building, community-based policy creation, and public demonstrations.

Coalition-building in Los Angeles as a Countermeasure to Trafficking Narratives

The increased police presence along Fig has not just impacted sex workers and their clients. Figueroa is also home to several small businesses, including motels. Since Fig is an active area for street-based sex workers, there are several motels within a 5-10 mile radius that workers sometimes bring clients to. Being able to rent a room for a session is not only safer for workers, but also helps to reduce loitering and soliciting charges. Yet, city officials cite both the presence of sex workers and that of motels as contributing to high crime rates in the area. In an effort to “crackdown on crime” they have targeted motel owners along Fig. City leaders state that by doing so, they will bring a stop to prostitution and rampant violence (Sternfield, 2024). During my participant observation with sex worker organizers in LA, many of them divulged that they believe the crackdown in Fig is directly tied to the city’s efforts to “clean the streets” in preparation for the 2028 Olympics in LA.

A recent attempt occurred in 2024, with LA City Attorney Hydee Feldstein Soto pursuing a lawsuit against the owner of (the now closed down) Sun Motel on South Figueroa Street. According to KTLA news, “the suit claims management has failed to prevent ‘violent and escalating criminal activity’ connected to a street gang.” Soto justifies this lawsuit by documenting several instances of shootings and arrests near the hotel. Additionally, she mentions that LAPD officers found several rooms occupied by sex workers. Since sex work is criminalized in the US, just their presence is enough to justify increased state violence.

Soto and other officials name Fig as a human trafficking haven to justify their lawsuits against business owners and LAPD’s targeting of street-based sex workers. In a press announcement on October 23, 2024 where she discussed the lawsuit, she asserted:

For decades, the Figueroa corridor has been a volatile magnet for crime, including the sexual exploitation of minors, and the illegal

activity of some of the businesses in the area has helped fuel it... This lawsuit is another step toward disrupting the ecosystem of violence and bringing safety back to this community.

There has been a continuous extension of state oversight in Fig that has disproportionate negative impacts on sex workers. Sex worker organizers from DecrimSWCA-- Decriminalize Sex Work California --as well as from Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOPLA)-- have had a continuous presence in Fig since 2017/18 through their strolls (discussed in the informal organizing chapter). Through this connection, they were made aware of the increased policing and targeting by Soto and other LA City Council members. Such awareness led DecrimSWCA and SWOPLA in 2023 to get into contact with a handful of people who owned motels along Fig. Many motel owners were justifiably worried, as a 2023 lawsuit led to the permanent closure of New Gage Motel. Alice, a board member of SWOPLA and the Director of Policy and Finances for the organization, shared with me information about what the city is doing to “crackdown” in Fig. She also shared that SWOPLA was able to get into contact with the motel owners in 2024 because of a connection with an ACLU lawyer SWOPLA had. They formed this connection during their co-creation of SB233, discussed further below. Alice got back in touch with this lawyer after being reached out to and connected her with the owners. This (albeit not explicit) coalition has met several times in the last year to discuss the actions taken by LA County. The coalition is formed of Alice, other SWOPLA members who are available, the lawyer, and available motel owners interested in joining.

This coalition has met sporadically since they started, based upon the limited availability of its members. Alice informed me about these meetings in late 2024, and I was able to join two of them (there were only two that happened from October 2024 until April 2025). The lawyer who put Alice in contact with the motel owners was present at one of these meetings. In the first

meeting, there were two motel owners who attended, out of five who were invited. The second meeting only had one attending. In each of these meetings, on SWOPLA's side, there was Alice (who is also a member of DecrimSWCA's steering committee), one other board member, and two or three other members. In these meetings, motel owners shared how they were being scapegoated by the city council and blamed for increasing crime rates. Sex worker organizers were interested in collaborating with these motel owners because closures increased violence against street-based sex workers. Most workers in Fig are Black and people of color and are already subject to higher surveillance and violence. Having the option to take clients inside for sessions substantially decreases their risk. Many sex worker organizers meeting with the motel owners were not currently street-based, but recognized that the city targeting some sex workers threatened all of them. The potential to escalate violence against the whole sex worker community provided an incentive to LA sex worker organizers to create a coalition with motel owners, despite the fact that these business owners had intentions and perspectives distinct from that of the organizers.

This distinction became apparent during the meetings themselves. DecrimSWCA and SWOPLA do not have physical spaces in LA, and so much of their business is conducted online via Zoom or Jitsi (an encrypted video conferencing platform). The motel owners who attended the meetings did not include those who were already forced out of business by Soto and crew. There are only a handful left in Fig, about five owners. These five people meet with sex worker organizers knowing that they are advocating for their peers. Yet, the way they talk to the organizers indicates that they do not view them in the same stigmatized way they view street-based sex workers. For instance, during the second meeting where only one owner was in attendance, when he was speaking to SWOPLA members about the people working in Fig, he

would continuously say comments along the lines of, “I know you care about them, I admire what you are doing for those prostitutes.” He would catch himself when he said prostitute and correct to sex worker without anyone telling him to do so. But, from his comments like this it appeared as though he was distancing SWOPLA members from workers in Fig. SWOPLA members later said to me that it felt as though he was forgetting that the people he was speaking to were also sex workers. Additionally, some SWOPLA members at the meetings reflected after the fact that they felt that the motel owners are ill-informed of sex worker issues and are just looking for the lawsuits against their business to stop. According to the owners themselves, they “have no issue” with sex workers doing business. But SWOPLA members worry that the energy they are putting into combatting the city’s lawsuits in Fig to support motel owners will not be reciprocated by them when sex workers are being targeted.

Another example of this occurred when one of the owners, Satish, began ranting at a meeting in late 2024. During this meeting, he started talking about how sex workers dress, and how inappropriate it can be to have around children and families. He stated that he had no issue with working girls, but wanted to have it only allowed in certain areas. His ideas reflect a legalized model of sex work, despite the fact that both groups he spoke with were explicitly advocating for decriminalization. Additionally, he mentioned wanting to create zones for sex workers, which is often condemned by sex workers because it creates a two-tiered system where some workers are sanctioned by the state and others are still actively criminalized. His lack of knowledge about sex worker issues was not surprising but disappointing to the sex worker organizers present on the call. SWOPLA members expressed discomfort with his support for a legalization model given that they have been vocal to him about the need for decriminalization. It can be difficult to form coalitions with non-sex working groups because often there is not an

equal level of support and “showing out” for sex workers as they do for other groups, as I have conceptualized.

Despite these differences, this coalition is united by its view that anti-trafficking initiatives in LA are creating more harm than good. According to SWOPLA members, these initiatives by the local government are closing small businesses, displacing longtime residents, increasing policing in South Central, LA, and endangering sex workers. Though this coalition has not itself resulted in significant legal or material change, SWOPLA members reflect that it is an important building block in uniting members of the local community and working towards long-term change in Fig. In doing so, organizers are able to tap into concerns that encompass more than “just sex work” and impact others in LA. Coalition building like this is an important strategy utilized by sex worker organizers in criminalized environments so that they can ally themselves with more “legitimate” actors who are not considered criminals.

When the pushback against human trafficking initiatives comes from actors in addition to sex workers, it serves to legitimize and bolster their concerns. In part, this is due to the lack of credibility of sex workers to government officials and the general public. Stigma, mediated by whorephobia, depicts sex workers as unreliable narrators; either they are criminals engaged in immoral sexual behavior, or they are trafficking victims who have been exploited. Both idealized perspectives serve to delegitimize sex workers’ ability to advocate for themselves. In order to combat stigmatizing, sex workers have actively sought out partnerships with other organizers, nonprofits, researchers, and other actors who they can create coalitions with. We see such coalition-building in the example of LA sex workers involvement in the policy-making process. By partnering with lawyers and human rights groups, SWOPLA sex workers were able to craft legislation that ameliorated the harm of anti-trafficking initiatives. They also conducted research

that demonstrated how greater policing under the guise of anti-trafficking has significant consequences for street-based sex workers.

Advocating for Community-Informed Policy Change to Reduce Criminalization: SB233 and SB357

SB233 was authored by Senator Scott Wiener and co-authored with Assembly Members Bill Quirk and Laura Friedman. It was passed in 2019, and aimed to improve the health and safety of sex workers by preventing condom possession from being used as evidence of prostitution. It further allowed people to report crimes without fear of being arrested for sex work or misdemeanor drug offenses. This bill was supported by the St. James Infirmary, US Prostitutes Collective, Erotic Service Providers Legal, and the Sex Worker Outreach Project (the national organization). While some of its supporters include sex worker organizations or organizations that support sex workers, some of the sex workers I interviewed and observed during my field work expressed dissatisfaction with its implementation. This is because most workers are either not aware that the use of condoms as evidence of prostitution was overturned, or they are aware but the police they interact with still profile them (Ochoa et. al. 2023). One of the reasons SB233 failed to fulfill its intent may have been due to insufficient community involvement (Fuentes et. al 2025). During its creation and proposal stage, sex workers from the community were not consulted. This failure to incorporate the expertise of the people most impacted by this bill meant that the negative consequences of it that could have been mitigated were not. SB233 was out of touch with sex workers' priorities and the difficulties with law enforcement they face on a day-to-day basis. SB233 intended to reduce criminalization by mandating protections and immunities that would help safeguard sex workers from harassment and arrest. Theoretically, by

making condoms inadmissible as evidence of prostitution and giving immunity when reporting violent crimes, sex workers should have felt safer and less targeted after the bill's passage.

While the aspect of SB233 concerning condom possession technically reduced criminalization, it did little to address harassment by police and law enforcement, who did not change their patterns of targeting sex workers after the bill's passage (Ochoa et. al. 2023). In practice, harassment continued regardless of condom possession, particularly for marginalized workers. SWOPLA and a team of UCLA researchers interviewed LA-based sex workers to assess the impact of SB233. Many sex workers – 80% of those interviewed – were unaware of SB233 protections. Furthermore, their experiences with law enforcement were so negative they stated that they would not feel comfortable reporting a violent crime regardless of SB233 (Ochoa et. al 2023). Thus, while technically reducing criminalization, (1) most sex workers were not aware of the passage of SB233, and (2) SB233 did not address harassment and targeting by law enforcement. A law is only so good as its enforcement, as SB233 shows. Sex worker organizers online, and those I spoke with during my fieldwork expressed that they believed that if they had been consulted in the creation and proposal of SB233, they would have been able to point out that removing criminal penalties is not enough. Instead, SWOPLA board members such as Alice commented that it is also necessary to address police mistreatment in order for it to be more effective, including having police go through mandatory harassment training, or otherwise enforcing a requirement for receiving updates on policy changes.

The other aspect of SB233, offering immunity to sex workers and people possessing small amounts of drugs when reporting certain violent crimes, does not reduce criminalization, and could even increase it. While seemingly positive, this part of SB233 could involve sex workers in data-driven policing, a way of policing that allows law enforcement to keep track of:

(1) where certain violent crimes are reported, and (2) the proportion of sex workers and substance users in an area. Even though sex workers reporting violent crimes may receive immunity under SB233, this puts more data in the hands of the police. It enables law enforcement, who consistently harass, violate, and discriminate against sex workers, whether or not they are committing a crime, to track workers in different areas over time. Further, SB233 responds to violence with criminalization, funneling resources to the police and relying on the state to intervene in their mistreatment of sex workers.

To counteract this impact, sex worker organizers in LA have petitioned local officials and the state legislature for greater community involvement of sex workers in policy making. For instance, DecrimSWCA has gone to Sacramento to lobby officials on the need to support decriminalization bills in California. Additionally, DecrimSWCA and SWOPLA worked together to support the passage of SB357, also known as the “Safer Streets for All Act”. This act was signed into law on July 1, 2022 and went into effect on January 1, 2023. It repealed a law that criminalized loitering with the intent to commit prostitution in California. Police disproportionately target cis and trans women of color for loitering, and SB357 promises to curtail this targeting. Thus, sex worker-led policy efforts have also been protection efforts for marginalized groups. A community based policy that actively involves sex workers, like SB357, helps ensure that the interests of sex workers and other marginalized groups are addressed.

Since its adoption in 2023, some sex worker organizers have expressed great optimism in its potential. In a news article Ashley Madness, who is an organizer with SWOPLA and a steering committee member of DecrimSWCA, stated she hoped the bill would result in a significant reduction in sex worker arrests (Chiriguayo and Kagel 2022). In the long term she claimed, “walking around should be safer.” But, she also mentioned that even once this bill goes

into effect, police may still try to arrest people for loitering. Other SWOPLA members who were involved in the creation and study of this law also spoke to me about the potential for unintended consequences from any piece of legislation, but described SB357 as an important step in the right direction because it was created by consulting directly with impacted communities and incorporating their insights into the policy-making process. Overall, sex worker organizers and allies have expressed positive perspectives on the passage of this bill both on and offline.

In addition to their activism in drafting SB357, sex worker organizers from Decrim SexWork CA and the Sex Worker Outreach Project Los Angeles have also begun to mobilize letter-writing campaigns against emerging bills introduced to the California Assembly Public Safety Committee. One of the SWOPLA sex worker organizers I interviewed shared information about the planned political advocacy of both organizations. In March 2024, three bipartisan bills were introduced to (re)criminalize intent to commit prostitution. One of these, SB 1219 – introduced by Senator Kelly Seyarto (R- Murrietta) – aimed to reintroduce penalties for anyone loitering with intent to sell or purchase sex. Due to ongoing letter-writing efforts from multiple sex worker advocacy groups, SB1219 was killed in committee (Riquelmy, 2024). In April 2024, two bills remained before the California State Legislature. AB 2034, introduced by Assemblymember Freddy Rodriguez (D-Pomona), sought to make loitering a misdemeanor. AB 2646, proposed by Assemblymember Tri Ta (R- Orange County), targeted explicitly loitering within 1000 feet of a school, park, playground, amusement park, or state highway (Riquelmy, 2024). In 2025, both of these bills failed. LA-based organizers attribute this outcome to their political mobilization against these bills. Their experiences advocating for SB357 allowed them to be well-prepared to issue public comments, create and distribute letter and phone call

templates on social media to encourage people to call in during public comments, and to lobby government officials to not support these bills.

Utilizing Public Demonstration to Raise Awareness: December 17th, 2023 Die-In

Under the recommendation of Mayor Karen Bass and LA City Council members, police have increasingly utilized raids and trafficking operations along Fig, and in LA County more broadly. In particular, LA City Council President Marqueece Harris-Dawson w, as well as Mayor Bass, have encouraged the use of law enforcement to address human trafficking.

Mayor Bass founded Community Coalition (CoCo), a local non-profit, in 1990 to address “the crack cocaine epidemic” in South Central, Los Angeles and provide community-centered solutions¹⁴. The stated mission of CoCo is to:

transform the social and economic conditions in South LA that foster addiction, crime, violence, and poverty by building a community institution that involves thousands in creating, influencing, and changing public policy (CoCo, home page).

CoCo has a “Free the Land” initiative in which it states that it seeks to transform South LA, “through nuisance abatement, economic development, and access to public spaces” (CoCo, Free the Land). To CoCo, one of the largest “nuisances” in South LA is the Figueroa Corridor. In October 2023, CoCo mobilized over 300 people who were residents, parents, and undisclosed “organization” to march in South LA in order to call on local officials to close the motels. CoCo also reports that they want public officials to create a robust system of care for trafficking victims and to purchase the land in South LA to turn it into “community assets.” On their page about the Free the Land campaign, it states that, “Community Coalition continues to organize community residents which have identified additional neighborhoods in South Los Angeles that are also impacted by negative land uses, sex trafficking and divestment.” Though its stated goals

¹⁴ At the time, Karen Bass was a physician assistant and clinical instructor at the Keck School of Medicine of USC Physician Assistant Program.

are to center community in confronting racial and economic injustices, the participants I have communicated with -- including LA natives and transplants alike -- have expressed great skepticism for CoCo's stated goals.

My participants report that part of this skepticism stems from who has been involved in its creation. Given Mayor Bass' actions¹⁵, in which she is "cracking down" on crime through the increased use of police force against sex workers, immigrants, and other vulnerable communities, it is hard for some people to believe that CoCo is invested in uplifting the community. Additionally, Council President Harris-Dawson is the current Executive Director of CoCo. Their involvement in increasing the surveillance and criminalization of vulnerable communities has de-legitimized their position within the community. It also has to do with the fact that CoCo has explicitly stated its desire to "clean up" Fig and shut down motels operating in the area (which I discuss in the coalition-building section above).

In response to the increases in police raids and arrests, community organizers who have long expressed mistrust in local leaders started a more intentional dialogue together. This informal coalition briefly and temporarily included StopLAPDSpying, Sex Workers Outreach Project LA (SWOPLA), and The Sidewalk Project (Sidewalk). I have introduced SWOPLA previously as a sex worker led non-profit seeking bodily autonomy and racial and economic justice. They do not have a physical space, though many of its members are located in West LA. StopLAPDSpying is a community organization founded in 2011 seeking to abolish police surveillance. They have a physical presence in Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN) located near Skid Row in downtown LA. The Sidewalk Project is a non-profit

¹⁵ Mayor Bass' identity as a Black woman may be influencing the constraints and limitations she faces in navigating local politics. This dissertation does not explicitly address racial respectability politics and is interested in legal and material changes. Given her sustained investment in anti-trafficking initiatives since the 1990s, it is feasible to claim that she is part of a broader network maintaining the city's investment in these efforts.

organization that recently acquired a physical location near Skid Row as well. Its official mission is, “through various mediums, including the arts, research and public health, our group aims to be socially active and to empower houseless communities around the world” (Sidewalk Project, home page). In practice, however, it focuses on harm reduction distributions in Skid Row and MacArthur Park.

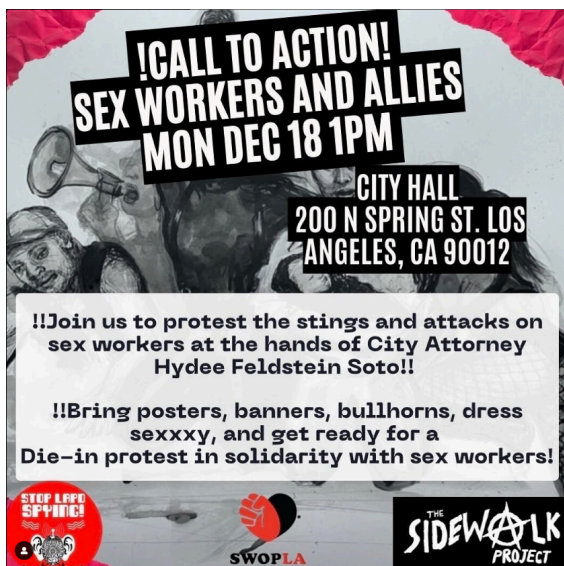
One of the founders of Sidewalk Project is Soma Snakeoil, a former Dominatrix who practices harm reduction. Though her organization does not explicitly serve sex workers, it has many formal and informal ties with sex worker groups. Sidewalk Project and SWOPLA became connected with StopLAPDSpying through a member involved in all three groups. This put organizers in conversation with one another and opened up the possibility of collaborating to address increased surveillance and targeting by law enforcement in LA.

Sidewalk, StopLAPDSpying and SWOPLA were responsible for coordinating a Die-In on December 18th, 2023 at LA City Hall as a public demonstration against the mayor and city council. This date was chosen both because of the increasing ramping up of the Mayor’s efforts in Fig at the end of 2023 (with the closure of New Gage Hotel, as discussed in the coalition-building section), but also because December 17th is an international sex worker holiday known as the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. It thus had symbolic relevance as well and served as a way to rally sex worker organizers and allies.

A Die-In is a form of public demonstration where the involved parties congregate at a high visibility area and pretend to “die” by laying on the ground and becoming immobile with the intent to visually demonstrate the human cost of government decisions. The idea is to be visually disruptive without actually threatening public safety, so as to circumvent any potential for the police to shut down the protest. A flier for the event was distributed on Instagram (seen

below) by the three groups involved. Since only one group-- SWOPLA --is specifically for sex workers, both sex workers and allies were invited to this event. Advertising events as open to allies also provides sex workers with some plausible deniability and means they are not forcibly outed just for attending a public demonstration. Though this event was advertised online and was open to the public, the attendees were primarily members of each organization and press who were invited.

Figure 3.2 Die-in Flier



Source: SWOPLA Instagram

Hosting this Die-in is a testament to the organizers capabilities as collaborating across organizations can be a difficult endeavor. In addition to the physical presence of sex workers at LA City Hall, SidewalkProjectLA invited press and photographers that were able to capture some striking images. Figure 3.3 below shows sex workers on the city hall steps lying “dead.” The image is meant to be visually disruptive and draw attention. As with other public demonstrations, onlookers are most likely unaware of what people are demonstrating for. The intent with a die-in is to make people stop and pay attention as a way to bring awareness. The

organizers of the event included on the flier, shown in Figure 3.2, to wear “sexxy” outfits as another method to garner attention.

Figure 3.3 Die-in Photograph



Source: SWOPLA Instagram

Regulatory Liminality in Criminalized Environments

In each of the cases I mention in this section, criminalized sex workers in Los Angeles utilize formal organizing strategies to counteract harmful narratives and policies. These strategies focus on raising public awareness of the issues sex workers face, contributing alternative policies informed by sex worker experiences and creating coalitions with other groups targeted by the state. I group these formal strategies into the categories of political advocacy and public education to highlight their social impact. At the same time that I note these formal strategies and discuss how sex workers engage with them in the case of anti-trafficking initiatives in LA, I also bring attention to the tensions and ruptures that occur within their efforts.

The criminalization of sex work increases sex workers’ likelihood of discrimination, harassment and arrest. Additionally, it makes it easier for law enforcement to target sex workers

by weaponizing anti-trafficking initiatives. The stakes of organizing in criminalized environments are very high- it is people's very lives. While regulatory liminality conditions the environment workers are organizing in, it does not prevent them from doing so. It does however make it easier for some people to engage in certain political practices than others, and it impacts the kinds of issue areas workers are more likely to focus on.

Though all sex workers suffer in a criminalized environment, the increased police presence along the Figueroa Corridor has had a disproportionate impact on Black sex workers. At the same time, Black sex workers are often not adequately represented in organizing spaces. Regulatory liminality explains why it is more difficult for some people to participate in organizing spaces than others. Discourses around sex and the model of regulation of sex work form the context within which sex workers operate. Even within similar conditions however, the unequal enforcement of laws increases the risk of organizing for some people.

In Los Angeles, sex worker organizing centers on challenging human trafficking narratives and efforts as well as advocating for the removal of carceral legislation. Because the conversation around sex work has been linked to human trafficking and exploitation organizers are forced to seriously contend with the city's investment in trafficking initiatives. The workers who are mobilizing to address these issues range in background and lived experiences. The workers at the forefront of these actions are people of color who are system impacted. White women tend to be the secondary group most present in these spaces. In most instances, organizers had prior experience in other social justice movements and/or had postsecondary training in social justice. The makeup of these organizing spaces points to the inherent tensions within a criminalized environment- the stakes are so high that those most marginalized are forced to put their bodies on the line. However, people who are more privileged are able to take up

space and set the agenda because they are seen as more palatable representatives of the sex worker community.

The case of trafficking in LA demonstrates the tensions in organizing spaces of who can participate and who gets to set the agenda. But it also demonstrates how people experiencing high levels of regulatory liminality-- that interaction between discourse, regulation, and identity-- are still able to participate in formal political spaces through public demonstrations, lobbying, and coalition-building.

In the following section, I discuss a context where sex work is legal; the United Kingdom. How does the regulatory liminality of sex workers shift when their regulatory environment does? Do sex workers in the UK have to content with the conflation of sex work and sex trafficking, even when the former is legal? How do they enact the formal strategies of organizing I identify?

Formal Organizing When Sex Work is Legalized

In the US case, many of sex worker's formal organizing strategies aim to raise awareness about the discrimination, stigmatization and violence sex workers experience. They advocate for decriminalization as a way to ameliorate these issues. In the United Kingdom, sex work is legal. Legalization embodies a "grey area" wherein some aspects of sex work are legal and some are illegal. For instance, in England, Wales and Scotland, selling and buying sex is legal. However, other aspects of sex work such as working in public, managing a brothel, and "pimping" are illegal. In Northern Ireland, selling sex is legal but all other aspects of sex work, including buying sex, is illegal.

Many of the workers I interviewed in London had worked in other parts of the United Kingdom, and explicitly noted that though sex work is legal, they were still subject to state

surveillance and policing. One woman had an apartment where she would take in-calls from, who I will refer to as Gwen. In-calls are when sex workers have clients visit them versus going to meet the client. Gwen was working from her apartment and would keep her money there as well, under the floorboards and stashed throughout the place. She did this because though sex work is legal, many banks continue to discriminate against sex workers and make it difficult to open accounts there. In the worst cases, banks will seize sex workers' funds and prevent them from accessing their accounts. Gwen had allowed her friend to see a client at her place while she was in the other room. This is a common safety tactic for many sex workers because it allows them to see clients in a familiar location while also having someone nearby if anything goes wrong. However, the current laws in the legalization model England has adopted criminalizes "managing a brothel". The definition of managing a brothel is so broad as to include two sex workers "working together". As such, Gwen allowing her friend to work from her apartment was an illegal activity. Her apartment was subject to police raids because of this, and they ended up confiscating all the money she had in her apartment. Besides being an obviously traumatic incident, she was left financially bereft. As Gwen's example illustrates, even in legal models of regulation sex workers experience criminalization.

In this section, I discuss how sex workers are both constrained and enabled in a legalized environment, and how that shapes their regulatory liminality. I then discuss the formal organizing strategies they utilize to petition the government for decriminalization and an end to state-inflicted violence. I consider two cases that emerged from my interviews with London-based sex worker organizations, including the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP), Sex Workers Advocacy and Resistance Movement, and Sex Workers Breakfast London, as well as members of a group called European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance that is composed of more

than 100 organizations. These cases highlight the issues of immigration and police raids, and sex working mothers.

Immigration and Police Raids: A Case for Intersectional Advocacy

Among the groups of sex worker organizers I interviewed and observed was the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP). The ECP is a group of both indoor and streets-based sex workers organizing for decriminalization and safety. They are explicitly against legalization, as it creates a two-tiered system wherein some sex workers operate “legally” and some “illegally”. The ECP was formed in 1975 in the wake of church occupations and sex worker strikes in France (the occupation in Lyon by more than a hundred sex workers on June 2, 1975 is now known as International Whore’s Day) (ECP, history). It has been politically active in the decades since its founding with public demonstrations, as well as public education and legal campaigns.

The overarching mission of the ECP and SWARM, two prominent London-based sex worker organizations, are to destigmatize sex work and shift the narrative to “sex work as work”. This counter-narrative originated within sex worker spaces, emerging from their desire to petition the state for recognition of their labor so as to be afforded greater rights and protections at work. As I argue in an op-ed for Australian Outlook, the conflation of sex work with sex trafficking is harmful because it ignores poor working conditions and heightens the criminality and stigma sex workers experience (Rowland, 2024). Sex workers continuously have to state to the public that their sexual services are just that-- services -- and that they are compensated for their labor the same as any other worker. In part this is for state legitimacy, and it is also meant to combat trafficking discourse(s) which promote sex worker victimhood. Due to transnational advocacy by sex workers, this counter-discourse of sexual labor has been slowly taken up in

international organizations; the report by the UN Working Group on the discrimination against women and girls advocating for decriminalization is one example of this.

England, and the UK broadly, has a stronger labor movement than the US does. Trade unions that represent employees and workers are more commonly joined per capita, with 23.5% of the workforce participating compared with 11.1% in the US (Daniels, 2023). By allying themselves with the labor movement, sex workers are petitioning for greater legitimacy in the current regulatory environment. At the same time, they are also arguing for decriminalization. These goals, on the surface, seem incongruous; on the one hand, requesting greater regulations in terms of labor rights and, on the other, asking for a removal of regulations around what sex work is/should be. This messaging is echoed in the global sex worker rights movement, which is unified around the need for decriminalization. The movement views the criminalization of sex work as a source of continued violence (moon 2021). This is echoed within my interviews as well, in which I ask sex workers to describe some of the main issues sex workers experience. Virtually everyone mentioned the criminalization of sex work as having significant negative consequences for them personally, and for the sex workers' rights movement broadly. All organizations I observed emphasized the importance of decriminalization for reducing the violence sex workers experience, in tandem with other legal and social changes.

The legalization of sex work in the United Kingdom is in part due to the efforts of the ECP and other organizations who have been mobilizing for decades for sex worker rights. The initial intention of many of these groups were inspired by Marxist feminists who sought to have the unpaid labor of sexual exchanges be officially recognized and appropriately compensated. As policies in many parts of Europe shifted towards legalization of sex work, some sex workers began to take note of the unequal impacts of these changes. As a model of regulation,

legalization creates a two-tiered system wherein workers who are able to be legally employed are safe from criminalization, and those who are not are still subject to criminalization. The whorearchy informs how these power asymmetries map out for workers; those who are white, able-bodied, thin, and otherwise conform to Western beauty standards are more likely to be formally employed, whereas those who are BIPOC, transgender, LGBTQIA+, and otherwise deviate from these standards are more subject to criminalization (Fuentes, 2022). As these unequal impacts became more evident to organizers, there was greater mobilization around decriminalization. The ECP itself has campaigned for the removal of criminal penalties since its founding in 1975 due to their ineffectiveness and because penalties perpetuate inequality and stigma (ECP 2020). Sex worker organizers, researchers and allies believe decriminalization will reduce the likelihood of criminalization for the most marginalized sex workers (ACLU, 2023).

The ECP echoes this shift towards an intersectional understanding of sex work and the impact of sex work regulation through its recognition that sex worker experiences are not monolithic: street-based workers face greater precarity than indoor ones and migrant sex workers are more at risk than citizens due to deportation. This understanding appears in the kinds of messaging on its website and social media. For example, the figure below is a screenshot of a post made regarding the 2016 United Kingdom EU Referendum in which the UK voted to leave the EU by 52% to 48%. There have been significant long-term costs of this decision, but a cost which many have not attended to is how it has impacted migrant sex workers. This decision made it more difficult for people to freely move across borders. By doing so, people who were once able to work in the UK as well as other parts of the EU became unable to do so due to the stricter border control. The result of this shift meant either forgoing potential economic gains, or increasing the risk of arrest and deportation. In order to push back against the increased

criminalization of migration --and migrant sex workers-- sex worker organizers in London mobilized to raise awareness about this issue and provide public comments to legislators about the harm of modern slavery and anti-trafficking legislation, primarily for migrant sex workers. For example, the ECP partnered with the Legal Action for Women to prepare Know Your Rights sheets for women to carry with them as well as a letter detailing sex workers rights. The intent of the letter was to communicate to police in the case of being stopped or harassed that the worker knew what she was legally entitled to.

Figure 3.4 EU Referendum Post



Source: English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) Instagram

The ECP also submitted written evidence to the UK Parliament in 2024 about the harmful impacts of modern slavery and anti-trafficking legislation. It argued that such laws primarily were used to raid sex worker premises. It mentions a study that demonstrates seven out of ten brothel raids did not identify any trafficking victims. It also argues that “sex workers are often treated in a degrading and humiliating way by the police, and raids attract intrusive media

attention” (1). Sex workers experiencing this violence come to the ECP for assistance. It drew on some of these interactions to highlight such violence. For example, the police raided two migrant sex workers working together. They were given a questionnaire asking if they were being trafficked, and answered “no” on the form. The police left upon seeing this, and returned with immigration officers to deport the women. In another example, a brothel was raided and a woman was arrested and handcuffed while naked. She was placed into a cell like that and left alone for six hours. The police stated she was arrested for modern slavery, brothel keeping, and controlling prostitution. These charges allegedly relate to her following up with other workers after they met with clients to make sure they were safe. Two years after the arrest, the police have continued to investigate her and she fears deportation.

The ECP additionally fostered partnerships with academic experts from local universities to highlight the negative consequences of the EU Referendum. For example, they published research with Dr Laura Connelly from the University of Salford. On social media, it advertised her finding that “violence, #xenophobia and threats of #deportation against migrant #sexworkers from the European Union have risen”. This 25 page report, “EU Migrant Sex Work in the UK Post-Referendum,” drew upon the input of sex workers who completed an online survey about their experiences working in the UK. The survey provided insight into how the Referendum changed working practices, places, hours and clients, and how it impacted threats of arrest and deportation. The report ends with recommendations informed by the responses they received, calling on the UK government to decriminalize sex work, grant automatic settled status to all EU citizens in the UK, expunge prior convictions for all sex workers, improve financial assistance for migrants in the UK, and end hostile working environments (Connelly & ECP, 2021). These recommendations seek to remedy the increased experiences of violence and xenophobia EU

migrant workers experienced post-Referendum and to make it easier for them to implement safe working practices.

In addition to contributing to research on how sex workers are impacted by legal changes, the ECP also created a two page summary brief and held a recording of the launch event to ensure their findings reached a large audience. To take a more active role in affecting policy, they created a template letter for people to contact their MPs and encourage them to prioritize the rights and safety of migrant sex workers in the UK. These tactics are in line with the formal organizing strategies previously discussed political advocacy and political education. They also echo the strategies sex worker organizers in the US utilize to combat their criminalized legal environment. Based on the organizers I spoke with and observed, both the issues and the strategies utilized in the US and UK are extremely similar.

Petitioning for Motherhood as/for Sex Workers

In the case of sex workers in the UK, the EU Referendum became a reason to target migrants and arrest and deport migrant sex workers. This is despite the legal status of sex work as such. In this section, I discuss how the legalization of sex work is not enough to protect even sex workers who have citizenship or settled status in the UK. For example, despite the legalization of sex work, sex working parents are still stigmatized and surveilled. The ECP, SWARM, and other sex worker groups in the UK are advocating for the protection of sex working mothers and their children.

When I went to London for fieldwork, I was able to visit the ECP's and SWARM's in-person locations to speak with organizers from their groups. The ECP location was hosted out of the Crossroads Women's Center in London, which includes other women's rights groups such as the All African Women's Group for asylum seekers and refugees, the Global Women's Strike

for care workers, and the Single Mothers' Self Defence Network. I spoke with a member who had been involved with the ECP for several decades, and as a long-time sex worker and mother, she emphasized how stigma, discrimination, and legal barriers compounded precarity. Niki had been involved with the ECP since at least 1995, and the protection of sex workers who are parents has been a priority for her as long as she has been a part of the organization. Though accurate aggregate data on the industry is difficult to obtain, she estimates that 70% of sex workers (who are women or assigned female at birth) are mothers (ECP 2020B).

The ascription of deviancy by the state, due to race, gender, class, and other power asymmetries, increases the likelihood of being targeted. Sex workers experience targeting due to the deviancy of their labor; even in legalized environments, sex workers do not escape state surveillance. As I've documented earlier in this section, there are several instances where sex workers who should have been safe from policing and arrest were not, such as Gwen working in the same place as her friend and migrant sex workers who are performing "legal" work.

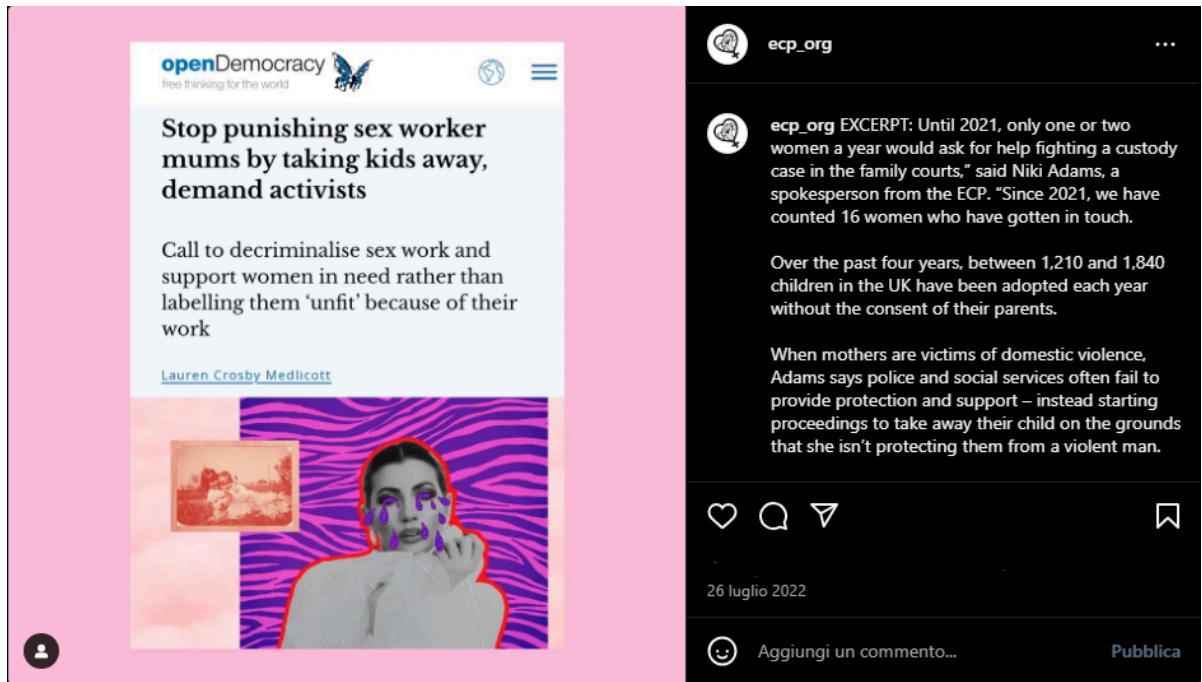
In an effort to bring awareness to the violence sex working mothers experience, the ECP started campaigning online and through in-person events. The organization has actively contributed to counter-discourse around being a sex working parent through the creation of media, such as a 2017 short film called "Mum." This short film was part of a social media campaign the ECP launched called "Make Mum Safer." To make this 2 minute and 13 second film, they collaborated with independent feminist filmmakers Merien Adib and Claire Cottrell. The film is about the story of a girl and her mother and their daily routine. For instance, the daughter drawing, the mother driving her daughter to school, the mother working retail, the two of them watching television. The mother figure is depicted as a life sized plastic doll. Then, the film shifts to night. The mother is on a street as cars pull up to her. Then, the mother, the doll, is

shown violated and “dead” in the fields. The film flashes to the daughter crying with a picture frame. Throughout these images, the following text appears: “most sex workers are mothers. Under current law they are criminalized and can’t work together in safe places. This means they work in isolation at greater risk of danger. Let’s start thinking of sex workers as real people. Support decriminalization.” This short film challenges narratives around the type of people engaging in sex work, and why they are doing so.

The Make Mum Safer movement has been supported by the Home Affairs Select Committee of MPs (Gil 2016). This is a committee within the House of Commons in the UK Parliament created to research and examine government policy, spending and law in areas related to immigration, security and policing. Other allies within Parliament include Labour MPs Dawn Butler and Tulip Siddiq, and Labour peer Lord Alf Dubs. With the support of Butler, the film’s launch was even hosted at the House of Commons. Celebrities have also been vocal about their support for the movement, such as Micahel Sheen and Bridget Jones's Baby actor Sarah Solemani. The former had previously worked with the ECP to decriminalize sex work.

The screenshot below depicts a post from ECP’s Instagram showing an OpenDemocracy article titled “Stop punishing sex worker mums by taking kids away, demand activists”.

Figure 3.5 OpenDemocracy Article Post



Source: ECP Instagram

The mobilization of the ECP was in direct response to the increasing violence being reported to them by sex working moms. Niki Adams reported that:

Until 2021, only one or two women a year would ask for help fighting a custody case in the family courts. Since 2021, we have counted 16 women who have gotten in touch. (Medlicott, 2022)

Adams attributes this rise to the increase in social-services caseloads, with more than a third of social workers stating their caseloads have reached unmanageable levels. The theft of children from families deemed “unfit” is overwhelmingly enacted upon racialized and criminalized people. In countries such as the UK (and US), poverty itself is being criminalized. Related to the discrimination sex working parents experience, Adams further explains:

Social services are prejudiced and sexist in their treatment of women and mothers generally, and this is compounded when women are immigrant[s] and doing sex work. We have seen this with sex-working mums, who despite their massive efforts to escape violence, are judged, with social workers implying the woman was putting her child at risk.

Though these laws do not pertain directly to the regulation of sex work, they can impact sex workers' regulatory liminality by imposing different constraints on sex working parents than on other sex workers. Sex working moms may be reticent to reach out to social services because it could be used to indicate their inability to provide for their children. Similarly, if they experience violent interactions with clients or with their partners, they will be hesitant to report it for fear that it will be used by authorities to state that they are exposing their children to a violent home. One participant I interviewed named Jesse, a transmasculine person with an eight year old child, spoke about the precarity they faced as a sex working parent. Jesse talked about a client he had that was disrespecting boundaries and wanting a relationship with him. When he refused, this client doxed him (disclosed personal information publicly) and told his parents that he was a sex worker. Jesse recounted that the client actually called his dad: "He called my dad on Christmas, and told him I was doing sex work in [redacted location], and I was like in trouble and said he was a high school friend of mine." Jesse's dad confronted him directly about this and upon learning that he was consensually engaging in sex work, threatened to call Child Protective Services and take his child. Other sex working parents I interviewed expressed a fear of having CPS called on them, and that this fear made it all the more difficult to navigate the industry safely.

As part of the ECP's efforts to support sex working parents, the organization belongs to Support Not Separation (SNS). This coalition seeks to end the separation of children from their parents and/or caretakers. It consists of a large number of groups such as the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services, Centre for Social Work Practice, ECP, Global Women's Strike, Soul Sisters, Women Against Rape, as well as individuals who are social workers, teachers, and other professionals (Support Not Separation Blog). In my interview with Adams,

Regulatory Liminality in Legalized Environments

Sex workers in legalized environments should have greater legitimacy and recognition by the state. In turn, sex workers should have lower incentive to organize because there is less dissonance between laws on the books and the enforcement of those laws. However, it appears that there are still significant barriers for workers to have the same treatment under the law. While sex work is allowed, there is an extensive apparatus of legislation that criminalizes certain forms of sex work and many of the safety practices people use at work. Examples include working at unlicensed brothels or being in the next room as a friend while they are seeing a client.

In this section, I draw on interviews and fieldwork that demonstrate the continued stigma and precarity sex workers experience even in a legalized environment. While nonexperts advocate for the legalization of sex work as a method to reduce violence, sex workers themselves have pushed back against this approach in favor of decriminalization. Organizations like the ECP have decades of activism for decriminalization due to the harm their community continues to experience under legalization. For example, parents who are sex workers continue to be heavily targeted by state run organizations like Child Protective Services. They are often doxxed and discriminated against and viewed as unfit parents by virtue of their work.

Since regulatory liminality is conditioned by discourse, laws, and identities sex worker's experiences with regulatory liminality in a legalized environment is not actually very distinct from a criminalized environment. While sex work is de jure allowed, it is de facto policed. Carceral measures are still used by police to conduct raids on brothels that do not register with the state, and police seize funds of sex workers who transgress laws. Regulatory liminality is mediated by the legal environment as well as discourses and identities. Since the legal

environment in the UK is not materially much different than in the US, the formal strategies sex worker organizers use in the UK are very similar. What is a point of departure between the two cases is that sex worker organizers in the UK are more focused on the unequal enforcement of legislation than on combating trafficking initiatives. Movements to protect migrant sex workers and sex working parents are rooted in the reality that some sex workers are more heavily policed and surveilled than others.

As with the criminalized context, sex workers experience differential policing and violence based on their identities. Some sex workers are more able to participate in organizing spaces than others. In particular, white cisgender people can be at the forefront of the movement in ways that black and brown sex workers and transgender workers are unable to. Regulatory liminality contextualizes the organizing priorities of sex workers and what bodies are seen as more legitimate representations of the movement. At the same time, regulatory liminality also serves to explain why sex workers in the UK are still very active in petitioning for rights despite operating in a legalized environment.

Formal Organizing When Sex Work is Decriminalized

In the following section, I discuss shifts in how sex work has been regulated in Australia. I do so by describing the decriminalization of street-based sex work in New South Wales in 1979, the decriminalization of brothels in 1995, the implementation of the Australian Modern Slavery Act in 2018, and the decriminalization of sex work in the Northern Territory in 2019, Victoria in 2022, and Queensland in 2024. I then discuss how issue-framing by sex worker organizers in Australia is distinct from that of those in the US and UK. Unlike in criminal and legal regulatory environments, sex workers in a decriminalized environment are able to align themselves with the state (rather than against it, as in the other cases) in order to receive greater

recognition, legitimacy, and access. One avenue through which workers do this is through public health. Scarlet Alliance, the only national sex worker organization in Australia, focuses a significant amount of its efforts on destigmatizing sexual and health education.

Regulating Sex Work in Australia

Prior to the 1970s, sex work regulation in Australia adopted a criminalization model. However, sex workers in New South Wales began to push for law reform in the mid-1970s. In 1977, the NSW Labor Government held a public seminar on “victimless crimes” (Aroney 2017). During this seminar, feminists and civil society members criticized prostitution laws, stating that police corruption negatively impacts sex workers, particularly street based workers, and that decriminalization is the solution to this issue. This led to the repeal of the Summary Offenses Act and the instatement of the Prostitution Act. In regards to this decision, the NSW Attorney General Frank Walker explained:

It’s been legal in NSW for many, many years to be a prostitute. It was the soliciting side that became an offence or habitually living in premises used for prostitution. Now those two offences - soliciting and habitually living in premises used for prostitution - go. Why? Because every Commission that sat in the last decade, the Human Relations Commission, the Anti –Discrimination Board, Select Committees, just about every body of any responsibility in the country has recommended that those two clauses go.

This law descriminalized street-based sex work, but working in brothels (or massage parlors, as they are often interchangeably called) was still illegal. Because of this, many sex workers who worked indoors shifted to working outside. A 1970 interview with a sex worker from New South Wales highlights the types of harm sex workers experienced when they were forced to work outside. The approximately 9 minute interview does not disclose her name (it can be viewed on Youtube here), but in it she shares her journey into sex work. She states that she

was looking for a job that paid more so that she could provide for her daughters and pay down her debts. Upon realizing that sex work would provide her the kind of financial stability she was desiring, she began seeing clients in a massage parlor. She documents that the parlors were clean, that there was someone to intervene if clients became disruptive or violent, and that the pay was generally good. However, these parlors (brothels) were closed down by vice squads and she was forced to start street-based work. This was more difficult because she did not have a room to see clients in. She describes an incident where she went to a client's motel room, and he held her hostage with a gun for a few hours. She was able to flee the room, but he chased after her, shooting. When she finally made it back on the street, he continued pursuing her until some passerby took notice. The police were called and when they showed up, they did not press charges or arrest the man.

She goes on to describe the tumultuous relationship sex workers had (and have) with the police. She mentioned that sex workers are often pressured to have sex with police. Once a sex worker is "known" to law enforcement, they will arrest her whenever they see her in order to assault her. Even once someone chooses to leave the industry, police will continue to publicly arrest her because she is a "known" prostitute. The woman in the interview mentions that this is possibly why it is so difficult for people to leave the industry, due to police harassment, and having to pay fines from arrests.

The growth in street based sex work in NSW led to increasing complaints from police and residents. Due to this, the NSW government formed a committee that included the Attorney-General, the Police Minister, a police inspector, a local councillor and a representative for the residents, but no sex workers were included or consulted. Though this committee was formed due to the increase in street-based workers, it paradoxically started to crack down on

brothels, leading to their closures. This committee continued to find ways to attack sex workers, such as through increased surveillance and arrests in Kings Cross (one of the prominent areas in Sydney where street-based sex workers operate), and the enforcement of old laws that would charge street-based workers with “offensive behavior” and “alarm and affront.”

Though street-based sex work was decriminalized, working inside, working with others, and working in brothels were not. These are all ways sex workers reduce their harm at work, and so many sex workers were outraged at the uneven application of decriminalization. Additionally, after the decriminalization of street-based sex work there was significant community and police backlash. This backlash led to the formation of the Australian Prostitutes Collective (APC) in 1983 in order for sex workers to collectively mobilize for the decriminalization of all forms of sex work. The image below depicts a street flier from the APC that describes how the decriminalization of street-based sex work paradoxically led to controls being enforced that restricted street work to commercial roads, making it difficult for clients to pull up on the curb. When clients were able to do so, police would charge sex workers with traffic obstruction. This demonstrates how even in decriminalized environments where sex workers experience reduced regulatory liminality, they are still subject to regulations which limit their autonomy.

Figure 3.7 Australian Prostitutes Collective Flier

PROSTITUTES ATTACKED FROM ALL SIDES!

DID YOU KNOW THAT....

- State and Local Govts are using every means at their disposal to discriminate against prostitutes.

1. State Govt legislation has forced street prostitutes off the streets (where they have been for over a century) and onto:

- a) William St, where it is difficult for cars to stop, and if they do, the police can (and do) charge the prostitutes with obstructing traffic.
- b) into cars where prostitutes are even more vulnerable to violence and health problems.
- c) Into brothels. Not only are these overcrowded but local councils are systematically closing them down. Sydney City Council have dragged up an old by-law that hasn't been used since its formulation in 1971.

Some houses have already been closed down and many have already been issued with notices to quit.

2. Despite all these laws discriminating against prostitution (supposedly an illegal activity), the Taxation Department has decided that taxing prostitutes is a legitimate source of revenue. The taxman is now demanding information in Darlinghurst - more harassment for workers.

Declaring your income means declaring your occupation... a handy little record that can be used against you later.

All this despite the fact that women are already paying "tax" - fines to the courts, pay-offs to police, Councils and protection rackets.

ALL THIS MEANS THAT....

1. VIOLENCE TO PROSTITUTES HAS INCREASED DRAMATICALLY. A Task Group on Prostitution, who submitted a paper to the present Select Committee on Prostitution, found that half the women they interviewed had been violently assaulted while working and a third had been raped.

PROSTITUTES ARE NOT RECOGNISED TO HAVE THE RIGHT TO SAY 'NO'.

2. FEMALE CRIME HAS INCREASED IN THE AREA, as the women have been denied their means of income.

3. POLICE HARASSMENT OF PROSTITUTES HAS INCREASED. There is widespread victimization of prostitutes. It is common for well known prostitutes to be arrested for soliciting when they are just doing their shopping.

However, they rarely defend because with two policemen giving "evidence" (to an all male courtroom) they would not be believed and in any event, to defend would only antagonise police.

PROSTITUTES ARE NOT ONLY POWERLESS TO ACT BY THE WAY THE LAWS ARE STRUCTURED, IF THEY DO CHALLENGE THE LAW, THEY RUN THE RISK OF THEIR HUSBANDS, CHILDREN ETC. FINDING OUT THEIR OCCUPATION.

Source: Eurdyice Aroney, The Conversation

In addition to spreading awareness about the conditions of street-based sex workers under decriminalization, the APC also argued that the inability of sex workers to operate indoors increased their experiences of violence. In the 1980s, they interviewed over 100 sex workers, with approximately half of them stating they had been assaulted while working, and one third that they had been raped (Aroney 2017). They were able to conduct these interviews by collaborating with trans researcher Roberta Perkins, who recruited students from Sydney University to help with the project. These sex workers ranged from mid 20s to 50s. Besides

documenting the wide-spread state and client-based violence sex workers experienced when forced to work outside, a major contribution of this study was that sex workers themselves did not see themselves as victims.

The APC was also politically active. They met the NSW Attorney General in order to speak out against proposed legislation that would push them onto specific streets. Sex workers feared that this exposure would make them more susceptible to theft and exploitation. The APC spent three years providing testimonies and submissions regarding the need to reduce criminal punishments against sex workers. However, many of their efforts were not adopted by public officials and so they sought to take other measures. In 1984, the Australian Prostitutes Collective called on sex workers across the country to boycott sexual services for MPs (Aroney 2017). This boycott went on for years and was effective in gaining greater attention by the government and the public on the issues sex workers experienced. Due to their public demonstration, the APC was awarded a \$120,000 grant by the NSW and Federal governments to combat HIV/AIDS. This allowed the APC to open up a brick and mortar location and hire official staff to begin outreach to brothel and street-based workers in NSW. This was the first instance in Australia in which the government funded a sex worker run organization (Aroney 2017). Despite this success, the next year resulted in little political change. This was in part due to the lack of action by the government to follow through on recommendations by sex worker-led committees to decriminalize sex work, and also due to internal conflict within the APC. This conflict stemmed from disagreements in organizational accountability, and led to the dissolution of the management committee. Without the APC for sex workers to collectively mobilize, the government began to take a hard line against sex work and sought to “crackdown” on street soliciting. In 1989, the defunct APC formed the NSW Sex Workers Outreach Project and Scarlet

Alliance, which allowed sex workers to continue their organizing momentum to push for decriminalization. By 1995, the Disorderly Houses Amendment act was passed, which decriminalized brothels and led to the effective decriminalization of sex work broadly in New South Wales¹⁶.

The adoption of decriminalization in New South Wales was a testament to the activism of sex workers, and it paved the way for further advocacy efforts. It also served as a launching point for sex workers in other regions of Australia to petition for decriminalization as well. However, it took over twenty years until sex work was decriminalized in the Northern Territory through the Sex Industry Act of 2019. This was made possible due to the continued work throughout the decades by Scarlet Alliance and SWOP Northern Territory. Jules Kim from Scarlet Alliance, the Chief Minister Natasha Fyles and the former Labor minister Dale Wakefield worked together in order to achieve the change in sex work legislation. Their efforts to advocate for decriminalization were also supported by the NT Aids and Hepatitis Council, which provided a useful coalition to legitimate the need for decriminalization as a method of ensuring better public health.

It was another three years before Victoria decriminalized with the Sex Work Decriminalization Act of 2022. The effort to decriminalize sex work was passed in the upper house by 24 to 10 votes, showing a clear majority. This passage was in part due to the campaigning of Upper House MP Victoria Patten, who had been campaigning for decriminalization for decades. In 2019, she led a review of sex work laws. About this effort, she stated, “this campaign really started in the early 1980s and we have seen iterations of legislation

¹⁶There are records of parliamentary debates that state the Wood Royal commission identified a link between illegal sex industry and police corruption (through bribes) and that it argued to take a harm minimization approach to health and safety. In future iterations of this work, I intend to conduct primary source research to understand the role sex worker activists played in contributing to these debates.

designed to control and effectively stigmatize sex workers. We have legislation currently in place that is not fit for purpose. It doesn't work on any meaningful level, it doesn't protect anyone and, in fact, it does quite the opposite" (Decrim Sex Work 2022). Patten has been in consultation with sex worker groups throughout her efforts, with Scarlet Alliance being one of these groups. While Scarlet Alliance's chief executive Jules Kim stated in an ABC News article that the adoption of decriminalization in Victoria is worthy of celebration, she also states that there is more work to be done; "we're committed to continuing pushing for further reforms... We'll continue to fight really hard to ensure that the many positive elements of the bill extend to everybody" (Decrim Sex Work 2022). The concerns that she and others have, such as Vixen Collective's acting manager Dylan O'Hara, have is that though sex work was decriminalized, the government also introduced new offenses to regulate where and when street work can occur. This includes preventing operations in certain areas such as close to schools, childcare facilities, and places of worship. The fear is that these limitations will be used to encourage law enforcement to continue surveilling and arresting sex workers. This reaction also demonstrates that even when a decriminalized model of regulation is adopted, sex workers continue to experience regulatory liminality-- and that this regulatory liminality is more extreme for some workers than others based on other forms of marginalization, such as being a street-based sex worker versus an online sex worker.

Queensland was the most recent territory to decriminalize sex work, with its adoption in 2024. In a forthcoming book chapter, I describe how sex workers utilized social media in order to advocate for decriminalization in Queensland (Rowland, 2025). Their efforts built upon the last 40 years of sex worker advocacy for decriminalization in other parts of Australia. Momentum within the Queensland government began after sex workers and the media reported

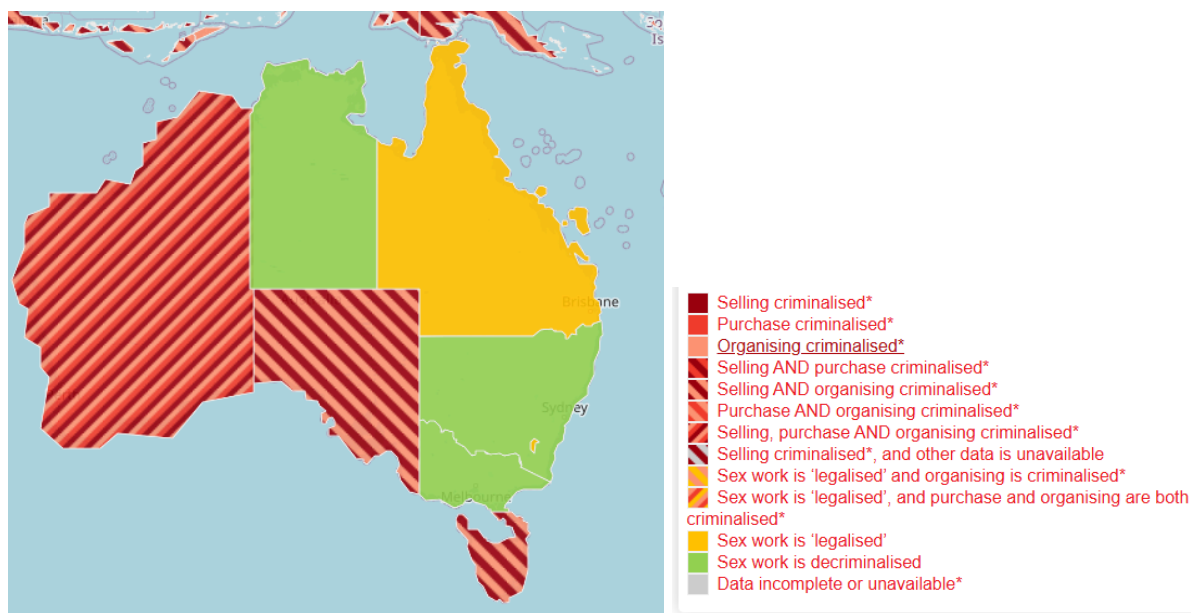
widespread police corruption (CCC 2019). This led to what became known as the Fitzgerald Inquiry report of 1989. Tony Fitzgerald QC was appointed by the Acting Queensland Premier Bill Gunn to investigate these claims. After almost two years of conducting a comprehensive inquiry into police abuse of power, four ministers were jailed and many police were convicted. In addition to supporting these convictions, the inquiry made over 100 recommendations for police reform. Fitzgerald described, ‘systemic police corruption in relation to the sex industry and associated police misconduct’ in his inquiry and recommended a model of regulation based on legalisation or decriminalisation (Jeffreys et al., O’Brien, Fawkes 2019). His recommendations were ignored at this time, however.

Rather than address the concerns brought up in the 1989 report, independent sex workers were further criminalised in Queensland through the Prostitution Laws Amendment Act 1992 to the Criminal Code 1899. A further escalation of this criminalisation occurred with the Prostitution Act of 1999, which imposed a licensing framework that effectively created a ‘two-tiered’ approach to sex work criminalisation, 3, wherein only workers employed at 20 licensed brothels across the country were allowed to operate without fear of imprisonment. Additionally, in 2000 and 2011, existing laws allowing police entrapment and police immunity were expanded. From this point onwards, these criminalising laws continued to expand and sex workers operated in an environment of intense state violence. In 2019, scholars and sex workers released a report which stated that, ‘the powers held by police in relation to sex work in Queensland are far greater today than at any time before the Fitzgerald Inquiry’ (Jeffreys et al. 2019). In 2021, the Queensland Law Reform Commission was recruited by the state government to conduct a review of current legislation. Two years later, in March 2023, the Commission released their report and recommended a framework for decriminalisation of the sex industry.

Today, Scarlet Alliance is a critical organization for sex worker rights, as it advocates for all sex workers within Australia. It has established itself as a key player in the formation of sex worker legislation, to the point that, “they own a seat at the table whenever policy decisions are made that affect Australian sex workers” (Aroney, 2017). Due to the decriminalization of sex work in Australia, sex workers have been able to actively participate in public life, shaping law and policy across Australia.

Though sex work has been decriminalized in NSW, the Northern Territory, Victoria, and Queensland, it has not been implemented across the country. The map below highlights the different regulatory models used throughout the nation. It has not been updated to reflect the decriminalization of sex work in Queensland, which is shown in yellow (meaning legalized) on the map. Due to this, sex workers in other regions still experience greater constraints vis a vis agency. Many workers describe navigating these restrictions as a choice between operating legally or operating safely. For instance, carrying condoms could be used as evidence of prostitution but not carrying them increases health risks. One of the workers I interviewed was a male sex worker who had worked in multiple countries, spanning the spectrum of tacit decriminalization to legalization. In our interview, Reggie shared that many people he knew worked in flats or brothels because it protected them from the police, which he stated “is the main source of violence for most sex workers.” He also stated that while the sex workers he knew preferred this kind of working situation, it was often illegal. Because of this, if they experienced an issue with a client, they did not have any recourse but each other. After all, they could not go to the police because whoever’s name was on the lease of the place they were working in (if it was a flat) would be charged with pimping.

Figure 3.8 Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws: Australia



Source: *Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws*

This legal landscape shapes the regulatory liminality of sex worker organizers in the country. While some workers have high levels of agency, others experience greater constraints. The moral panic and backlash by the community against sex workers since the 1980s has maintained resistance to decriminalization in Australia. In tandem with this is the impact of anti-trafficking discourse and white slavery hysteria, which continues to impact sex workers even where sex work is decriminalized. An example of this is the passage of Australia’s Modern Slavery Act of 2018. This act came into effect on January 1, 2019 and required businesses to report on how they are working to prevent and combat modern slavery risks in their manufacturing and business practices. The stated intent of the act was to create more transparency and accountability for businesses in Australia who utilize supply chains (especially in the case of outsourced manufacturing and labor). It required them to publish a yearly Modern Slavery Statement outlining their efforts to identify and address modern slavery risks.

Despite the MSA’s intent to reduce modern slavery and increase the transparency of corporations, Scarlet Alliance expressed as early as December 2017 the potential consequences

of this act on sex workers. In 2023, they composed a statement called “Companies are using the Modern Slavery Act to discriminate against sex workers,” that condemned the MSA for its failure to “provide sufficient guidance on creating effective anti-slavery strategies, or any mechanism for evaluating them.” (Scarlet Alliance 2023). They released this statement because the Australian Government was undertaking a review of the MSA, but had not conducted a review of its impact. The Alliance goes on to state that while the MSA does not specifically refer to sex work or the sex industry, the reporting entities fail to distinguish between sex work and modern slavery. Furthermore, it argues that these entities “attempt to meet their MSA obligations by introducing policies and procedures that directly harm sex workers.” It details some of the harm that entities who self-identify as high-risk experience due to their changes in policy, including sex workers being denied or ejected from short-stay accommodations (regardless of whether they are using the accommodation for sex work), sex workers being faced with stigma and scrutiny from employers, and sex workers being subject to discrimination and surveillance from financial service providers, leading to seizure of funds, account closures, work-based discrimination, and denial of services. These consequences have been a persistent issue for workers in Australia, as the intent of the act - to combat human trafficking - and the reality of it - sex worker discrimination - have spurred numerous research and reports. Due to the conflation of trafficking and modern slavery with sex work, many companies seeking to comply with the MSA end up discriminating against sex workers.

Overall, the regulatory liminality sex workers operating in decriminalized regions experience is less than those operating in legalized or criminalized regions. This is due to laws on the books being more closely aligned to how they are enforced in practice. Despite this however, workers in decriminalized environments still experience regulatory liminality. This

stems from the continued stigmatization of sex work, and the disproportionate surveillance and policing stemming from the impact of human trafficking agendas. Like sex workers in the US and UK, sex worker organizers in Australia continue to push for decriminalization for all. The formal organizing strategies they utilize are also similar. In the next section, I focus on how sex workers formally organize in decriminalized regions of Australia. I do not discuss regions which are partially criminalized (legalized) as there is not significant variation from discussions in prior sections of this chapter. Instead, I seek to highlight how the formal organizing strategies I identify (political advocacy and public education) are utilized by workers who experience low regulatory liminality and are thus able to concentrate on issues other than the conflation of sex trafficking and sex work.

Legitimizing Sex Work Through Formalizing Ties to Health

In some ways, the formalization of sex work organizing represents an extension of state oversight. Whether sex work is legalized or decriminalized, the state finds ways to create additional regulations for sex workers. In the context of sex worker organizing in Australia, Scarlet Alliance is beholden to operating within official channels of political activism. Their status as a national organization means they primarily engage in lobbying, advocacy, and health promotion, or otherwise risk funding, legitimacy, and perhaps even threaten the dissolution of their organization. At the same time, however, it also provides avenues for sex workers to contribute openly to public discourse on other kinds of issue areas. I interviewed the Executive Director of the organization, Mish Pony, who stated that the membership of sex workers in the organization, “makes us strong...one person saying this is an issue, people won’t take you seriously, but if you can demonstrate that you are community controlled and community invest(s) in you, then you are an authoritative voice for the community.” In Australia, sex worker

organizers from Scarlet Alliance have heavily mobilized around public health issues. There is significant overlap in what sex worker organizers in each regulatory environment are focusing on, and how they are mobilizing. But unlike organizers in the US and UK, those in Australia are able to pay an equal amount of attention to other issue areas.

An example of this is the Red Book created by Scarlet Alliance, which is a comprehensive website with Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) and Blood Borne Virus (BBV) (including HIV and Hepatitis) resources for sex workers by sex workers¹⁷. According to a member of Scarlet Alliance, they are “primarily a health promotion organization, and as a peak body...concerned with supporting, evaluating and producing policy in relation to funded health promotion programs” (Jeffreys 2018, p.153). Though the Red Book is directed towards sex workers themselves, it still embodies an example of formal organizing by sex workers. Sexual health and public health are important avenues for sex workers to gain greater legitimacy and leverage for more resources in order to continue to petition for their rights and the decriminalization of sex work. After all, the first time a sex worker organization in Australia received federal funding, it was for sexual health awareness and prevention. So while this Red Book is an information resource created “by and for sex workers,” it is also a form of public education to non-sex workers. It serves to signal to the general public that Scarlet Alliance, and therefore sex workers broadly, are invested in prioritizing their sexual health, and it signals to governmental and nongovernmental agencies that sexual health is an organization priority. The former helps destigmatize sex work by combatting the popularly held belief that sex workers spread infections and disease within communities. In this way, it is a form of political and public education. The latter positions the organization well for future funding opportunities. Many of

¹⁷While the Red Book can be viewed as a community-centered (or informal) strategy, I argue that the institutionalized process it went through and its effect in legitimizing sex worker organizers to the state makes it is a formal strategy

the sex worker organizations I interviewed across my case studies communicated that the majority of sex workers' funding comes from groups seeking to support sexual health. By prioritizing a sexually transmitted infections handbook, Scarlet Alliance was strategically setting its agenda around what would be appealing to funding and to the general public. It is also not a disruptive intervention, such as a public demonstration, boycott, or strike, nor is one that seeks to further the rights of sex workers.

In 1996/97, Scarlet Alliance produced an Annual Report where they discussed lobbying the Commonwealth Government to fund a national sex worker handbook on STIs (Scarlet 1997). The Red Book's first iteration was published in 1998. When it was, there was no evidence of intent to reprint or update the handbook. But, it became a popular resource for sex workers and this demand led to a reprint in 2003, and an update in 2013. In that same year, copies were transcribed and over 20,000 distributed. Scarlet Alliance continuously noted the popularity of the Red Book in its annual reports (Jeffreys, 2018).

This Red Book is an accessible resource that is clearly labeled and translated in Chinese, Thai and Korean. The screenshot below shows the guide's formatting: introduction, Mpox, STIs and BBVs, safer sex tools, sex worker skill shares, testing information, general sexual health information, laws surrounding STIs and BBVs, sex worker services and sex worker organizations. This kind of resource takes a significant amount of time and resources to complete. Scarlet Alliance can do so because it is an officially recognized charity that receives funding through the government, nonprofits and private philanthropists. The kind of funding it receives is often tied to promoting safer sex and better sexual health outcomes, which aligns with the perspective that they are primarily a health promotion organization. According to Jeffreys (Jeffreys, 2018), who is a member of Scarlet Alliance and conducted their dissertation on how

the organization maintains autonomy despite its funding sources, the organization does so by actively influencing the political landscape of sex worker policy and funding, taking a community development approach to health promotion and resource creation, and highlighting the oppression sex workers experience while working to alleviate it.

Figure 3.9 Scarlet Alliance Red Book Screenshot

The screenshot shows the Scarlet Alliance Red Book website. The header is red with the text "RED BOOK" and "STI & BBV RESOURCES FOR SEX WORKERS BY SEX WORKERS". The Scarlet Alliance logo is in the top left. A sidebar on the left lists navigation options: English, Introduction, Mpox (Monkeypox), Sexually Transmissible Infections & Blood Borne Viruses, Safer Sex Tools, Sex Worker Skill Share, Testing, General Sexual Health, STIs, BBVs & the Law, Sex Work Services, and Sex Worker Organisations. The main content area is white and features a red box with text about Monkeypox (MPX) resources and vaccination information. Below this is a section titled "How to use the resource" which explains the Red Book Online and provides a list of common uses. At the bottom, there is a search bar and a list of options for finding information if the user cannot find what they are looking for.

RED BOOK
STI & BBV RESOURCES FOR SEX WORKERS BY SEX WORKERS

This post is also available in: 简体中文 (Chinese (Simplified)), ไทย (Thai), 한국어 (Korean)

Monkeypox (MPX) resources and vaccination information for sex workers are now available.
 Information about MPX with photos of symptoms can be found here.
 Find MPX vaccination information for your state and territory here.

How to use the resource

The Red Book Online contains health and safety information by sex workers, for sex workers. There are a lot of ways sex workers can use the Red Book Online! Here are some of the most common uses, based on sex worker feedback:

- Find information about STI and BBV prevention, treatment, testing and symptoms, including symptom images
- Find general information about sexual health and sex work
- Find information for people who are new to the sex industry to feel empowered to navigate workplace health and safety, negotiate with our clients, and make the right choices for us about our health and wellbeing at work
- Understand common sex industry terminology and abbreviations
- Get a referral to a sex worker-friendly health care service or a sex worker peer organisation
- Learn how to check for visible signs of STIs
- Pick up sex worker skillshare and harm reduction strategies
- Understand legal obligations about sex working with BBV and/or STI

There are a few different ways to find the information you're looking for:

1. BROWSE the resource using the menu headings
2. SEARCH for what you're looking for in our search bar
3. Use our QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE, designed to help you quickly navigate STI and BBV symptoms you encounter in your sex work

If you don't find what you're looking for, here are some other options for finding the information you need:

1. Contact your local sex worker peer organisation and speak to a peer educator. They are so knowledgeable and can help you navigate the world of sex work!

Source: Scarlet Alliance Website

Scarlet Alliance explains how the Red Book has been maintained since its original publication:

Our resources are written by Scarlet Alliance staff and reviewed by sex worker focus groups, sexual health clinicians (where applicable), and our organisation's leadership. All of our resources are informed by community consultation, best practice standards in sex worker peer education and harm reduction, the best available clinical and epidemiological information, and our community health colleagues. This ensures that the resource is accurate, relevant and reflects our diverse experiences,

identities, contexts and needs.

Their explanation emphasizes the kinds of concerns sex worker organizers in the US brought up regarding how policies and resources impacting sex workers are created. In the case of condom laws in the US, the criminalization of safe sex practices was a threat to sex worker safety. Yet even when condom carrying was no longer used as evidence to arrest sex workers, they still experienced stigma and threats from law enforcement. Thus, there needed to be greater integration of sex worker consultations in order to create more effective policy outcomes, in conjunction with the decriminalization of sex work. Scarlet Alliance echoes this in their statement on how they created the Red Book.

They also emphasize on their resource home page that, “peer education is one of the most important tools for keeping sex workers and our communities safe, healthy and empowered” (Red Book, Scarlet Alliance). Sex workers in the US and UK also echo this sentiment. While sex worker organizers in all regulatory environments work to create peer resources, the “polished” nature of Scarlet Alliance’s reflects the status of sex work in the country; their efforts are state sanctioned and federally funded. If sex work was not decriminalized, it would be difficult and potentially impossible to receive federal funding. If sex workers had to spend all, or at least most, of their energy combating misinformation about sex trafficking, then it would be difficult to focus on other issues affecting sex workers.

Regulatory Liminality in Decriminalized Environments

In Australia, sex workers experience the greatest access to the welfare state. Workers also do not experience the same level of carceral punishments as in the US and UK. At the same time, sex workers still experience precarity and stigma. Socially, sex work is not significantly more acceptable despite not being illegal. Additionally, sex workers who experience marginalization

due to their identities are still more likely to be targeted and harassed than their more privileged counterparts. Racial difference continues to mediate people's experiences of regulatory liminality and structures organizing spaces.

Sex workers in Australia are still utilizing formal strategies to advocate for their rights and reduce stigma. Because sex work is decriminalized however, workers do not need to engage in the same level of political advocacy as those in the US and UK. Efforts can instead be focused on integrating further into the state and/or on public education. Scarlet Alliance is a testament to the impact of decriminalization on sex worker organizing. It operates nationally and is well-institutionalized, with sway at the local to international levels of government.

Sex workers in Australia have the least barriers in place to political participation according to regulatory liminality. The removal of criminal penalties means less dissonance between de jure and de facto regulation. Discourses around sex work are not tied to trafficking, nor are they weaponized to target particularly vulnerable sex worker sub-groups. Since the stakes of organizing against state violence are reduced, it opens up greater avenues to collaborate and integrate into the state. But, integration is still impacted by sex workers' identities. Since identities play a role in shaping regulatory liminality, there are always some sex workers who will be able to more easily navigate state systems of violence than others. In Australia, aboriginal and migrant sex workers remain especially vulnerable to saviorism and campaigns seeking to "liberate" workers from their conditions of labor. Attending to how regulatory liminality manifests across time and space brings attention to constraints organizers experience, as well as the stakes involved in their organizing efforts.

Conclusion: Similar Tactics for Different Legal Regimes

In this chapter, I discuss the formal organizing strategies sex workers are using to navigate criminality and stigma. Sex workers in the US, UK, and Australia each use political advocacy and public education to petition for greater rights and safety, despite the differences in their regulatory environments. In the case of criminalization in the United States, organizers in Los Angeles push back against anti-human trafficking initiatives that are overwhelmingly weaponized to arrest consensual sex workers. To do so, they engage in the policy-making process, build coalitions with other LA-based organizations, and demonstrate publicly. In the UK, sex worker organizers are dissatisfied with legalization and are advocating for the state to implement decriminalization. This is primarily due to the asymmetrical effects of legalization on sex workers' experience; for instance, migrant sex workers and sex workers with children. Similar to workers in the US, they engage in lobbying, political education and are working to destigmatize sex work through social media and film.

In Australia, sex work is decriminalized in several territories. Despite this, sex workers still experience regulatory liminality from the unequal application of decriminalization and the impact of anti-trafficking and modern slavery initiatives. Sex workers in Australia formed a national body in the late 20th century, and after decades of activism they were able to achieve decriminalization in NSW, the Northern Territory, Victoria, and Queensland. Their centralized organizing and focus on public health have also allowed them to receive significant government funding, and play an active role in the creation and implementation of sexual health policy. Yet, sex workers who are migrants, undocumented, transgender, and occupy other marginalized identities are still subject to trafficking hysteria and power hierarchies.

Several insights emerge through this discussion of sex workers' formal organizing. The first is that all sex workers experience regulatory liminality, even in decriminalized environments. A second finding is that sex workers experience greater dissonance between the law and practice when sex work is legalized. Finally, though sex workers in decriminalized environments experience less regulatory liminality, the fact that there is still a mismatch between de jure and de facto regulation, and that anti-trafficking and modern slavery discourses still impact sex workers' experiences, demonstrate that decriminalization is not enough to eradicate the violence sex workers experience.

The formal organizing strategies discussed in this chapter rely on established advocacy networks. However, sex workers' regulatory liminality is shaped by more than official legislation. The impact of social stigma and other power hierarchies requires sex workers to mobilize in informal ways as well in order to address these additional sources of violence. In the next chapter, I discuss sex workers' informal organizing practices. These practices fill the gaps of formal ones, and are centered on creating communities of care by sex workers, for sex workers. Informal organizing strategies are not motivated by changing legislation, but are oriented towards improving sex workers' material conditions in the moment. Examples of these strategies include mutual aid and information sharing. While the intent of informal strategies differs from formal ones, both are utilized by sex workers to respond to conditions of state violence shaped by how sex work is regulated, and discourses shaping our understanding of sex and work.

“We have always been saving our own lives. When the state deems certain people disposable, we don’t disappear. We turn to one another, prop each other up, and provide the care and solutions that no governing body ever could or would”

-Tourmaline, in Saving Our Own Lives

CHAPTER 4: INFORMAL ORGANIZING STRATEGIES

In the previous chapter, I discussed the formal organizing strategies of sex workers: political advocacy and political education. These are ideal-typical groupings that stem from my fieldwork data and in reality they often overlap with one another. Formal strategies are marked by several features: they appeal to the state for legitimacy, they are readily legible as political practices, and they are addressed to “outside” rather than “inside” the community. Informal strategies, on the other hand, consist of practices and strategies that may not be readily legible as political practices, but nonetheless impact power. For instance, redistributing material resources (mutual aid) is an informal tactic. Outsiders observing friends swapping lingerie may not initially interpret this action as political, but it is nonetheless one of the informal strategies sex workers utilize to support one another. Informal organizing strategies usually do not address the state, but are directed towards the community. They either seek to fulfill deficits in state welfare provision and/or seek to foster community. They do not go through state-sanctioned channels, but are rather instituted “below-ground” and without the need for formal organization (though sometimes formal organizations employ informal strategies). In this chapter, I group sex workers' informal organizing strategies into the following categories of practices: mutual aid, information sharing, and relationship building.

I define and describe these categories and discuss how they draw upon the tactics utilized by broader social movements and by sex workers themselves. Sex workers deploy informal strategies to combat the stigma and violence they experience. Whether workers are in criminalized, legalized (partial criminalization) or decriminalized environments, they engage in

mutual aid, information sharing, and relationship building with one another. These informal tactics are effective across environments because they exist alongside formal political practices; sharing information and resources, for instance, can happen independently and concomitantly as more formal political practices such as public demonstrations. Informal organizing strategies play an important role in helping sex workers navigate their legal environment. When sex workers experience regulatory liminality, they confront overlapping and contradictory laws. For instance, in the UK where sex work is legal, sex workers can still be arrested on sex trafficking charges because working with a partner remains criminalized. To lessen their risk of violence, sex workers share information with one another on how to engage in saf(er) work. They also form relationships with one another so that they can lessen the emotional and psychological tolls of navigating criminality and precarity.

The rest of this chapter consists of three sections which describe examples of how sex workers across regulatory environments utilize these informal organizing tactics. I draw from my participant observation and interviews with sex worker organizers in the US, UK and Australia to describe instances of mutual aid, information sharing and relationship building.

Mobilizing Within/Against/Outside the State

The three informal organizing strategies I pull out from my data collection to leverage their regulatory liminality; mutual aid, information sharing, and relationship building. These strategies are not unique to sex workers as they have been utilized by other marginalized/criminalized communities who exist in “liminal” spaces within the state. Among these communities are racialized people, migrants and undocumented folks, transgender and queer people, and incarcerated people. For example, groups that establish legitimacy through building strong relationships in their community are more likely to survive (Walker and

McCarthy, 2010). The Black Panther Party actively invested in their community by hosting free lunches and health clinics. These spaces acted at once as mutual aid, information sharing, and relationship building. While these strategies are not unique, sex workers' experiences of regulatory liminality- wherein they navigate a complex legal relationship between de jure and de facto laws- differentially constrains and enables their usage of these informal tactics. I define each of these strategies below and discuss how scholars and organizers have engaged with them, drawing from the examples of BIPOC, transgender and queer organizing. I also weave in sex worker-led studies and examples from sex worker organizers. This discussion frames how I am engaging with, and interpreting, my fieldwork.

Mutual Aid

A common strategy instituted by marginalized groups is mutual aid. Dean Spade defines mutual aid as “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (Barnard Center, 2020). Spade argues that mutual aid is one of the most useful strategies to support marginalized and criminalized communities, but that it is also one of the most underutilized. He states that “mutual aid is an often devalued iteration of radical collective care that provides a transformative alternative” to current hierarchical systems (Spade, 2020; 131). Mutual aid is fundamentally people coming together to provide for one another in the ways the state has failed to do. By doing so, people create alternative economies and ways of being that exist within and outside the state, while also challenging the states’ utility. Despite this transformative potential, Spade also notes its potential limitations. For instance, because mutual aid seeks to address the deficits in state welfare, it is also doing the job of the state for the state. This can reduce incentives for the government to change and actually reinforce, rather than challenge, the status quo (i.e. the lack of provisions by

the state). Mutual aid can also slip into charity models, where the people providing the support are not of the community. Charity models are often criticized for maintaining hierarchical social relationships (Drake, 1996).

While these challenges exist, Spade and other organizers still consider this approach among the best strategies to dismantle existing hierarchical structures. Organizer and abolitionist Mariame Kaba speaks to its importance for getting rid of the prison-industrial complex. She states that mutual aid combines “community service with political education and political activism that’s actually focused on challenging power and oppressive systems” (Kaba, 2021). Kaba’s definition of mutual aid extends Spade’s by arguing that it is more than just material redistribution, but can itself be a political practice that seeks to bring about social change. Echoed in both definitions of mutual aid is the idea that it is community centered and led, and that it aims to disrupt, intervene, and transform harm. They both recognize the role of conflict resolution and trust in building and sustaining mutual aid efforts.

Because mutual aid is community centered, it often arises due to a crisis or need. The outbreak of Covid-19 is one such example, and mutual aid efforts proliferated in its wake. Fernandes-Jesus et. al. (2021) conducted interviews with organizers of Covid-19 mutual aid groups in the UK and analyzed the responses for common themes and strategies. They find that mutual aid efforts prosper through localized action and resources focused on building trust, and community-based alliances. Creating a culture of care and support and holding regular meetings also sustained participation and overall positive feelings associated with organizing efforts. The authors note that the actions of mutual aid groups should be supported practically and financially by more formalized organizations as leveraging the knowledge and experiences of organizers can be useful for developing community interventions.

Based on the insights of scholars and organizers, mutual aid plays a critical role in the ability of marginalized groups to meet their needs. These efforts are impactful materially as well as politically. However, mutual aid cannot take place without community-building which requires people intentionally work on communication and conflict resolution. If these relational aspects of mutual aid are prioritized, then the efforts of organizers have a more likely chance of being sustainable over time.

Information Sharing

Information sharing is another informal strategy used by communities that are neglected and targeted by the state. In the previous chapter, I discussed the passage of FOSTA/SESTA¹⁸ in the U.S. in 2018. Once passed by the Senate, SESTA/FOSTA resulted in the closure of several sex work forums, such as Backpage, that workers relied on to post their advertisements and communicate with potential clients. Additionally, Craigslist (an anonymous website that had forums for connecting clients and workers) ceased holding personal ads of any kind, and Reddit forums related to the industry disappeared. Though sex workers were heavily impacted by this increased censorship, there were also ripple effects on civilians. For instance, Tumblr no longer allowed NSFW¹⁹ content, and social media websites strengthened their censorship.

In response to SESTA/FOSTA, many sex workers began to organize to raise awareness about its harmful effects and to petition for greater rights and protections. Hacking//Hustling is a collective of sex workers and allies working at the intersections of technology and social justice. They advocate that “an internet that is safer for sex workers is an internet that is safer for everyone” (Hacking//Hustling, 2021). In 2020, they conducted a study on the impact of SESTA/FOSTA on sex workers. This study was a sex worker-led mixed methods participatory

¹⁸ FOSTA/SESTA and SESTA/FOSTA are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation because they are used interchangeably in media and research.

¹⁹ Not Safe For Work

action research (PAR) project. In it, they found that sex workers faced significant changes to content moderation tactics that disrupted their ability to make income, organize, and participate in free speech (Blunt et. al., 2020).

As part of their research, they asked sex workers to define trafficking in their own words. A consensus amongst these responses included forced labor and a lack of consent. This is important because sex work is distinguished from sex trafficking through the mechanism of consent; if a sex worker is not consenting, they are not a sex worker. The authors note that forced labor as a concept has some inherent tensions considering our capitalist system forces us all to labor to meet our needs. However, this never factors into any legal definitions of trafficking. Among the responses they got, one long form quote in their subsequent report, “Erased,” captured this complexity:

Trafficking was a word that I never heard when I first got into the business in 2002, back then it was called pimping. In my opinion, the terminology changed to conjure up images of white women being forced into sex work. Pimping is mostly associated with African-Americans and if I know anything to be true, it's that America is a deeply racist country that doesn't value black women as much as it should.

This quote echoes the work of scholars such as Kempadoo, Hua, and Shih who find that the upsurge in the last few decades of attention to human trafficking results as much from the states' desire to expand borders and militarize as it does from a desire to “protect.” This observation parallels the prediction of sex workers who had warned government officials about the consequences of SESTA/FOSTA prior to its passage, but were subsequently ignored.

SESTA/FOSTA's intention to “protect” resulted in widespread online censorship. While this threatened free speech for the public broadly, for sex workers there were also serious health and safety implications (Stryker, 2024). I previously discussed these implications, which include

the potential to be coerced into lower rates and taking on less vetted clients. The erasure of sex workers from online spaces has had serious implications for their ability to protect one another. The expansion of state censorship that FOSTA/SESTA presents not only affects sex workers' ability to exist publicly online, it also impacts their ability to use online services. This includes gmail and online payment platforms such as Venmo and Paypal. Many sex workers live in fear of their work email being shut down and losing access to their client list. There have also been instances where workers' funds are seized from their account by payment processors.

The challenges presented by these attacks on free speech, both online and offline, have forced sex workers to create alternative methods of caring for themselves and one another. In their forthcoming book *Sex Worker Solidarity: Networks of Caring and Sharing*, Lauren Levitt discusses how sex workers utilize information networks to protect each other. Information sharing practices include sharing which clubs are safe or should be avoided, where not to work, which clients are violent and/or well-behaved, and how to vet a potential client. According to Levitt, information networks are themselves a form of mutual aid that seeks to disrupt current configurations of power. Levitt applies social reproduction theory to sex workers' caring practices to argue that sex workers create non-biological kinship structures and engage in non-capitalist forms of caring and sharing to manage precarity, stigma and criminalization.

Kimberly Fuentes, a UCLA PhD Candidate and Board member of Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOPLA), conducted several studies on how sex workers in LA care for one another. She discusses forms of mutual aid, and particularly attends to the utility of information sharing for sex workers. Fuentes' participatory action research project with sex workers in LA finds the conflation of sex trafficking with sex work harmful for vital information

sharing networks. Both Fuentes and Levitt contend that sex worker organizing can not only build systems of support, but can create networks of mutual safety and survival (2021; p. 46).

Everchanging regulations around sex work in the form of trafficking laws, censorship laws, and others, makes it difficult for sex workers to properly manage the risks they face while working. When sex work is criminalized, it becomes even more difficult for workers to know how to find safe clients while keeping themselves safe. Information sharing is a vital informal strategy for sex workers and sex worker organizers to be able to manage the stigma and precarity they experience. Knowing which apps are safe to advertise on, how to work around social media censorship guidelines, how to open a bank account without getting it flagged -- all of this is experiential knowledge passed from one sex worker to another. Like with other criminalized and surveilled communities, it is essential for sex workers to find ways to share information with one another so that they can reduce the potential of violence.

Relationship Building

Mutual aid and information networks go hand in hand with relationship building. Though they can be practiced separately, they are most useful when combined. As Spade and Kaba state when discussing the role of mutual aid in organizing efforts, organizing requires building community with one another in order to sustain it. Importantly, community in this context is distinct from proximity. Ndeye Oumou Sylla, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and online influencer, provides a useful distinction between the two:

Just because people follow each other on ig or show up to the same events doesn't mean they're in community-it just means they're in proximity. True community requires intention, reciprocity, and a shared commitment to each other's well-being (Instagram, 2025)

This social media post speaks to the sentiment in organizing spaces that people can be around each other without “practicing” community, and that community is just that -- an

intentional practice. This statement also highlights that people are able to co-opt the term community and provide false safety to precarious people. Spade speaks to this issue in his article on mutual aid when he describes its potential to be reformist (2021). He discusses how collective care is radical and generative, and that effective social movements always include elements of mutual aid. But for mutual aid to be possible, it must be rooted in solidarity, not charity.

Solidarity presupposes community, and community presupposes a shared commitment to each other. For this commitment to be present, relationship-building plays a pivotal role. In the context of relationship-building for the purpose of organizing, abolitionists like Kaba and Spade discuss the generative role of conflict. Conflict is a feature of relationship-building, but Spade argues that power hierarchies have prevented people from learning how to effectively manage conflict. On this, he argues:

We are taught to either dominate others and be numb to the impact of our domination on them, or submit with a smile and be numb to our own experiences of domination in order to get by. We learn that giving direct feedback is risky and that we should either suppress our concerns or find sideways methods to manipulate situations and get what we want. (p.145)

Conflict has the potential to aid people in building stronger, more trusting relationships, but survival in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy has numbed us and made us unprepared to engage in it. He proposes that effective organizing work requires concentrated relationship building efforts that address racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and other systems of control. Some methods he suggests for building lasting relationships include clear approaches to decision making, transparency (especially in regards to money), and using transformative justice and mediation frameworks (p. 146). These methods can be applied in more “formal” settings such as

501c3 organizations, but they can also be used in informal spaces between peers invested in addressing similar issues.

A potential consequence of the failure to build relationships prior to and during organizing is the dissolution of such organizing efforts. In the chapter on formal organizing methods, I discuss the example of a Die-in organized at the LA City Hall for International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers on December 17th, 2023. I wrote about how this event was led by two organizations; one of which is sex worker-led but does not organize specifically around sex work, and another which is neither sex worker-led nor has it historically organized around sex worker issues. While all groups that participated in the Die-in were outspoken about their opposition to Mayor Bass ramping up trafficking initiatives in Figueroa, the groups did not have prior experience organizing as an intentional coalition. In addition to that, there had been previous interactions between the groups that had fostered unresolved tensions. For instance, StopLAPDSpying had a history of harm against one of the BIPOC sex workers who attended the Die-in. This sex worker had previously been part of the organization, and had advocated for StopLAPDSpying to consider sex workers when addressing issues of police violence. While it is a positive sign that they were willing to expand the scope of their mission, the woman of color who brought the issue to the agenda was slowly ousted from the organization for failing to voice her concerns with other issue areas in a manner that was “friendly” enough for the man leading the group. These issues were related to transphobia and homophobia within the group. When this worker pushed back on these sentiments, she was accused of being racist to the leader of the group, who is a Black man. Instead of using this conflict as a moment of transformative justice, the group failed to redress the harm the worker had grievances with. She attributes this failure to change perspectives as partially responsible for the lack of coordination for the Die-in.

This example helps communicate the role relationship building plays in movement work. In my theory chapter, I had discussed the need for an intersectional feminist framework to understand issues of sex work and criminalization. Necessarily, we all have blindspots due to our positionality; Spade speaks to how our adherence to hierarchies of control numbs our ability to handle conflict. Organizing without a willingness to be called out/called in for these blindspots either leads to the exclusion of members or the dissolution of the effort entirely.

Sex Workers' Mutual Aid

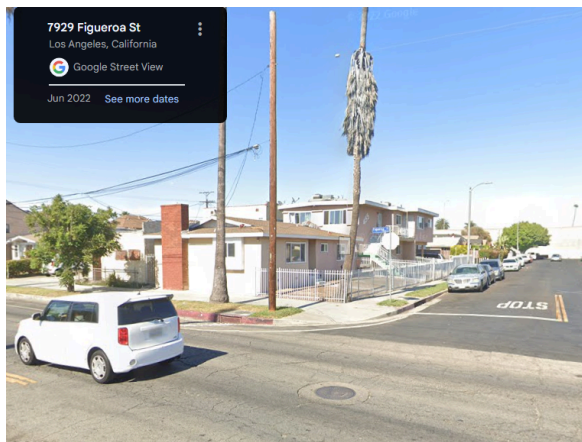
In the previous chapter on formal organizing strategies, I demonstrate that sex workers in criminalized environments are to some extent still able to utilize traditional political pathways to advocate for their rights and safety. In the United States, for instance, sex workers in LA organized public demonstrations to protest their local government. While they are able to wield their regulatory liminality to create counter-narratives and express dissatisfaction, there are still significant legal, social and economic risks to doing so. Moreover, so long as sex work is illegal, people who openly identify as sex workers open themselves up to being targets of the state. As such, informal organizing strategies are necessary to fulfill the deficits of the state and to protect one another from state and interpersonal violence. In this section, I draw on mutual aid projects across my field sites to demonstrate how sex workers are engaged in practices of solidarity and care. These mutual aid projects are for sex workers, by sex workers: as an act of resource redistribution, mutual aid not only supports people's ability to meet their material needs, it also acts as a symbol of commitment to uplifting community. The sex worker organizers who organize these mutual aid projects do so over different longitudinal time periods, but always with the intent of continuing to build upon their efforts in other ways.

Street-based Sex Worker Outreach

Figueroa Street is one of the longest streets in LA and spans over 30 miles from north to south. Within this expanse is the University of Southern California and several historic landmarks, including Angels Flight Railway and Heritage Square Museum. It is also the designated location for the Summer 2028 Olympics. For many locals, however, the area is infamous for its association with “the stroll,” a less than 4 mile stretch of Figuroa street where street-based sex workers seek out clients. People often refer to this specific region of the area solely as “Fig.”

I have included a screenshot of a part of Fig from Google Maps below that shows a portion of this area during the daytime. The image depicts the corner of a main street and a residential one. There are cars parked along the off-street next to houses and apartment buildings. The streets are clear of trash and debris. There is no visible graffiti or people walking on the streets. While on the main street (Figueroa) there are numerous businesses, most of the off-shoots are filled with family housing. The popular imagery of Fig is that it is a dangerous place filled with “gangsters, thugs and prostitutes.” While there is very real danger present in Fig, it is not from sex workers as Mayor Bass and other local officials argue.

Figure 4.1 Google Maps Screenshot



Source: Google, March 2025

A program SWOPLA has run since 2018 is its stroll on Fig. The term stroll can refer both to a geographic location, as well as to an action. Fig is known as “the stroll” to locals, referring to a location where street-based sex workers frequently operate. SWOPLA uses the term stroll to refer to the act of distributing harm reduction and other supplies to street-based workers. During my time with SWOPLA, I participated in five strolls. Strolls are held at least monthly (sometimes more frequently) and take place at night when people are most likely to be working. They are also usually on a weekday so as not to disturb sex workers during high-traffic hours. Each stroll has 3-4 people and is mobile-- members are in a car and have pre-made resource bags that are handed out through the window to people working. It is risky for both the person doing the stroll and for the worker to linger and the mobile distribution method is meant to reduce this risk. The amount of people working varies depending on the day and time, but there are usually people on every street corner in the concentrated area of the corridor.

Earlier in this chapter, I discuss how Spade distinguishes charity and solidarity in mutual aid, and that relationship-building is a core component of the latter. Many groups target south Fig, particularly the streets where sex workers operate, for their resource distribution efforts. These groups tend to be charities or churches. In fact, many of the workers during the stroll often ask SWOPLA members if they are from the church. This is due to the legacy of white saviorism which encourages people to reach out to the “morally corrupt” or “victimized” sex workers. Scholars such as Kempadoo and Hua discuss how human trafficking discourses reify this saviorism at the expense of survivors' autonomy. With SWOPLA, though, the intent of the stroll is to provide fellow sex workers with material support. Organizers are trying to interrupt power

hierarchies that cause street-based sex work to be more vulnerable than other forms of sex work. While doing so, they also try to foster stronger relationships with the workers on Fig.

These strolls are one part of SWOPLA's mutual aid efforts. As an informal organizing strategy, they help redistribute material and financial resources back into the hands of the workers themselves. They are also completely no-strings attached; organizers ask workers if they want any of the supplies they have, and workers are free to take and leave what makes sense to them. They do not have to provide any information about themselves or further the risk of criminalization they experience. Most services and resources provided directly to sex workers come with strings attached, either in the form of extracting traumatic stories from them, requiring medical records/testing, or otherwise requiring them to divulge private and personal information. For example, there are free pop up clinics for sex workers that require them to record personal data in exchange for test kits or vaccinations. SWOPLA does not ask for identifiable information when offering resources at its events. In the case of research, most interview protocols ask sex workers to recount their most traumatic experiences at work. When interviewing one of my participants, they remarked that my questions were well-thought out because they did not engage in "trauma porn".

There are several aspects of SWOPLA's strolls along Fig that embody the kind of liberatory mutual aid scholars and organizers envision²⁰. For one, the stroll is rooted in principles of solidarity. This is evidenced in the fact that members of the community are the ones leading and shaping how strolls look. Since the strolls are rooted in solidarity, there is more incentive for strolls to be sustained. The sustainability of SWOPLA's strolls is novel considering they have been consistently hosting them monthly for over five years. As Spade and other organizers note,

²⁰ Strolls are something members can choose to do and volunteer for. Members allowed to participate in strolls undergo an informal vetting process to ensure the safety of street-based workers. For instance, a new member may not be allowed on the stroll based on the discretion of long-time members.

sustainability of a movement is often one of its largest impediments. Additionally, the long-time presence of SWOPLA members in Fig has built some level of credibility and trust amongst street-based sex workers. When members go on strolls and state they are with SWOPLA, many of the workers recognize that name and feel more comfortable accepting the distributed items.

Part of my ongoing participant observation with SWOPLA members are planning meetings for community events in Fig. These meetings were initiated by Kim, a SWOPLA member and researcher, because they were a Postdoctoral Scholar at Southern California (SoCal) Library in South Central. Vermont Street is a few streets away from Fig, and the SoCal Library is an open community space where unhoused people and sex workers are safe and able to rest/relax/otherwise take up space. SoCal Library is openly anti-police and community-centered. As a postdoc there, Kim sought to bring SWOPLA's presence more to the forefront in Fig rather than just biweekly strolls. Because the strolls take place during working hours, it is virtually impossible to stop and talk with the workers. I have been on five strolls now and the actual conversations we are able to have with street-based workers are all of 30 seconds. These planning meetings began early 2024 in an effort to create drop-in hours at SoCal Library. The first resource hour began in April 2025. Though the first event had low turnout, the plan is to host monthly events to encourage greater attendance. Members are continuing to build up these resource hours with the goal of having events and resources to support street-based sex workers and serve as a community epicenter.

During meetings on how to have a greater presence in Fig and be a better resource and advocate for street-based workers, short term and long term ideas were discussed. The most salient one had to do with forming a rapid response hotline specifically for sex workers and sex trafficking victims. There are other existing hotlines, such as the National Human Trafficking

Hotline which is funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, and Cat911, which stands for Community Alternatives to 911, run by local communities. But neither of these hotlines were able to respond to the specific needs of sex workers. They may be able to support trafficking survivors but only with police intervention, which could cause further violence. The conversation at this meeting included having a sex worker-led rapid response team to run the hotline and meet people's needs. The goal would be to replace and make police obsolete.

However, there are several logistic, legal, and financial barriers brought up during the meeting that made this a long term goal for SWOPLA members. Grant money that the organization receives often has specific parameters that prevent funds from being used for other projects. It has been difficult to identify funds to support a sex worker resource hour. All members involved have other priorities that require a significant amount of their time, including caregiving responsibilities, other jobs, and other organizing labor. The constraints on funding and people's schedules increases the time needed to get new initiatives set up. Members also need to be wary of how they are advertising events and any potential implications for their involvement in creating sex worker spaces as there are risks of surveillance and criminalization from police. For instance, advising sex workers on how to advertise their services or what sites to use during resource hours could implicate members in aiding and abetting trafficking.

One of the short-term events SWOPLA members are organizing through these meetings is a drop-in resource hour in Fig. With Kim's assistance, the goal would be to establish a more consistent physical presence of SWOPLA in Fig, and create a community-centered space where sex workers could receive emotional support from one another. The logistics of coordinating this event were difficult; SoCal Library was a willing supporter and offered to host the drop-in hours at their space since it is close to Fig. But, figuring out the advertising, scheduling, and legal

boundaries caused several delays in the launch of the drop in hours. They are set to officially launch at the library April 23rd, 2025. Examples of the first set of invitations can be viewed below. They have the original launch date of March 3rd on them, but members had to move the date back.

Figure 4.2 Resource Hour Fliers



Source: Author, March 2025

These invitations were edited with the correct date and passed out to street-based workers during strolls. The intent of the drop-in hours is to provide resources, information and peer support to street-based sex workers. Another goal is to build more sustainable relationships with street-based workers in Fig so that SWOPLA can better represent their needs and so that more street-based workers have opportunities to get involved with SWOPLA.

These examples highlight how sex worker organizers are utilizing mutual aid, information-sharing, and relationship-building in order to resist state violence. These informal strategies help sex workers in LA build community with one another. In doing so, they are able to better identify the needs of their most vulnerable members, tailor resources and support to address those needs, and build alternative systems of support to state-led ones.

SWARM Mutual Aid during COVID-19

I interviewed several SWARM members as part of my dissertation, including Gwen and Lara. When I began my fieldwork in January 2023, I also virtually interviewed another SWARM member, Polly. Polly shared about a very successful mutual aid initiative SWARM ran at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Polly joined SWARM shortly before the pandemic in 2019. At the onset of the pandemic in the UK, Polly reported that the government was failing to respond to the public health crisis. There were some feminist groups who were mobilizing a response, but these groups failed to consider sex workers because of a belief that sex work is a last resort and that no one should willingly engage in it. She also recounts that the brothels in Chinatown were facing intensified racism due to harmful and racist narratives about the disease.

At the time [when shutdowns first occurred] brothels in Chinatown were facing horrendous racism. The government wasn't really helping, and feminist groups took the liberal exit-y way perspective on sex work which didn't really help either.

Since there was significant fear and panic about contracting Covid-19 early on-- especially prior to vaccines being available -- many workers did not want to work in person. Even for those who did want to or who were unable to take time off from work, it was much more difficult to get clients at the time. This led many workers to take on clients they normally would not. Some people were able to pivot to online work, but often it is difficult to make this pivot due to technological constraints and the fact that it is often longer hours for less money.

Additionally, Polly mentioned that there was a growing sentiment within the government to push for the Nordic Model, wherein the buyers of sex would be criminalized, and that this was horrifying to many sex workers. In response to the lack of government response, growing racist sentiments, and the drop off in clients for in-person workers, SWARM put together a mutual aid

hardship fund. Their Covid-19 pandemic response was organized quickly by members, and Polly reported that they distributed £250,000 in over 1,500 individual grants.

SWARM created a report in 2020 that documented how they were able to put this initiative into action. This is an excellent example of information-sharing, as it provides a template for other sex worker organizers to follow. In this report they discuss the applicant criteria they decided on, how they set up their application form, the different tasks required to manage the applications, how they verified sex workers' statuses, how they managed privacy concerns, where they got the money from, how they promoted it and how they closed it. As part of the fund distribution process, they asked people to complete an anonymous survey that asked 1. What has been most challenging since the crisis? 2. What did the payment help with? 3. How did you find the application process? 4. Where did you hear about the fund?. They had 116 survey respondents. A majority of the applicants stated loss of income was the most challenging aspect of the pandemic, and 100% of recipients stated that the funds went to bills, food, and rent. The report included anonymized sentiments from SWARM members who helped run the fund, and one mentioned, "I will never get over how good it felt to just give money directly to sex workers and let them decide for themselves how they spent it" (p16). As a sex worker-run mutual aid project, the organizers of it respected the autonomy of their peers. As people who were also impacted by the pandemic, they knew that the best way to help someone was to provide them with direct access to funds so that each person could allocate that money towards their most pressing needs (e.g. rent, bills, food).

While Polly recounted her experiences with SWARM early on through her involvement with the mutual aid fund, she also shared some of her perspective about organizing around sex worker rights issues and building community within and outside of the movement. She did not

disclose an exact age during our interview, but she mentioned being in her 30s and having finished her PhD in 2020. After her PhD, it was initially difficult to meet people, stay motivated, and form a community. In fact even before she completed the degree, she mentioned struggling with feelings of loneliness and a lack of motivation. Joining SWARM gave her an outlet to focus her energy and build connections with people. She recounted a story in which she was out with a group of people and they were having drinks. There was a woman who was a bit drunk and was complaining about how difficult it was to make friends. This was after Polly joined SWARM and felt more fulfilled by her organizing work, so she responded that the woman just needs to “pick a cause” and make friends that way. Her work with SWARM gave her something to occupy her time and redirect her energy. Upon reflecting on how her organizing work has impacted her in the long term, she mentioned that it helped her regulate her mental health.

Similar to the experiences of Gwen and Lara, Polly’s growing involvement with the sex worker community had a positive impact on her sense of self. She mentioned struggling with her mental health due to a lack of direction and community, and that joining SWARM helped her address both of these issues. While she did not disclose experiences of criminalization and stigma as the other SWARM members did -- and perhaps this can be attributed to her doing primarily online work versus Gwen who did primarily in person work, and Lara who dabbled in both -- she still benefited from being able to talk with other sex workers. To her, organizing and friendships (relationship-building) went hand in hand.

Sex Workers’ Information Sharing

Organizers often hold skill shares, workshops and other events to share information with one another. This is a valuable practice as many of the strategies and skills are transferable across organizing settings. For instance, using encrypted messaging apps to discuss sensitive content or

making sure not to document people's faces when publicly demonstrating. This information is also transferable to sex worker organizing but often requires tailoring to better suit the community. For instance, sex workers often cannot meet clients solely on encrypted messaging apps. Rather, they have to be savvy about their use of more mainstream forms of communication such as social media apps and then switch over to apps like Whatsapp or Signal once they have confirmed an interested client and are discussing sensitive topics. Below, I describe an example from my fieldwork of how sex workers modify and expand on existing information networks to better serve the needs of sex workers.

Information-sharing amongst sex workers is valuable in both organizing spaces and for the work itself. Sex workers share information as a tactic to mitigate stigmatization and surveillance. Workers often will not disclose with people that they engage in sex work unless they know the other person does too. Additionally, many sex workers work by themselves. This lack of connection with other workers creates information silos. Sex worker organizers intentionally create sex worker only spaces in order to break these silos. In these spaces, sex workers can feel comfortable to discuss details about their work life amongst other people who "get it". This can include general venting about clients, and it can also include sharing resources or advice on how to make more money or work more safely. Community spaces such as this are not only beneficial because they allow for the exchange of information but also because they provide emotional and psychological relief for workers. I draw on an example from my fieldwork in the UK of an informal community event where sex workers gather to share information to illustrate this.

Sex Worker-Informed Reproductive Justice

In 2023, SWOPLA received a California state grant to create a practical abortion support program. These grants were distributed in response to the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*. Given that many states in the US had abortion trigger laws that went into effect shortly after, people who lived in states with abortion bans or reproductive deserts now had to travel across state lines in order to receive reproductive services. Several other groups in California received this grant as well, such as the Birthworkers of Color Collective based out of Long Beach, but SWOPLA's contribution was creating a sex-worker specific peer support program.

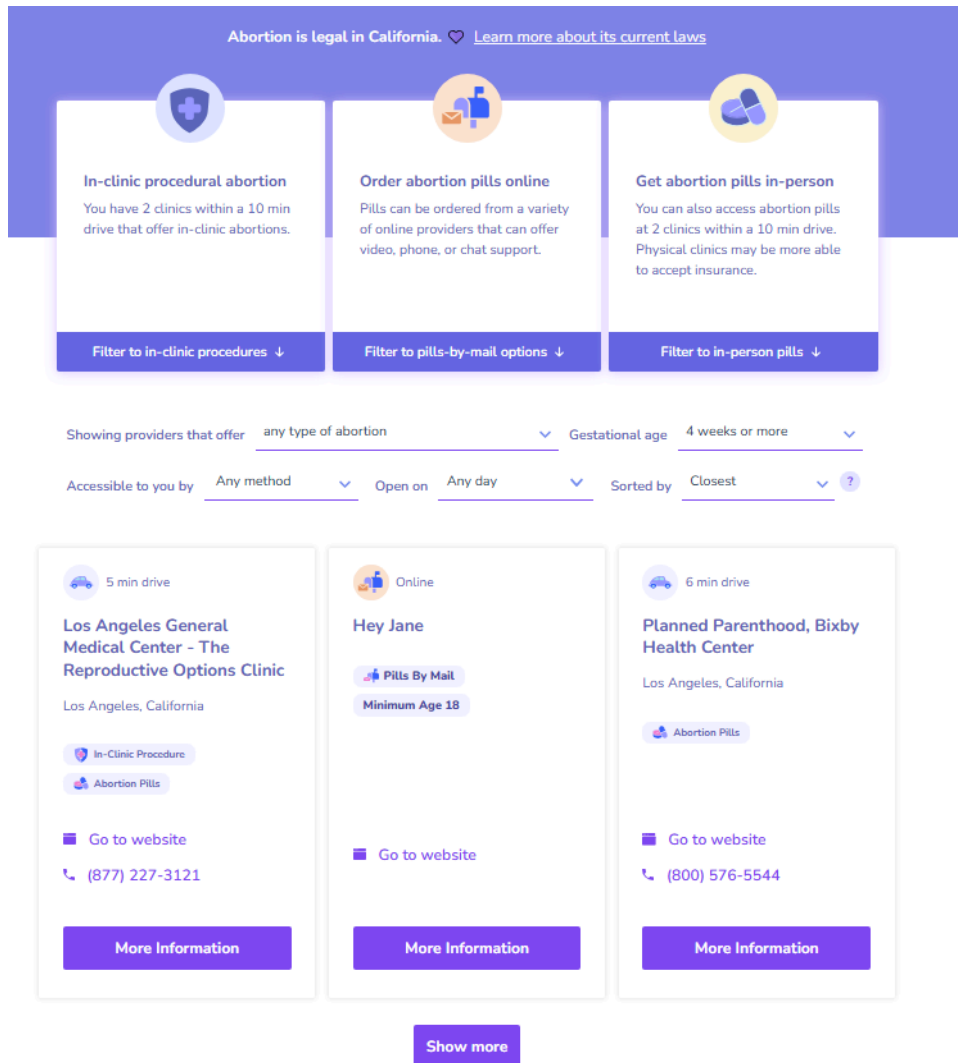
This program became Sex Workers Abortion Navigation Services, or SWANS. SWANS is composed of a lead peer navigator and three other peer navigators who are all current sex workers. Most of the team have been trained as abortion doulas or have other reproductive care experience. As a practical support program, SWANS aims to provide abortion-seekers with any financial, emotional and logistic support needed to complete the procedural process including scheduling the appointment, securing travel accommodations, and providing funds to take time off work. SWANS is unable to pay for the actual abortion procedure, and has no capacity as a health provider to facilitate the procedure itself. Peer navigators' jobs include advertising the program on and offline, creating informative resources for people to destigmatize abortion access, and being "on call" when there is a SWANS client in case the client needs anything before, during, or after their procedure. As part of the grant requirements, clients are required to have their abortion in California. As such, a large part of the work peer navigators do is helping clients with travel plans and providing childcare or compensation for missed wages, if needed.

Though SWANS has supported over ten sex workers in receiving reproductive care, the first year of the program did not have any clients. This was in part due to having to build a

practical support program from the ground up. It was also due to the difficulty in accessing its targeted population: sex workers who live in abortion-restricted states who are willing and able to travel, who are comfortable communicating about their abortion needs virtually, and who are willing and able to provide confirmation of sex worker status and identity (needed to arrange travel such as flights and lodging). Given these constraints, SWANS has had to focus a large portion of its efforts towards relationship building in order to reach a broader audience and establish itself as a legitimate practical support program.

I interviewed the current peer navigator team, and engaged in participant observation with SWANS members since the program was founded. Through this, I gained insight into the process it uses to build these relationships. Many of the strategies members used are similar to the ways other programs conduct outreach. For instance, cold emailing other practical support programs and groups that provide funds to receive abortion procedures. Among the groups that SWANS built a relationship with was I Need an A which is an organization that maintains a comprehensive website that provides information to abortion seekers. It has an up-to-date map that shows people their closest clinics, provides information on abortion funds and practical support networks, options for telemedicine and abortion pills by mail, and other information and resources relevant to obtaining an abortion. As an organization, it partners with other abortion groups such as Apiary for Practical Support and the National Network of Abortion Funds. They do not sell pills, offer abortion funding, or provide medical or legal advice; their goal is to be a one stop shop for accurate and vetted abortion information across the country. Figure 4.3 below is a screenshot of their search tool. You first have to add three pieces of information (location, age, date of last period) and for search purposes I put Los Angeles, 27, and “I’m not sure”.

Figure 4.3 I Need an A Website



I need an A also run a content library with information such as what are period pills, where can you access free Plan B, and information on safely using medication abortion pills. When SWANS reached out to I need an A, the person updating their content library was interested in meeting with peer navigators (remotely, because they work out of Texas). After a series of virtual meetings late 2024 and early 2025 with Mimi (the team’s contact at I Need an A) the team decided to create a blog for the content library titled “A Sex Worker’s Guide to Navigating Abortion,” as shown in Figure 4.4 below²¹. As the name suggests, the blog SWANS

²¹ The blog in its entirety can be viewed [here](#).

created with Mimi's support was a guide for sex workers, by sexworkers, on how to navigate abortion procedures. Creating this blog had a three-fold purpose: it built a bridge between I need an A and SWANS that has lasted past the actual blog post creation, it drew attention to SWANS as a program, and it allowed SWANS to consolidate information on abortion support that it could then distribute in other avenues (such as through social media). Through this partnership, SWANS also became listed as an official practical support program on I Need an A's resource map.

Figure 4.4 I Need an A x SWANS Blog Post

A Sex Worker's Guide to Navigating Abortion

Posted February 14, 2025



This is a guide for sex workers from sex workers on how to navigate abortion. We teamed up with the baddies at [SWOPLA who run the Sex Workers' Abortion Navigation Services \(SWANS\)](#) to create this guide that offers a supportive, sex worker-informed perspective on accessing abortion.

[Not a sex worker but want to know more about what sex work is? [Click here](#)]

Abortion is a deeply personal decision—one that can bring up a lot of emotions, questions, and considerations. For sex workers, the reality of navigating abortion care can be even more complex because of ongoing stigma and the criminalization of sex work in many parts of the U.S. **We recognize that every experience is unique; our goal is to provide you with the knowledge and resources you need to make the decisions that are best for you.**

What does abortion access look like right now?

This guide was intentionally crafted by the SWANS team to assist sex workers seeking abortions. As its main support demographic, SWANS prioritizes creating and distributing accurate abortion resources to sex workers. Creating this guide synthesized these efforts in an accessible format that anyone can access. By doing so, SWANS established itself as a reliable source of information for sex worker reproductive care. Creating this content also demonstrated to other practical support and abortion funds programs that SWANS is willing and able to create community-based resources. This provided SWANs with opportunities for additional collaborations, such as SWANS facilitating sex worker-informed abortion training for other practical support programs interested in better serving the sex worker community.

One such training is a Decriminalization 101 Workshop using a reproductive justice lens that SWANS facilitated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) early 2025. This workshop was in collaboration with UCLA's Reproductive Health Interest Group (RHIG) for the school's annual Sex Week, which is a campus-wide initiative seeking to foster conversations about love, relationships and sexual well-being. RHIG is a graduate student group based in the Fielding School of Public Health that discusses reproductive health issues, shares information and engages in service and advocacy projects. SWANS was invited to host a workshop titled, "Decriminalization of Sex Work and Abortion Access". The team facilitated this hour-long workshop to over twenty graduate students and faculty at UCLA, sharing a sex worker informed understanding of the criminalization of reproductive rights and how decriminalization would alleviate harms against the most vulnerable.

Figure 4.5 UCLA RHIG Workshop



Source: UCLA RHIG Instagram

Efforts such as the I Need an A blog post and the workshop at UCLA demonstrate how sex workers are creating and identifying avenues to distribute sex worker informed and vetted information. Sharing this information with both other sex workers and the broader community serves to destigmatize sex work, interrupt people's bias, and provide accurate information about sex work and the people who engage in it. Though these resources *can* be accessed by people who are not sex workers, they are crafted with sex workers in mind with the intention of alleviating violence and increasing safety within the community.

Information sharing as an informal organizing strategy, and public education as a formal one, are demonstrably compatible. The efforts by SWANS highlight how sex workers can create resources for themselves that can then be translated²² to the public in order to advocate for the

²² And sometimes reconfigured or redacted as necessary to protect information that should stay within the community.

community. However, these examples also demonstrate that information sharing as a practice should prioritize distributing accurate information by sex workers for sex workers as this kind of information is less available and critical to creating safety for one another.

Breaking Bread Together: SWer Breakfasts in London

One of the events I was able to attend while conducting fieldwork was Sex Workers Breakfasts in London. This is “a relaxed social community space with free hot food, safer sex supplies, lingerie swap, menstrual products and more – run by sex workers, for sex workers!” It is held every Wednesday from 11am-2pm and is hosted at the London Action Resource Centre (LARC) which is “a collectively run building providing space and resources for people and groups working on self-organised, non-hierarchical projects for radical social change.” The building has a large meeting space, a kitchen, a rooftop garden, a library and free internet. The LARC is known colloquially as a leftist/anarchist space.

Figure 4.6 Sex Worker Breakfasts London Flier



Source: National Ugly Mugs Website, 2025

The airbnb I rented was close to Soho, and I had to get to East London to attend the breakfast. I wanted to be there early, in case the people organizing the event had time to speak

with me before attendees arrived. The building was on the corner in a series of brick buildings on the street. It was immediately identifiable due to the colorful graffiti and murals splashed across the side of the building.

Figure 4.7 London Action Resource Centre



Source: Author, July 2023

To get inside, I had to ring a doorbell for the building to be unlocked. In the entryway was a library with leftist and anarchist produced literature, as well as zines. Walking further into the building led me into a large community space; to the left was a full kitchen with sink, oven, stove top, and fridge, and straight ahead was a space with couches, chairs, and a table covered in “freebies” that include lube, condoms, testing strips, and more. I was the first person to arrive besides the host of that week’s breakfast. The person hosting was a member of SWARM named Polly who was busy preparing food when I arrived. Since she said she did not need any help and there was still 30 minutes left before others were set to get there, I spent some time showing myself around the space.

It was a multi-level building rented out to several different leftist groups. Going up the stairway led to a library. Continuing up the stairway led to a room about half the size of the community area downstairs. There was a table with chairs covered in boxes and bins, and miscellaneous storage items all along the walls. The items on the table were free for breakfast attendees, and mainly included work wear such as lingerie and high heels.

Figure 4.8 SWARM Clothing Bins



Source: Author, July 2023

There was a door branching off from that room that led to a rooftop garden. The garden was shared by everyone who used the building, but Polly shared that she was often the one taking care of the plants. She even used some of the herbs in her cooking.

Figure 4.9 LARC Community Garden



Source: Author, July 2023

A bit after 11am, more people started to come by. There was Gwen, the woman discussed in the previous chapter who had her home raided by the police due to “abetting trafficking” when she let her friend take an incall at her apartment. She was a member of SWARM and also an employee of the European Sex Workers’ Rights Alliance (ESWA). ESWA is a sex worker-led network of more than 100 organizations led by or working with sex workers in countries across Europe and Central Asia. There was also Lara, who was a SWARM member and one of the co-organizers for the breakfasts. All three of these people were white femmes. There were two attendees at this breakfast, Vivian and Donna. Vivian was a white Swedish transwoman who travels from country to country sightseeing and working. Vivian was openly a sex worker and dressed in black fishnets and heels, a full face with lashes, a tight black dress. Donna was a Black woman born and raised in London. She was casually dressed in a t-shirt and pants and had a large backpack with her.

While at the breakfast, I had informal conversations with Vivian and Donna that provided general insight into how sex workers were navigating the legal environment in the UK and how

marginalized workers felt about their safety and rights. They expressed that while there were greater risks involved than in other areas they have worked, but that it was still possible to see clients. At the same time though, they recounted experiences with harassment from both clients and law enforcement and expressed concerns about breaking rules they are not even aware of. They also provided their perspectives on what it was like to be in London compared to their perspective of living and traveling to other areas of the country and to other countries. Since the breakfasts are meant to be an informal community space and Vivian and Donna are attendees, not SWARM organizers, I did not ask them to go through with an official interview. I did hold interviews with Gwen and Lara, which I was able to record and take notes.

My interview with Gwen took place during the breakfast. We went upstairs to where the table with free items was to have a bit of privacy during the interview. I kept this interview largely unstructured because it was early on in my fieldwork and I wanted to hear from her as a key informant due to her experiences working in London and with sex worker organizing. In her “civvie” life,²³ Gwen was a writer and organizer for sex worker rights as a paid worker for ESWA. Despite her heavy involvement in the industry as both a worker and organizer, Gwen initially spoke about her internalized stigma and shame. She had to work through her internalized whorephobia before she felt comfortable being involved in sex worker activism:

I think I started working in about 2010 or so, you know, that was still like...a really big, like period where I wasn't [involved in] activism, it was just sort of work. And I think obviously, I had more shame in those days...because I hadn't found that kind of community yet.

As she continued in sex work, and as she experienced more of the impacts of criminalization, she became more involved in the community. Besides working through her shame, she attributes a

²³ Civvie is short for civilian, which is the word used in the sex work community to refer to someone who is not in the industry, or to someone's “vanilla” job. Vanilla job refers to someone's day job/other forms of work outside of sex work.

big aspect of her growing involvement in the sex worker community and with organizing to her shift in regulatory environments. Gwen began sex work in Australia where “you can work together. It’s sort of safer. The market’s not saturated there, so you don’t feel like you have to, you have to do more here, and sometimes for less money.” She talked about how being in a legalized versus decriminalized environment made her feel like she had to work harder to get clients, and offer more services for less. She was also subject to harassment from her landlord because of her work and had been evicted. From her work with ESWA, she had other stories of incredible violence against workers in the UK from the police. For instance, she mentioned a situation where a known sex worker went to the police for help with a violent partner. During her interaction with them she insisted on her name to the police (rather than being called a nickname like “babe” or “love”), and because of that she was hogtied and beaten.

The experiences Gwen mentioned of stigma and violence from the general public and from police were echoed in my conversations with Lara. She was also at the same breakfast, but because she was busy during that time we coordinated to go to a second location as she had to run some errands after the breakfast. This secondary location was not too far away and was a co-working space where people could work in common spaces or rent more private rooms. Lara and I sat in a common area while I interviewed her, and one of her friends who was also a sex worker from Glasgow came by while we spoke. I also recorded this interview and took notes throughout. Lara also shared feelings of isolation, especially when she took on a civvie job: “for the first two and a half months that I was at Spectra²⁴, I felt so alone because I didn’t have time to come to breakfast and benefit from it....[I was] very distant from my community, there wasn’t anyone else, especially, who understood, like, the challenges.”

²⁴ Spectra is an organization that “delivers supportive, knowledgeable, non-judgemental peer-based services to under-served communities” including advocacy, counselling, outreach, HIV testing and social groups ([link](#)).

Conversations with sex workers on experiences with violence is emotionally taxing both for the person telling about these experiences and for the one listening. But sharing these experiences -- at least with one another -- is an essential aspect of information-sharing that can be life-saving. This process warns fellow workers of potentially dangerous interactions, it builds solidarity over shared experiences, and it breaks the stigma around negative experiences at work. The intent of spaces like the Sex Workers Breakfasts London is to create these informal spaces to have more frank conversations with other sex workers. Many sex workers, especially those in criminalized and legalized environments which legally preclude workers from working together, spend the majority of their time alone. Gwen spoke to this when she stated, “when I first started out it was more of an isolating experience...in London, it’s not possible because you can’t work together with people to be safe...It’s just a lot more hard to find that community”. In a stigmatized job like this where workers are subject to psychological, emotional, and physical tolls -- on top of having to navigate overlapping and contradictory regulatory environments -- being able to speak with others who are navigating similar circumstances can be a harm reduction tactic. As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, relationship-building and information-sharing are two critical informal strategies people can use to reduce state-inflicted harm. The experiences Gwen and Lara share during their interviews highlights the need for these practices. By hosting these breakfasts, they are also engaging in mutual aid; they offer meals and work-clothing exchanges in addition to being able to mingle and talk with other sex workers. Though this event is not traditionally legible to people as political, its existence is nonetheless necessary as part of a robust toolkit to combat stigma and violence.

Sex Workers' Relationship Building

Like information sharing, relationship building is another informal strategy that increases sex workers safety and the longevity of their organizing efforts. Creating information networks requires mutual trust that what is being shared is accurate and confidential. In most cases, establishing that trust requires a relationship with the other party. Relationship building is also a necessary strategy. Drawing on interpersonal networks helps create and sustain organizing efforts. Examples from my fieldwork illustrate how who you know can be as important as what you know. In this section, I discuss two examples of how interpersonal relationships furthered organizers' goals.

Making or Breaking Community-based Efforts

Earlier in this chapter I discussed SWOPLA strolls along the Figueroa Corridor and its efforts to create mutual aid projects specific for street-based workers. While an example of mutual aid, the strolls themselves are only possible due to prior relationship-building efforts by SWOPLA. Professional relationships the board members had enabled them to meet someone working at the LA Department of Public Health (LADPH). This person indicated an interest in supporting SWOPLA's efforts and has been a long-time attendee of general meetings and even in person events since 2023²⁵.

This connection with LADPH has been an indispensable connection for the longevity of the stroll as the majority of stroll items are free donations from LADPH. These supplies consist of condoms, lube, hygiene wipes, testing strips, and other harm reduction items. There are also hand warmers and baby wipes, and sometimes there are mini water bottles and snacks. Each bag also has \$20, and this is the only stroll item taken directly from the SWOPLA budget. It is usually \$400 each time with around 20 bags, with strolls occurring as often as twice a month.

²⁵ General meetings are held online via a secure video conferencing platform (not Zoom) and are open to anyone.

Stroll items were selected in part based on what items are available for donation, and in part based on what workers themselves have indicated they need. For example, the hand warmers were a common ask as California nights, when workers are primarily out on the stroll, can drop to the high 40s or low 50 degrees. This, compounded with people's work outfits which often precludes wearing and carrying warm weather clothes, makes workers susceptible to the cold. Sometimes street-based workers are able to wear fluffy coats, but many forgo this either because they do not want to/are unable to carry them around, they are told not to wear them or because they otherwise do not wish to.

Without SWOPLA members' forged connections, sustaining the strolls would be an expensive and/or impossible endeavor. Having a well-connected board has allowed SWOPLA to make a significant material impact in its community. My fieldwork with sex worker organizers highlights how much of the process of creating and sustaining mutual aid efforts comes down to being in the right place at the right time. Relationship building is intentional and thoughtful work, but it can also come down to luck and circumstance. Playing into individual strengths and networks allows organizers to draw on their rich existing networks in order to find creative ways to meet peoples' needs.

Interpersonal Relationships and Organizing

In the previous chapter on formal organizing strategies, I discussed how the decriminalization of sex work in Australia allowed sex workers to distance themselves from some of the stigma associated with sex work. The lack of threat of incarceration for engaging in sex work, or for allegations of human trafficking, meant that sex workers could pursue addressing other issues they were experiencing. My fieldwork with Australian sex workers and organizers was the least intensive. As such, much of my analysis of their strategies rely on their

online presence and secondary reports. However, I was able to connect with Scarlet Alliance to conduct virtual interviews with sex workers. In addition to interviewing sex workers I was put in contact with through Scarlet Alliance, I conducted limited amounts of participant observation of public virtual and hybrid Australia-based events. The ones I could sit in were public events such as conferences and talks where sex workers were invited speakers. In order to find participants, I reached out to Scarlet Alliance. Among the people I interviewed was the Executive Director of Scarlet Alliance, Mish Pony. From my interviews with workers and my observations, I observed a much higher level of formalization amongst Australian sex worker organizers than exhibited by US and UK workers. Members have an office building and are expected to show up in person to work, they are formally employed and receive employee benefits, and they have strict organizational structure and bylaws they adhere to. This is attributable to the regulatory system in Australia, wherein decriminalization both allows and requires workers to be more formalized. Though workers do not face criminal penalties for engaging in sex work, they are still subject to potential fines and discrimination for their choice of work. Sex workers can be fined for public solicitation, which incurs fines up to \$880 and/or imprisonment for three months. They can also be fined or penalized for advertising their services, for exploitation, for unlicensed brothels, among other potential charges. Combatting this requires workers to operate “above the board” and engage in conventional political strategies. I describe some of these strategies in my formal organizing chapter, such as political advocacy and education. For instance, the CEO of Scarlet Alliance, Jules Kim, spoke at the United Nations Human Rights Council for their Universal Periodic Review Panel on HIV, Decriminalization and Human Rights in Geneva in 2019. The ability to engage in “high-level” politics can at least be partially attributed to their formalization, which begets greater political legitimacy.

Due to the regulatory environment in Australia and the fact that Australia has a national sex-worker led organization that has legitimacy at the global, national, and local level, many of the strategies they use in their organizing work are well institutionalized as opposed to the more ad hoc organization of sex worker advocacy groups in LA and London. Here, formal refers to the fact that there are written standard operating procedures that staff are accountable to. While organizers at the local level have more room to maneuver, how the national body represents itself is more rigid. In order to gain more insight into how sex workers in Australia are engaging in the informal strategies I identify -- mutual aid, information-sharing, and relationship building -- I asked participants 1. What are the most pressing issues sex workers experience? and 2. What are the best strategies to address these issues?

There were many issues Australian sex workers mentioned that echo what those in criminalized and legalized environments experience. For instance, the conflation with sex trafficking and modern slavery, lack of protections for migrant sex workers, and the regulation of online spaces. Prior to speaking with workers I assumed, based on the research I have read which recommends decriminalization as the ideal model for sex work regulation, that the decriminalization of sex work would alleviate many of these issues. However, in my conversations with Executive Director Mish Pony, they shared that the regulatory environment in Australia is much more varied than people assume. Across the country, as we have seen, it ranges from criminalization, to partial criminalization, to state licensing (a form of legalization), and then decriminalization. Even with decriminalization, however, Mish mentioned in our interview that it is more akin to the Nordic Model than full decriminalization because migrant sex workers and street-based sex workers still experienced police harassment and arrest

for deemed infractions. Mish encouraged me to not view decriminalization as some utopia, but rather a first step towards greater autonomy and rights for sex workers.

The way sex workers in Australia understand the deficits of decriminalization is through the conversations they have had with one another about their experiences at work. The formalization of sex work organizing makes it much easier to share this kind of information, because there is a stable setting -- a workplace -- that puts sex workers who would otherwise not know one another in proximity to each other. In this way, information-sharing still plays a significant role in how sex workers organize in Australia. It also provides key insight into how sex workers' regulatory liminality is impacted even in a decriminalized context. This is echoed in one of the most pressing issues for workers in Australia being citizenship status-based discrimination. This discrimination is compounded for sex workers who still experience social stigma even when legal repercussions are alleviated, making it more difficult for migrant workers to access social welfare, to exit the industry if they desire to, and to otherwise move freely within and outside the country without significant surveillance.

Additionally, Mish's experience getting their current position with Scarlet Alliance is due to the relationships they had built with other sex workers. During our interview, Mish mentioned that they began sex work during university. They happened to be living with someone who did sex work at the time who was an administrative officer for Scarlet Alliance. This connection to the organization through their roommate was helpful to Mish getting involved with sex worker organizing, because their roommate started bringing them to events and introducing them to other people working there. When a position became available, Mish quickly jumped on the opportunity. This prior connection helped them gain access to a more formal position in the organization. Mish mentions that this then allowed them to become more and more involved in

“different ways of organizing and supporting the organization and... {the people they met} just happened to be also lots of {their} friends”.

My conversations with sex workers in Australia, and secondary sources on sex worker organizers in the country, indicate that they utilize the same types of informal organizing strategies that workers in the US and UK do: mutual aid, information sharing, and relationship building. Workers in the country also report that the most marginalized workers among them -- such as BIPOC, migrants, and transgender workers -- still experience the highest levels of precarity and risk as they do in other regulatory environments. The main point of departure between sex workers' experiences in a decriminalized environment versus criminalized or partially criminalized (legalized) seems to be how much leverage their formal organizing strategies have at the national and global levels. Though I cannot say this conclusively since my field work was less extensive, it seems that workers who are involved in organizing tend to do so in more formal ways (through a legally recognized entity, versus an informal collective) and thus seem to rely less on informal strategies to combat violence and stigma. It may also be the case that more marginalized workers rely more on these informal strategies than workers who are able to be formally employed by organizations such as Scarlet Alliance.

Regulatory Liminality and Informal Strategies: Organizing as a (Luxurious?) Necessity

My fieldwork in the US, UK, and Australia highlight the critical importance of informal organizing strategies in addition to more formal ones. Mutual aid is the cornerstone of much of these informal efforts, and is supported and sustained by information sharing and relationship building. Regardless of the regulatory environment sex workers are operating in, there are censorship, trafficking and public health regulations that impact their ability to engage in sex work safely. This, combined with the social stigma they experience, shapes their regulatory

liminality. Sex workers' regulatory liminality precludes them from engaging in certain political practices, but it also encourages them to engage in others. Informal organizing strategies are particularly useful for navigating their regulatory liminality because it allows them to draw upon community-led alternatives. Rather than be subject to state neglect and violence, sex workers engage in mutual aid, information-sharing, and relationship-building to create alternative methods of safety.

In Chapter 3, I discuss how sex workers' experiences using formal organizing strategies vary due to regulatory liminality. Sex workers in all regulatory environments draw on political advocacy and public education. However, the stakes in a criminalized environment are arguably higher than those in a decriminalized environment. These differences in risk impact who can more easily participate in organizing. In Chapter 4, I draw on the informal organizing strategies sex workers use. Since these are community oriented rather than state oriented, there are often greater opportunities for sex workers to participate even if they experience higher levels of regulatory liminality. While risk is always present, these strategies help sex workers mitigate potential risk factors by warning one another of dangerous clients or of "hot" areas where police are especially active.

Across all three regulatory environments, sex workers utilize these informal strategies. Discourses around sex work have less impact on these practices because they are not state-oriented. There are more similarities than differences in how sex worker organizers draw on these informal practices. Mutual aid, information sharing and relationship building are the cornerstone of community care amongst sex workers. These strategies afford sex workers greater opportunity to participate in political life because they are less dependent on the regulatory environment and the discourses mediating sex work regulation. They also have significant

potential to improve the material conditions sex workers operate more immediately than formal strategies do. These factors make them essential strategies in sex workers' fight for greater rights and safety.

CHAPTER 5: THE STAKES OF REGULATORY LIMINALITY

This dissertation centers on the political practices of sex workers. From brothel raids to police profiling, sex workers' positions vis a vis the state are predicated on precarity. Conventional understandings of this relationship recommend decriminalization of sex work as a method to ameliorate state violence. Decriminalization does improve sex workers' safety and access to rights, and it is the gold standard sex workers advocate for states to adopt. However, even in a decriminalized environment, sex workers experience violence. What explains this persistent relationship; one in which the state continues to pursue carceral measures regardless of legal and social changes? I argue that regulatory liminality offers a lens through which to understand sex workers' experiences of violence within the state, and also a way to demonstrate that sex workers are not merely passive recipients of state violence.

Regulatory liminality contends that sex workers are subject to contradictory and overlapping regulations, and the impact of these contradictions are mediated by a workers' identities, and by anti-trafficking discourses' impact on inter/sub/national policies. Some workers are able to negotiate their precarity by virtue of their privileged identities and/or by working in a decriminalized environment-- others do not have the ability to do so. In all cases, sex workers experience violence, stigma, and precarity. Regulatory liminality also constrains who is able to participate in public life. Sex workers who are more privileged can take up organizing with less risk. Those who are BIPOC, trans, queer, disabled, migrants, and members of other targeted communities can and do organize, but with much greater risk than their white, cis, straight, able-bodied counterparts. In all instances where sex workers are engaged in organizing work, I argue their strategies of resistance and survival are practices of harm reduction. I discuss how they enact this framework below. Yet, due to regulatory liminality and the differences in risk sex

workers experience, organizing, a political necessity, can also be a luxury afforded only to a few. I discuss how regulatory liminality and hierarchies of power condition this luxury and the costs for those who engage in organizing in spite of this. Finally, I conclude by demonstrating that the political practices of sex workers move beyond the state by engaging in abolitionist praxis. Sex workers are not merely seeking to be incorporated into existing structures of power, but to reconfigure what it means to live and be in the world.

Organizing as Harm Reduction

Interviews with sex workers reveal that one of the unifying experiences within the community is violence, which can be interpersonal and/or state-inflicted. The precarity sex workers experience is global; even in decriminalized regulatory environments, sex workers experience social exclusion, police harassment and client-based harm. Political participation offers sex workers an avenue to alter their social and material conditions. Through political mobilization, sex workers are both petitioning the state for their rights, and seeking to create systems of care that eschew state-reliance. In both instances, the political work they are performing are forms of harm reduction.

Harm reduction is both a movement, and an alternative way of social interaction (Maree Brown, 2022). Author and activist Adrienne Maree Brown describes the principles of harm reduction as accepting what is, embracing complexity, acknowledging systems of power, and remembering that no one is disposable (Maree Brown, 2022). Many people define it through the practice of doing it: going with a friend to a doctor to advocate on their behalf, giving someone a ride when they have no other method of transport, lending an ear to a friend experiencing intimate partner violence (Hassan, 2023). In *Saving Our Own Lives*, an edited volume by Shira Hassan, Tourmaline writes, “sex work and our efforts to keep one another safe are inextricably

linked” (Hassan, 2023). They discuss Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera’s Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR). In the case of STAR, sex work both fueled the need for harm reduction practices, and funded their ability to practice it for other vulnerable trans women. Rather than begin from a punitive framework, harm reduction is predicated on principles of autonomy and self-determination. It is a care-based approach that seeks to share tools of survival, and trusting others to do what is best for them with those tools. As a framework of survival, harm reduction is rooted in the practices of Black and brown people, and queer and trans folks, and sex workers (Hassan, 2022).

Sex workers have always been engaged in harm reduction, because they have always been exposed to violence. Hassan (2022) describes harm reduction as a liberatory strategy developed by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) who were sex workers, queer, transgender, people with disabilities, and street-based people. The common experience for these groups of people is the experience of structural violence from forces such as institutional racism, settler colonialism, ableism, capitalism, misogyny, fatphobia, and transphobia. The goal of harm reduction is to identify methods to survive, thrive, and build power as a community. The range of methods to meet this goal are virtually limitless as people's needs and desires shift overtime, and the ways they seek to meet them similarly shift. In this dissertation, I have centered my analysis of sex workers' political practices on the forms of harm reduction my participants share that they have utilized and/or have had significant impact on their lives. These include mutual aid, information sharing and relationship building.

As we have seen, mutual aid is a well documented method for marginalized communities to circumvent state oversight while providing for each other's needs, and sex workers are no exception to this practice (Spade, 2020). Financial redistribution is a form of reciprocal care that

seeks to mitigate state harm in both the short term and long term. During my interviews, people shared examples from their own lives. Some examples include paying a friend's rent for a while to help them get out of a domestic violence situation, stealing food from large corporations to feed their friends, providing loans in order to help offset the costs of legal proceedings, and donating lingerie to colleagues unable to afford new work outfits. More than 75% of participants indicated they had engaged in, or been the recipient of, some form of mutual aid.

In addition to financial support, mutual aid also encompasses emotional support. Many sex workers interviewed participate in some kind of formal or informal sex worker-only space to talk about industry and non-industry related concerns. These spaces can take on various forms and may be in person or virtual. One participant, Pria, joined a sex worker self-defense peer group. This group was created by community, for community, and was oriented around providing tangible self-defense skills for workers to use in their professional and personal life. This group also offered Pria with a space of emotional support: “you know, it’s so hard, I think, when you’re a sex worker for other people who are not sex workers to understand many aspects of not just our jobs, but also our lives...because we’re sex workers, we may have those issues that only other sex workers would really understand.” Pria’s sentiment was shared across interviews, with 35% of participants explicitly referring to the nature of sex work as something difficult, or virtually impossible, to share accurately with non-sex workers. The ability to lean on one another for both financial and emotional support creates a sense of kinship that transcends what is commonly seen amongst coworkers. The liminal status of sex work - on social and legal margins - makes many believe that lived experience is required in order to understand the hardships and benefits.

There are also more formalized forms of mutual aid that enact reciprocal care. An example of this is SWOPLA’s Sex Worker Abortion Navigation Services (SWANS) program. In

October 2023, SWOPLA received a \$100,000 grant to create a peer-led practical support program that provides financial and administrative assistance to current and former sex workers. This program emerged in the aftermath of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, which led many states' "trigger laws" to severely redact, or virtually eliminate, medical abortion services for people. Because California is a safe-haven for abortion-seekers, SWOPLA's program provides financial and emotional support to current and former sex workers so they can travel to California for their procedures. As with other policies, the lack of access to abortion services most severely impacted those who were already marginalized. People who do not have the economic means to easily travel outside of the state, who lack state identification for such travel, or who are unable to access the services that are near to them due to fear of arrest. Sex workers have long reported having a contentious relationship with medical professionals. This is heightened for gender non-conforming sex workers, who are doubly stigmatized for their gender expression and their occupation (Fitzgerald et al., 2015; Capous-Desyllas and Loy, 2020). Being able to find supportive care was difficult prior to the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, but became almost impossible in states criminalizing reproductive services. SWANS was created with this in mind, in order to support sex workers who may not be able to access local care or who may not have the economic means to do so.

There is nothing new about recognizing the systemic oppression sex workers face. Yet, it is imbued in the strategic fabric of the organizations discussed here and featured prominently within the dialogues I held with individual members. The stigma and exclusion sex workers face day-to-day has, for the most part, encouraged them to create a stronger basis of solidarity with others despite the very different relationalities people in the industry occupy. These

conversations highlight the imperative sex workers feel to recognize not only their own socio-economic conditions, but the differential impacts on their colleagues:

It's an emergent movement. It's a volatile movement, both internally and then externally, with like the reactions that are provoked and it's a lot of different kinds of people doing a lot of different kinds of things. (Kaytlin).

Kaytlin, director of a US-based media based organization seeking decriminalization and reduced stigma around sex work, indicates how different her colleagues can be from her while discussing the sex movement for greater rights more generally. Common within my conversations were references to the fact that sex workers are not monolithic; each came to the work for different reasons, from their own contexts, and navigates the world distinctly. This recognition of situated needs does not mean organizing sex workers is a fruitless task. Rather, workers indicated that it is precisely because of this that mobilizing together is necessary:

And also we can all sort of like, stand together against the criminalization of sex work, because, like arresting people for engaging in this is wrong and bad and leads to bad outcomes...No one needs the same things. Nobody likes the same kind of music. Some people like to smoke. Some people are allergic to smoke. (Leah)

Even without their employing the academic language of intersectionality, it is clear that sex workers recognize that it is not, and has never been, “just” a labor issue. Workers have different political stances or viewpoints within the broader movement for greater rights; yet their shared purpose of achieving rights-based recognition for their labor pushes them to advocate their needs in different political and social spheres. Citizenship status, access to healthcare and welfare resources, mass incarceration, and other social issues necessarily impact a sex worker's ability to do her job:

Sex workers have so much to say about negotiated consent, reproductive justice, sexual exploitation, drug abuse, mental

health, right? And we can't share what we know, because we can't talk about our lived experience because of this stigma. (MiMi)

This connection to broader social issues is threaded throughout the conversations I discuss here. Sex workers recognize the operations of the whorearchy even in seemingly “unrelated” social spheres. The stigma they face invisibilizes not only their labor, but the very real contributions they make to political discourse and to petitions for human rights. The ways their lives are conditioned by their regulatory liminality influences how they navigate personally and as a collective. Their lack of protections and safety guaranteed by the state is an indictment of global human rights efforts that have failed to advocate for them. This has led to sex workers seeking alternative arrangements to have their needs met, while still pushing to have their presence legitimized. The incoherence and messiness that emerges from these goals can lead to burnout, and can cause organizing efforts to stall.

Figuring out sustainable ways to maintain organizing efforts is an issue for any marginalized community, as many experience burn-out from continuous state violence. The matrix of informality and criminality within sex work presents its own unique challenges, as workers are often excluded from state services while being explicitly targeted by legislation. Some workers are more or less privileged as well, which impacts how care is given and received. Since care is necessary to mitigate state harm, sex workers have had to create sustainable ways to do so. For some, the goal of organizing which aims to create a better, more liberatory world provides the impetus to maintain sustainability:

Primary motivations are just like loving us, like as sex workers like my love for us, and my like desire for like liberation and safety for us, and like decriminalization, and just like respect and safe spaces for us, you know. And like yeah, like, and just like for everyone, right, even not sex workers like for anybody who fucking who's a drug user and who is like stigmatized, like anybody who's like marginalized or stigmatized just for their choices or their identity.

Right? Because I think that's the overlapping thing right? That we all need safe spaces and like liberation from this horrible government and country. (Essence)

Essence speaks about the reasons they continue to engage and build community with other sex workers. It can be difficult to create networks with one another, even without laws which criminalize sex workers assisting one another. Despite this difficulty, the hope inspired by caring itself creates the conditions to continue. The desire to care for each other stems from the acknowledgement that current conditions are hostile to the safety and thriving of sex workers. In this way, care is both a survival tactic and the precondition for transforming society.

Sometimes, care acts are oriented towards community conditions broadly, and sometimes it is rooted in the specific needs of loved ones:

I've been able to plug in, you know, in different ways, and usually like at the beck and call of like, you know, my friends, and or you know who are also like sex worker organizers. So I feel like that's usually what ends up happening is that I'm just kind of like answering a call or a need that is expressed by like someone who I have a relationship with and care about. You know. So that's often how I ended up like getting involved. And I think that you know, usually it's kind of just like addressing something that either is like an urgent need, or like a topic that we want to explore more deeply, you know. (Rio)

Rio describes how she prioritizes calls for need within her community. By relying on existing relationships of care, Rio is able to tap into her community when needed without having to feel constantly plugged in and drained. Sex workers build sustainable care practices by investing in their relationships with one another. The lack of state protections, and sometimes the overt violence inflicted by the state, has required sex workers to build their own networks of support. Rio discusses how these networks build momentum and emphasizes how caring for one another ensures mutual survival. Knowing that the care you give will be returned in the future can keep people rooted in the act.

In this section, I demonstrate how the organizing practices of sex workers are rooted in principles of harm reduction, and are themselves strategies of survival. I label these harm reduction practices as informal organizing strategies in this dissertation to highlight their political importance. While their significance as a survival strategy has been established by activists and scholars (Spade, 2020), the impact these practices have on fomenting social change has not been explicitly drawn out. Through taking care of one another, sex workers are also actively creating a better world for all people.

Organizing as Luxury

Though sex worker organizing strategies are practices of harm reduction that ameliorate state and interpersonal violence, there are still structural factors impacting how these practices are enacted, and by whom. Informal organizing is often carried out and maintained by the most vulnerable community members, including BIPOC, queer and trans people, and disabled people. The stakes of these strategies are more deeply felt by these communities, who often must engage in these practices in order to survive violence. At the same time, organizing work often includes barriers to participation, including inequitable and uncompensated labor. Many sex workers are selling sex out of survival: to pay bills, to take care of dependents, and afford basic necessities. Additionally, many sex workers are disabled or have other chronic conditions (Jones, 2022a; Jones, 2022b).

Because of such circumstances, the ability to participate in political life is not accessible to all sex workers. There is a practical component to organizing that makes it difficult to engage in. For instance, organizing often includes a significant amount of meetings in order to participate in group consensus-making. For more formalized organizations where there are paid staff, a physical building, and “working hours,” these meetings will take place during the day.

For sex workers who care for dependents or have a vanilla job, they would be unable to attend. More ad hoc organizations may have the majority of meetings in the evening to accommodate vanilla work schedules, but the evening is the most lucrative time of day for street-based sex workers. In the case of the sex worker organizations considered in this dissertation, there is an overall dearth of street-based full service sex workers involved. The limitations of this study make it difficult to assess other potential reasons for the lack of involvement by street-based sex workers in organizing, but regulatory liminality provides one such explanation: these sex workers experience greater precarity, and participating presents too great a risk. This explanation is supported by the fact that street-based sex workers are often BIPOC and/or transgender (Fuentes et. al., 2025).

Regulatory liminality also makes it evident that hierarchies of power impact organizing spaces. The intersectional approach utilized in this dissertation makes apparent how organizing is a luxury that some are unwilling, or unable to afford. For those who do choose to be politically active, the level of precarity and risk is not equitably spread. This is due in part to the effects of regulatory liminality. Because it is mediated by people's identities, the whorearchy, and the regulatory environment, regulatory liminality varies person to person. The participants I interviewed who were white, cisgender, middle class women with a graduate degree had an overall easier time navigating their regulatory liminality than the trans people of color I interviewed. This was most evident in terms of organizational structure and representation in legalized and decriminalized environments, where the majority of people involved in organizing were white, cisgender, middle class people with a post-secondary degree or higher. The whorearchy functions due to power asymmetries, societal bias, and stigma against sex workers. These factors lead to the internalization of stigma and inter-group policing, which often

legitimizes divisions. Among interview participants, 16 specifically referenced the favorable treatment sex workers who are White, cisgender, dominas, cam models, and otherwise privileged receive compared with BIPOC and full service sex workers. Many sex workers are able to specifically reference the ways privilege and access co-mingle to create tensions within sex worker-led spaces:

the hierarchy is alive and well...we have this disconnect, and we often like are afraid to address it, like to to address that like. Maybe actually, some of us are incredibly more privileged and like, actually have become more accepted by society (Jewels)

Jewels' statement recognizes how the distribution of systemic power- such as white supremacy, patriarchy, and classism- combined with the type of sex work someone engages in, impacts their levels of individual privilege. While sex work is considered “the oldest profession,” the advent of the internet has allowed the proliferation of new forms of sex work. Sex workers who are able to more easily occupy remote industry positions tend to be those who already had greater privilege and ability (Blewett et al., 2022; Jones, 2022a; Jones, 2022b). This is because camming and other no/low-contact sex work often requires single-family housing and/or significant privacy, stable wifi, filming equipment, and other items which present barriers to entry.

The hierarchization of sex workers along a spectrum of those who perform no/low contact work to those who do full-service is a product of the stigmatization and criminalization of sex work. Despite its external origins, these divisions can become calcified internally:

And I think that hierarchy is like actually becoming more like embedded, which is so fascinating as like society starts to embrace different types of sexualized work but still shuns like the very root and origin of like being a whore...So I really, I really do think one of the biggest like divides is kind of just the way that the hierarchy is becoming more and more pronounced as society shifts and changes, and people take advantage of the privileges that they're now earning. (Jewels)

On the one hand, there has been a marked cultural shift around sex work as people recognize it as a viable economic strategy. This shift has been mirrored by legal codification, such as unionization at strip clubs and tax services for cam models. On the other hand, these shifts have not always led to more positive outcomes for sex workers. As some aspects of the industry become more public and commonplace, others are solidified as deviant. The stratification of the whorearchy becomes more rigid and those at the bottom become less able to exist in public life. The scarcity mindset this invokes makes building community within sex worker spaces especially difficult, “and then there's obviously also just like infighting like among sex workers, too [. . .] there's so much hostility in that space, and you know, it's messy (Nia).”

Jewels and Nia’s discussion of the whorearchy and how this impacts the ability of sex workers to care for one another is important for several reasons. First, it underscores that the whorearchy remains an unfortunate reality for sex workers; it mediates their experiences with the law, with the public, and with each other. Secondly, it makes it clear that many sex workers are able to name and recognize the patterns and behaviors that are upholding the whorearchy. Recognizing how and when it operates provides an avenue for people to challenge and confront it.

Many sex worker organizers and allies are doing this important work to challenge and disrupt harmful narratives (Yiu et al., 2023; SWOPLA, 2023). These include efforts to destigmatize and normalize sex work through the creation of counter-narratives, as well as legislative advocacy, mutual aid, and other forms of support. SWOPLA has played an integral role in interrupting the whorearchies machinations. In terms of their organizational structure, many of those on its board have been or are currently full service sex workers, and occupy other marginalized identities such as being BIPOC, queer and transgender (Nadal et al., 2014; Hoston,

2018). They've also been extremely active in promoting greater rights and protections for street-based full service sex workers.

While these are grassroots movements interested in economic, social, and legal improvements in the status of sex workers, they are, like any organization, sustained by people's efforts. The last few years has presented a physical and psychological drain on many, sex workers included. Mental health, while slightly more destigmatized than sex work, continues to impact the capacity of organizations- especially those already experiencing legal and financial strain. In terms of organizational longevity, it is easier and more feasible to focus on immediate issues rather than bridge movements for a long-haul fight.

Polly, the UK organizer and online sex worker in the UK, alluded to the difficulties in sustaining advocacy efforts;

People think it's a large operation-we have people email us from all over the UK asking why we aren't helping them. But really, we [the organizers] are all located in London so that is where our focus is. And it sucks but we are all at capacity and do what we can manage.

Despite the constraints they face, sex workers are able to materially change people's lives. In terms of reaching wider audiences, decriminalization and the active provision of rights to sex workers would increase the positive social impact organizers have. There are funding sources for sex work advocacy, but they are much more few and far between than in other circles.

Additionally, even when you find funding it can be exhausting to apply for grants. Many groups rely on donations to sustain themselves in the interim. Funding is a particularly tricky roadblock on the way to coalition-building. Due to funding issues, and due to the psychological strain of this industry and the general strain of being a person out in the world, it can be difficult to continue this work. Re-engaging with what brought someone to sex worker organizing to begin

with- be it their love for the people they are organizing with, the fulfillment they get from this work, their dissatisfaction with society, or any number of other reasons- is a necessary practice to remain committed that many people I communicated with expressed.

Another concern participants mention during interviews is the distinct nature of sex work compared with other industries and forms of employment. While there is an established recognition of the various relationalities amongst and between sex workers that shapes their experience with whorephobia, there is still a strong belief that this industry is distinct from others. As Kaytlin mentions, “yeah, people don't think the oldest profession is important or foundational, even though it's older than money and everywhere.”

There have been prior efforts by researchers and organizers to link the plight of sex workers to that of other exploited workers. Domestic and care work, while distinct in its own right, has been equivocated due to a similar undervaluation, to drawing similar groups of people (womxn, migrant workers, low income earners and/or historically marginalized groups) and to its often illicit nature. While it is true issues affecting sex workers also affect other types of workers, there is a resistance to mobilizing together. Many fear that collapsing the concerns of sex workers with larger labor movements could dilute their needs and push them to the sidelines. This is a valid fear considering the persistent exclusion of sex workers from other rights-based movements that has occurred throughout history. But, it is also due to the unique stigma sex workers experience- whorephobia does not affect domestic or care workers as it does sex workers. On the topic of cross-coalition resource-building, a member of a US-based organization stated:

I think it's important for me to recognize that, like I am an individual in a multi-generational movement, and I can do what I can do, and my best gifts are, or like the things that I am good at, and that I want to do are gifts to the movement and things that feel

yucky, are often counterproductive, and to like sort of trust that voice, and so like I spent a lot of time trying to force coalitions that I like thought made sense in my head that we're not meant to be.
(Cia)

Cia recognizes the legacy of sex worker organizers predating their efforts. There is the sentiment that she, like others within the movement, have particular strengths to offer. Putting energy into what they are good at, rather than trying to appeal to outsiders or to movements that may not necessarily have the best interests of sex workers at heart will not lead to the results many organizers are looking for. Similarly, another member expressed: “ I think important for sex workers, [to recognize] we're just never gonna put ourselves on like a bunch of organized lists like we're not all going to get along.” The particularity of their labor, the ensuing social stigma, and their continual sidelining from other movements has created barriers for such mobilization. Instead, many sex workers and organizers prefer to prioritize the situated needs of their own communities rather than potentially weaken their movement.

In the criminalized case study of the US, the majority of organizers were BIPOC, queer and trans, and disabled or with chronic illnesses. Regulatory liminality also serves to explain this, though, when considering organizing as both harm reduction and luxury. Since the most marginalized have paved the way for harm reduction practices, it makes sense that they would seek to organize together. Additionally, criminalization requires sex workers to rely on one another by virtue of being explicitly targeted by the state. This can explain why less systematically privileged people are involved in organizing in this context. At the same time, the people involved are also more privileged by virtue of their access to social capital. In the criminalized case study, all organizers to the authors recollection had post-secondary degrees, and many had graduate degrees. While this is representative of the sex workers I interviewed for

this project, it highlights how some level of privilege seems to be a prerequisite for being active in organizing spaces.

I have argued that while organizing can be life-saving for sex workers, there are significant barriers that prevent some from engaging in the political practices described in this dissertation. Some sex workers take on the majority of organizing work due to their ability to more easily negotiate the precarity they experience. On the other hand, others engage in organizing despite their precarity. Regulatory liminality as a concept aids in illuminating the kinds of considerations sex workers must make when engaging in public life. Sex worker organizers are often publicly disclosing their status as sex workers when they are advocating for greater rights and protections. This opens them up to greater surveillance and potential for violence. Additionally, organizing work often means taking on an inequitable and uncompensated amount of labor. Sex workers who have less systemic privilege will find it more difficult to navigate their regulatory liminality. This means being able to reconcile the precarity they experience based on their identities, the regulatory environment they operate in, and the discourses around sex which increase the stigma and precarity they experience. In this way, sex workers' political practices are both a form of harm reduction, and a luxury.

Organizing as Abolition

During the feminist “sex wars,” sex worker organizing centered on petitioning the state for greater rights and for the legalization of sex work. The Nordic Model was heralded as a way to reconcile the moral outrage about sex work with sex workers own outrage over abuse from law enforcement. Once instituted, however, sex workers did not experience the anticipated effects. Though sex work was no longer illegal, they were still subject to police profiling and other forms of state violence. The disillusionment this created led sex workers to reconsider both

what the goals of organizing should be, and what kind of system they hoped to bring into fruition. The organizing practices I describe in this dissertation-- from political advocacy, public education, mutual aid, information sharing and relationship building-- are the results of sex workers grappling with the failures of the state. While there are limitations to these political practices (e.g. persistent inequalities limiting who can participate with more or less risk), I argue these strategies are rooted in anticarceral principles. Sex workers' organizing strategies are abolitionist strategies.

Abolition is a praxis rooted in “people’s power; love, healing, and transformative justice; Black liberation; internationalism; anti-imperialism; dismantling structures; and practice, practice, practice” (Cullors, 2019). I have already discussed how sex workers are working towards dismantling and disrupting power structures and practices of care rooted in love for one another. Many of the sex workers I interviewed mentioned that they started organizing because their friends were organizing already, or because people in their communities were experiencing police harassment, facing eviction, and otherwise facing precarious conditions. One of my participants mentioned that even though they do not identify themselves as an organizer, they are involved in a sex worker organization because they love the people who are doing that work: “I just love to be around Lucy and the crew. I feel like they get me like those are my people. I just feel so comfortable, so anything that they want to do I want to tag along.”

My interviews and observations also demonstrate sex workers commitment to a global anti-imperial movement. An example comes from my interview with Maps, in which he stated:

I’m native. And the building block of colonization is like the sexual exploitation and coercion of like bodies, black and brown bodies. And so like it is an exchange that has been like happening for a long time, and there’s reasons I get specific clients type shit like they want, they’re on some like cowboys and Indians shit...just like visceral, like tangible effects of colonization.

The kinds of power relations Maps spoke to in our interview demonstrated the direct interpersonal impacts of colonialism and empire. This impact in turn emphasized to him the need to take back power and find ways to survive that both took advantage of the power hierarchies instilled from this relationship, while also striving toward an anti-colonial, anti-imperial future. Additionally, sex worker organizers in the UK being attentive to the violence migrant sex workers experience due to the legacies of colonialism also demonstrates a more internationalized, global understanding of the sex worker movement that embodies abolitionist praxis.

Sex workers also are constantly adapting based on what works and what does not. This demonstrates what Cullors (2019) refers to as the practice of abolition. Sex worker organizers are constantly having to adjust the issue areas they focus on and the strategies they use to do so based on the kinds of results they are achieving. The example in chapter 3 of SB233 versus SB257 demonstrates an instance in which sex workers renegotiated their organizing efforts in order to achieve safer conditions. While initially supportive of the bill, in practice it turned out to not be an effective measure for sex workers because it did not consider the daily experiences of street-based sex workers who were interacting with police frequently. So, sex worker organizers shifted efforts to decriminalize loitering to better serve the community's needs. Deer, a nonbinary participant I interviewed, discussed the importance of practice in organizing work, stating, "it's kind of like a delicate balance between like long term building and growth then also, like short term kind of reacting to the horribleness of the state. And so sometimes it's like an uneven balance but we really try to."

While there is a significant overlap between the strategies sex workers engage in an abolitionist praxis, it is not unanimous. Sex workers experience material harm from the state, but

some still seek greater incorporation into this system. Part of abolitionism asks people to fight the state, not make it stronger. In each of my field sites, the sex worker organizers in this study receive some level of state financial assistance. SWOPLA received a grant from the California government to create an abortion support program; the ECP operates out of a physical location reliant on state funding; the Scarlet Alliance receives state funding for its sexual health programs. Through using these government provided provisions, there is some level of legitimizing the work of the state. However, another core abolitionist principle is to experiment in order to find transformative justice alternatives-- alternative relationships to one another that seek to repair damage, to prioritize community-based responses over state-led ones, and to be accountable to the harm we cause one another. While these organizations receive money from the state, they then use it in order to create supportive systems that allow them to rely on one another to address harm.

In the case of SWOPLA's Sex Worker Abortion Navigation Services (SWANS) program, the grants it received allowed organizers to envision a network of care in which sex workers provided each other the support needed to make difficult reproductive choices. It provided the opportunity for sex workers to receive training, so that they could take that training and create their own programs to respond to community needs. For SWARM's organizers, their emphasis on mutual aid and material redistribution was a way to skirt the state while providing for each others' needs. Also for Scarlet Alliance which is the most institutionalized organization in this dissertation, they are constantly negotiating the boundaries of the state by redirecting state funds towards sex workers and towards community-based efforts. By identifying ways to challenge the very system they are operating with, they are still engaged in the practice of dismantling structures of power exercised over sex workers.

For marginalized people, the state can and will cause harm. And rather than passively accept that, sex workers work to solve problems so they do not have to rely on the police or the state. They seek to reduce violence, to survive it. Abolition offers sex workers a framework within which to continue to enact the survival strategies they are already experts at, to expand the bounds of their harm reduction efforts, to dismantle inequitable power structures, and to envision a world led by transformative justice. Though sex workers are often sidelined, ignored, or outright targeted, they are nonetheless political actors enacting social transformation. Sex workers' strategies are abolitionist strategies, and they are challenging the boundaries of politics through their refusal to conform to victim/criminal binaries. Their organizing strategies are messy, and sometimes reinforce the harm they seek to ameliorate. And their organizing strategies are necessary, saving one another, and saving us from the ever-growing threat of state violence.

CONCLUSION

Sex workers' formal and informal organizing strategies combat employment and institutional-based precarity. They utilize formal strategies to destigmatize sex work, extend existing labor protections, decriminalize sex work, and to repeal other laws that increase the difficulty of safely working. Sex workers also engage in informal strategies to protect one another and meet their basic needs. While formal methods of engaging in political participation, such as political advocacy and public education, are legible as political practices, informal methods often remain ignored. Social movement literature has expanded on how organizers engage in these activities by focusing on mutual aid and internal organizing dynamics. This literature indicates the importance of intersectional organizing for successful movements. This research builds upon this work by highlighting how precarity impacts people's ability to organize across racial lines, as well as other hierarchies of power.

This dissertation not only contributes to the study of political practices, it also complicates how we understand the relationship between rights and labor. People selling sex do so for financial exchange or for other basic necessities. Sex workers operating in legalized and decriminalized environments are classified as employees, or sometimes independent contractors. In the US, strippers and OnlyFans models are independent contractors, but other forms of sex work remain criminalized. Employment relations within the industry range from more formalized positions to operating within the informal economy. How can we account for the relationship between forms of employment and worker protections? What influences when and how social protections are extended to workers? This research highlights how workers in the sex industry experience a range of employment relations and the extent of labor rights granted to them are not always tied to more formal employment.

Additionally, many workers are operating informally by choice. These workers abstain from more formal employment relations because of a lack of incentives to do so. Sex workers working informally cite a lack of managerial surveillance and job flexibility as primary motivators for staying in the industry. Even considering the potential for client-based violence and lack of long-term stability, these workers remain outside the formal economy. This indicates a tension within rights-based and labor-based frameworks. Increasingly, states are pegging social protections to employment. This leads policy experts to advise for employment formalization (the transition from the informal to formal economy) as a way to decrease people's precarity. However, this does not reflect the claims many sex worker organizers are making. Instead, workers are seeking to work without interference. My findings gesture to the limitations of human rights and labor rights frameworks for addressing workers' concerns.

One way this work can be extended is through considering how different forms of sex work do/do not impact sex workers' regulatory liminality and ability to engage in organizing spaces. The sex workers I interviewed engaged in many forms of sex work, such as in person and online work. Some workers engaged in various forms simultaneously. Prior sex work research indicates higher levels of precarity and greater violence experienced by in person sex workers. According to my concept of regulatory liminality, sex workers experiencing greater precarity would also have greater constraints on their organizing capabilities. My findings suggest that there are greater barriers to entry in organizing for in person sex workers, as there are overall less people doing this form of work than online work. While my interviews did not indicate a significant difference in the strategies used by workers who engaged in different forms of sex work, this could be due to how I formed my interview protocol (see appendix). An avenue for further research is considering whether and how sex worker organizing strategies vary by the

form of sex work they engage in. This would provide insight into whether forms of work alter the regulatory liminality sex workers experience.

While this dissertation focuses on the sex industry, regulatory liminality may be applicable to other industries and groups of precarious communities. Citizenship and migration studies have had a long engagement with legal ambiguity and how it affects people's political participation and ability to prosper. For example, undocumented people often face significant barriers to traditional forms of political participation such as voting. Additionally, they are often excluded from state welfare programs. These conditions are similar to the regulatory liminality sex workers experience which includes having an ambiguous legal status. Sex workers regulatory liminality is instantiated by inter/national human trafficking discourses and social stigma, in addition to legal ambiguity and worker's identities. It is the interplay between de jure regulation, de facto regulation, anti-trafficking discourses and stigma and identities that produce sex workers' regulatory liminality. People engaged in informal forms of labor, such as care work, and other forms of legal relationships, such as being undocumented, may be similarly subject to regulatory liminality. Further research is necessary to understand the broader implications of this concept beyond the sex industry.

Additionally, the world of work is undergoing significant digital transformations. The impact of Covid-19 has more people than ever before working from home which has required new technological adaptations such as an increased reliance on cloud computing and e-commerce. The pandemic also resulted in an increase of data analytics and AI in firm decision-making and customer service support. These technological advancements are impacting the sex industry as well. Sex workers who use the internet to meet or attract clients are the most likely to be impacted by these changes. The use of AI has spurred concerns for data privacy and

user-generated content. For example, the use of “deepfakes” to digitally alter videos using AI-based tools. These deepfakes can replace peoples’ faces or bodies to make it appear they are engaging in actions they are not. While it is often used to malign someone or spread false information, AI generated videos are increasingly being used within the sex industry.

AI-produced adult content creation threatens the livelihood of online creators and oversaturates an already impacted market. Further inquiry into how AI is altering sex workers' ability to work and organize is needed as these technologies become more widely adopted. The world of work is changing, and organizers’ strategies are changing with it.

APPENDIX

Prelim Checklist:

- Comfortability with recording
1. Could you tell me your name (can be an alias, and will be redacted if not an alias), pronouns, and job title?
 2. How would you describe your environment at work? How do you interact with your coworkers?
 - a. Can you briefly describe what a regular work day/period looks like for you?
 - b. Can you describe the demographics at your workplace? The general age range, nationalities, race, gender, or any other relevant information?
 - c. Do you support each other, emotionally, materially, or otherwise? Could you provide some examples?
 3. (If you identify as a sex worker, past or present) How did you enter this industry? For how long have you been in it?
 - a. Do you have a worker contract? Are you offered any workplace protections or benefits?
 - i. If yes, can you describe some of the details of the contract?
 - ii. If not, what appeals to you about the position?
 - b. What have been some of the highlights of your experiences at work?
 - c. What have been some of the lows of your work experiences?
 4. Have you had any encounters with law enforcement? Could you describe these encounters?
 - a. If not, do you know co-workers who have?
 5. How would you describe your relationship with/to the law?
 6. What is your opinion or perspective of sex work being illegal in (insert country)?
 - a. What does decriminalization mean for you? What are the stakes involved?
 7. Do you identify as an activist/organizer?
 - a. How did you get into advocacy? What does it look like for you?
 - i. How are decisions made within your organization(s)?
 - ii. How do you/your organization decide how to navigate in the socio-political context? What are some of the trade offs/strategies utilized?
 - b. What motivates you to continue this work?

- c. What are some wins/successes/highlights of this work?
 - d. What are some setbacks/difficulties of this work?
- 8. What is your perspective on sex worker organizers creating coalitions with other movements?
 - a. If you have done this, with whom? What incentivized this relationship?
- 9. Have you heard of redistributive justice? abolition?
 - a. If yes, what are your thoughts on it? Does it factor into your work at all?
- 10. What are ways you care for yourself and your loved ones?
- 11. What else, if anything, would you like to share that we haven't discussed yet?
 - a. What are issues I should be thinking about and talking to others about?
 - b. Others have said x/y/z - does this resonate with you?
 - i. Multi-coalitions, capacity of members, human trafficking harm

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