

# Workers, Migrants, and Queers: The political economy of community among illegalised sex workers in Athens

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## Abstract

This article unpacks practices of collaboration and community-building among sex workers in Athens, weaving them with an analysis of labour and illegalisation. In the field, cis and trans, local and migrant workers alike pointed to the pervasive material realities of harm, exploitation, and devaluation as inseparable from the multiple processes of illegalisation and dispossession to which they were subjected. They also demonstrated their own grassroots strategies to deal with these realities. Such practices are examined as concrete efforts of collectivities to survive together through diffuse forms of (state) violence. Nevertheless, the article shows that ‘community’ is by no means straightforward, harmonious, or free from instrumentalism, but situated within a multiplicity of relationships of support, collaboration, subjection, exploitation, obligation, and bondage between sex workers, migrants, and various brokers and gatekeepers. In tracing the connections forged between people occupying multiple positions as informal (sexual) labourers, migrants, and queers, sexuality and gender emerge as inextricable from class, and community as inseparable from political economy.

**Keywords:** sex work, migration, statecraft, criminalisation, gender, sexuality, political economy

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## Introduction

Following Shah's call to 'reposition, rather than eschew'<sup>1</sup> the discussion on violence and exploitation in the sex industry, this article weaves together the stories of cis and trans women selling sex in Athens, Greece, with an analysis focusing on labour and illegalisation. Although sex-working women are consistently discursively reified as victims of violence, the ways my interlocutors spoke and acted in the field did not correspond to linear narratives of victimisation and rescue. Instead, cis and trans, local and migrant women alike pointed to pervasive realities of harm, exploitation, and devaluation as inseparable from the processes of illegalisation and dispossession to which they were subject. They also demonstrated a rich set of grassroots strategies to deal with these realities, on their own terms.

The following analysis focuses on practices developed among workers who partake in shared material realities, such as extreme precarity, criminalisation, transphobia, and racialised violence, and try to mitigate violence, exploitation, and devaluation from that standpoint. Occurring across gender identity, these practices constitute concrete efforts of collectivities to survive together through diffuse forms of (state) violence. This does not mean such efforts are straightforward, harmonious, or free from instrumentalism. Following my interlocutors' own perspectives, I unpack the conundrums of 'community' by considering the multiplicity of relationships of support, collaboration, subjection, exploitation, obligation, and bondage that emerge between sex workers, migrants, and different kinds of brokers and gatekeepers.

Bringing different groups of sex workers into one analysis, I illuminate the connections that surface between people occupying multiple positions as informal (sexual) labourers, migrants, and queers. Building on the work of scholars like Shah and Allen,<sup>2</sup> I examine sexuality and gender as inseparable from class and materiality and argue that the legibility promised within these communities is inextricably tied to a recognition of the political economy of migration, illegality, and the options people deploy for survival.

These perspectives on violence, exploitation, and community in the field mark a departure from hegemonic representations of sex workers and trafficking victims, which obscure structural questions of work, survival, and mobility, depicting (usually cisgender) women as victimised, isolated, and suffering from extreme, if episodic, forms of individualised harm. As Kempadoo, Bernstein, and others have shown, such narratives only serve the interests of increased criminalisation and

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<sup>1</sup> S P Shah, *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; J S Allen, *Venceremos?: The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011.

border control across the spectrum of sex work and migration, with devastating consequences for workers experiencing different levels of coercion.<sup>3</sup> Plambech speaks of a ‘trafficking-industrial complex’ that spans licit and illicit economies of rescue, facilitation, and detainment.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, O’Connell Davidson illustrates how the markets built around both sanctioned and unauthorised migration turn migrants into debtors, leaving them ‘vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and other forms of abuse, whether they have moved through legal or irregular channels’.<sup>5</sup> Besides illuminating the role of the state in producing workers’ vulnerability, this literature advances a critical understanding of debt’s relation to labour. I build on such work by considering how different kinds of mutual obligation structure relations of both exploitation and community in the sex industry.

In the remainder of the article, I review the specificities of sex work in Greece, outline my methodology, and situate the ways critical approaches to ‘community’ resonate in my field. I provide some examples of interventions based on shared material realities, and unpack specific themes in them, such as the construction of chosen families among trans sex workers and the ways kinship relates to economics. Finally, I consider more intersectional forms of collaboration among sex workers who encounter one another in common spaces of work and sociality.

## Sex Work and Illegalisation in the Field

My material concerns sex workers with a long history of involvement in different parts of the sex industry, as well as occasional wage labour. They include locals and migrants (including LGBTQ asylum seekers), cis and trans women. The spaces of work and commensality they populate include trans brothels, flats, online platforms, the trans sex stroll of Syngrou Avenue in southern Athens, and the historic stroll and cruising area of Omonoia in central Athens, which combines street and hotel work by cis, trans, male, female, migrant, refugee, and local people.

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<sup>3</sup> K Kempadoo, J Sanghera, and B Pattanaik, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights*, 2nd Edition, Routledge, New York, 2016; E Bernstein, *Brokered Subjects: Sex, Trafficking, and the Politics of Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> S Plambech, ‘Points of Departure: Migration Control and Anti-Trafficking in the Lives of Nigerian Sex Worker Migrants After Deportation from Europe’, PhD Dissertation, 2014, p. 204; cf. ‘Sex, Deportation and Rescue: Economies of Migration among Nigerian Sex Workers’, *Feminist Economics*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2016, pp. 134–159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2016.1181272>.

<sup>5</sup> J O’Connell Davidson, ‘Troubling Freedom: Migration, Debt, and Modern Slavery’, *Migration Studies*, vol. 1, issue 2, 2013, pp. 176–195, p. 184, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mns002>.

Whether they are migrants or locals, all my interlocutors encounter some form of ‘differential inclusion’<sup>6</sup> to worker-citizenship, as the effect of a combination of policies. Although sex work is legal and regulated in Greece, on the ground this translates to effective criminalisation. Solicitation on the street and work anywhere outside licensed brothels remain illegal. A large part of the local workforce is unable to fulfil the requirements for a work permit, which exclude people who have any psychiatric history, are married, test positive on bi-monthly mandatory STI testing, use drugs, etc. Permits for brothels are restricted by zoning laws that make it impossible to operate legally within the municipality of Athens; consequently, almost all its brothels are illegal. Overall, sex workers occupy an awkward position between workers and criminals, resulting in informal, precarious labour conditions that make them illegible to state apparatuses, a situation compounded by gender normativities, migration, public health, and public order policy.

The management of sex workers and other ‘dangerous classes’ through legislation on work, public health, and public order has a long history in Greece,<sup>7</sup> tracing back to the birth of the Greek state. Prostitution has been regulated more or less continuously since 1836, through a French-inspired regulatory system where police and doctors collaborated as ‘sanitary police’.<sup>8</sup> This system worked through the interconnected spaces of brothels (including the state-run brothel-prison of Vourla),<sup>9</sup> venereal hospitals, prisons, and reformatories. From early on, the interest in controlling and containing sexual commerce was part of state projects to discipline the working classes to specific ethics of work, sexuality, and gender, and punish those who did not conform.<sup>10</sup> Sex workers were subject to illegalisation if they worked ad hoc, or confinement and strict supervision by police and doctors, if they were declared as prostitutes in state registries. This system was reworked multiple times in the post-war era, introducing changes such as privatisation and the closure of public brothels, and the prohibition of cooperative working arrangements. The main logic of supervision and containment on medical

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<sup>6</sup> S Mezzadra and B Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2013, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> M Korasidou, *When Disease Threatens: Surveillance and the Control of the Populations’ Health in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Greece*, Tipothito/Dardanos, Athens, 2002; P Hantzaraoula, ‘Prostitution in Athens’ in J-M Chaumont, M R Garcia and P Servais (eds.), *Trafficking in Women 1924–1926: The Paul Kinsie Reports for the League of Nations*, vol. 1, United Nations Publications, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.18356/3126d79b-en>.

<sup>8</sup> Korasidou, pp. 35–36.

<sup>9</sup> A Fotakis, *The Creation of the Town’s Police and the British Mission 1918–1932*, PhD Dissertation, University of Athens, 2016, pp. 64–65.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; see also: D Tzanaki, *The History of Non-Normativity*, Asini, 2016, pp. 154–155.

or criminal terms, however, has persisted<sup>11</sup> through the current legislation, implemented in 1999.

Nowadays, besides the illegality produced by regulation itself, sex workers are subject to various other laws that criminalise them and make them vulnerable to exploitation by clients, police, predators, and brokers. For example, ordinances related to ‘public decency’ were often used to arrest and fine street-based workers I encountered through my fieldwork when solicitation could not be proven. Laws relating to public health, such as the ban on ‘unnecessary movement’ and the curfews imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, criminalised workers’ mere presence in public space, and by extension, many of their survival tactics. Frameworks for migration and asylum, with their vast grey areas of waiting, indebtedness, and the constant threat of deportability or lapse in one’s fragile legal status, also have an immense effect on how people work and rely on or are exploited by others. Finally, besides dangerously conflating irregular migration, sex work, and human trafficking, anti-trafficking policy focuses more on fighting organised crime than protecting workers.<sup>12</sup> The argument that sex workers must always be locatable by the authorities in order to ‘weed out’ potentially exploitative situations, is consistently used to illegalise independent, mobile work in people’s homes, hotels, and bars. In a recent proposal drafted to re-examine the current system of regulation,<sup>13</sup> the fight against human trafficking constituted a central argument against allowing these forms of freelancing.

Therefore, ‘regulation’ translates to a reality where direct criminal penalties coexist with a vast grey area of illegality and invisibility. Although I use ‘criminalisation’ and ‘illegalisation’ interchangeably, ‘illegalisation’ emphasises how a *continuum of illegality*<sup>14</sup> is produced by these processes. This continuum does not rest simply on

<sup>11</sup> For these continuities, see also: A Michalakea, ‘This is the Law of the Plague: Public Health Crises, the Law, and Sex Work’, in P Kapola, G Kouzelis, and O Konstantas (eds.), *Imprints in Moments of Danger*, EMEA, Nissos, 2020, pp. 537–544.

<sup>12</sup> A Boukli and G Papanicolaou, ‘Human Trafficking in Greece’, in J Winterdyk and J Jones (eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Human Trafficking*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> (In Greek) K Asimakopoulos, ‘Brothels: The Government’s Big Bet for Changes and Legalisation’, *Ethnos*, 9 June 2020, retrieved 30 July 2022, <https://www.ethnos.gr/greece/article/109177/oikoianoxhstomegalostoihxmathskybernhshsgiaallageskainomimopoihsh>; Greek Ministry of Citizens’ Protection, *Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking, 2021–2025*, July 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Here I draw from: N P De Genova, ‘Migrant “Illegality” and Deportability in Everyday Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 31, issue 1, 2002, pp. 419–447, p. 419, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085432>; and S P Shah, ‘Impossible Migrants: Debating Sex Work and Gender Identity amid the Crisis of Migrant Labor’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 120, no. 3, 2021, pp. 515–532, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-9154884>.

imposing direct criminal sanctions and is more productive than straightforwardly repressive. Indeed, it produces value across institutions, spaces, and communities through fines and bribes paid to the police, debt and loans, fees for private insurance, unofficial circuits of exchange involving remittances and collaborative practices, and the establishment of entire industries around rescue, facilitation, and detainment.

Finally, my reading of relative historical continuity in the state's management of sexual labour differentiates itself from Lazos' definitive study of sex work and trafficking in Greece. Conducting research in the late 1990s, the criminologist posited that the influx of migrant labour which followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union introduced a radical break in the Greek sex industry, whereby a 'new, economically oriented, [...] antisocial prostitution of coercion' replaced the 'legal prostitution' that had prevailed.<sup>15</sup> The pervasive exploitation faced by impoverished, illegalised migrant women subject to various forms of organised mobility, and the effects of the introduction of a vast pool of devalued labour in the local sex industry, are undeniable. However, a historical approach sheds another light on the circulation of value within regulatory systems, whereby migration *policy* constitutes another terrain of illegalisation and, as Lazos calls it, primitive accumulation,<sup>16</sup> in a long line of many. Accordingly, since the transformations he described, various 'crises' relating to national debt, migrants and refugees, and public health, have reshaped the landscape of the sex industry, accompanied by state policies that continuously stretch the meanings of devaluation and multiply the conceivable positions across the spectrum between legality and illegality.

## Methodology

This paper is based on PhD fieldwork in my hometown Athens. I gained access to the field by volunteering in a day centre for sex workers in Omonoia and participating in streetwork and outreach in brothels and streets city-wide, from 2018 until I started fieldwork.<sup>17</sup> I began systematic field research by having informal talks with sex workers I knew from volunteering. Through them, I gained independent access to various groups—local trans sex workers, LGBTQ migrants from South America and the Caribbean, and multi-ethnic street-based workers in Omonoia. I interacted with an array of sex industry participants who were aware of my status as a researcher, but worked closely with six interlocutors, starting

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<sup>15</sup> G Lazos, *Prostitution and International Trafficking in Contemporary Greece: I. The Prostitute*, Kastaniotis, Athens, 2002, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> I owe my access to the field and a wealth of knowledge to the team of Red Umbrella Athens, with whom I consulted, collaborated, and volunteered during the preliminary stages of my research.

in January 2020 and continuing to the time of writing this article. Additionally, my methodology included consulting historical research, discourse analysis, and monitoring relevant policy reforms.

After the first exploratory discussions, I conducted interviews to get a sense of interlocutors' trajectories in the sex industry. Questions addressed the types of work they did, how they learnt the job and took safety precautions, their relations with co-workers, as well as their expenses and how they paid for them. Following that, the depth of my material varies. Although I conducted qualitative research before and throughout the pandemic, during that time the field underwent transformations which impacted some research relationships. COVID-19 measures deeply affected public space and the ways of working and socialising there. As my access to Omonoia's street-based workers depended on spatial dynamics that were shifting and fracturing, while these workers were experiencing major crises in their livelihoods, I could not maintain the same continuity of presence there. As one interlocutor put it after the first lockdown: 'There is no work and we are all on edge. Let's talk in autumn if things have calmed down'. That autumn, the government announced another lockdown that ended up lasting six months, plunging illegalised workers into new depths of dispossession.

Since all my interlocutors found themselves having to constantly diversify or live with less to cope with the changing landscape of this crisis, the rest of my fieldwork moved towards a more active involvement in people's daily conundrums. Contradictions and shifts began to emerge, enriching and complicating my interview material. More practically, rather than demanding extra work from already overworked women, I tried to make myself useful in the time we shared. I provided translations to non-Greek speakers, learnt and explained bureaucratic procedures, searched for lawyers, helped women set up online profiles, spoke with husbands about residence permit procedures, and visited people in detention. Interlocutors came to my apartment, I dropped by their homes and workplaces, we ate, celebrated, chatted, and dealt with paperwork together.

In such situations, the boundaries between research and sociality can become blurred, and informed consent needed to be addressed continuously. I discussed with interlocutors how or whether I could write about workplace dynamics or legal procedures that were still unfolding. I took care to anonymise them in my writing but also to one another. I worked to maintain boundaries within communities and to differentiate between one-on-one relationships and collective interactions. Depending on people's wishes, I would record or make notes of our discussions when we spoke in private, or alternatively write notes after I was home.

## Problematizing ‘Community’

Critical examinations of the notion of ‘community’ have warned about how it can be mobilised to divest responsibility from the state, lend a stamp of authenticity to different political interventions, or gloss over exploitative and unequal relations through romanticised appeals to abstract collectivities.<sup>18</sup> They also show how community can refer to sex workers’ and minorities’ ‘subversive solidarities [and forms of collective survival] in public space’.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Allen’s idea of ‘building community in the face of terror’,<sup>20</sup> situates queer communal practices within material realities that relate to gender, sexuality, race, state violence, and survival. Scholars such as Wekker<sup>21</sup> and Shah<sup>22</sup> have also repeatedly shown the situatedness of gender, sexuality, and kinship vis-à-vis political economy, further grounding the stakes of belonging and community in materiality and class.

Building on such analyses, I present an ethnographic account of community as the often fraught and complicated ways that people with shared concerns and material circumstances find to try and survive together amidst state violence. Complicating community’s relation to identity in any abstract or bounded form, my interlocutors’ ways of speaking about and practising togetherness point towards ways of surviving together and recognising one another that are inextricable from material realities, class, and illegalisation. While the word ‘community’ only surfaced in the context of NGO work, people in the field used a host of spatial and practice-oriented terms instead, such as ‘one of our own’, ‘she comes out here’, ‘in the life’. These expressions referred to commonalities vis-à-vis non-normative genders and sexualities, such as being trans or gay, but also sex work itself. Accordingly, I use ‘queer’ as an analytical rather than emic term, that speaks to these intersections between non-normative genders, sexualities, and labours.<sup>23</sup> Finally, in interlocutors’ accounts and my own observations, community and kinship were part of a continuum that involved support and exploitation, care and instrumentality.

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<sup>18</sup> G Vijayakumar, ‘Collective Demands and Secret Codes: The Multiple Uses of “Community” in “Community Mobilization”’, *World Development*, vol. 104, 2018, pp. 173–182, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.11.009>; M Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Vijayakumar, pp. 180–181.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> G Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women’s Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*, Columbia University Press, New York 2006, p. 129.

<sup>22</sup> Shah, 2014, p. xi.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. N M Stout, *After Love: Queer Intimacy and Erotic Economies in Post-Soviet Cuba*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014, pp. 25–26.



## Saving One Another

This section addresses the ways sex workers navigate violence, exploitation, and risk within their social milieus. My interlocutors found ways—however imperfect—of protecting one another, which took into account the continued pressures they were facing, and the available options they had. Community-building emerged from shared understandings and material preoccupations, common risks and harms that led to interventions, which differed greatly from state missions that often ‘rescue’ or ‘rehabilitate’ women into uncertain futures.<sup>24</sup> Focusing on two examples from my interlocutors’ first years on the job, and some more recent tactics that workers employed during the COVID-19 pandemic, I show how building relationships and exchanging know-how constitute crucial parts of learning how to (survive at) work.

Street-based interlocutors from different strolls similarly described learning to navigate risk by talking and working with other women. Teresa, a local trans woman in her fifties, recounted narrowly escaping an attack by a client, who was later convicted for the murders of three sex workers. After taking some time off to work at her boyfriend’s bar, she returned to Athens single and without any job prospects. She found herself back at the stroll of Syngrou, where she had met her attacker. The prospect of taking a client alone terrified her. Some of her trans friends were still working there—the ‘sisters’ with whom she started out on the job, after being introduced to it by the same ‘mother’. ‘It’s our own version of family, you see’, she said, and described how they took care of her during those first months of her return. ‘They took turns with clients so I wouldn’t be on my own on the street and arranged threesomes or group sex with me, so that I could work without being alone’. They did this for months, until she could handle herself better: ‘then, they told me the educational seminar is over, time to go out on my own now’. Looking back, Teresa said she had been completely ignorant of the risks involved in sex work. It was only upon return, and with the help of her sisters, that she developed what most people in my field alluded to: the skill of reading and filtering clients.

Foucault has spoken of (homo)sexuality as a way of inventing new kinds of relationships. Addressing the subversive potential of affection and companionship among queer men, he writes: ‘to imagine a sexual act that doesn’t conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love

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<sup>24</sup> D Brennan and S Plambech, ‘Editorial: Moving Forward—Life after trafficking’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218101>; E Shih, ‘The Anti-Trafficking Rehabilitation Complex: Commodity Activism and Slave-Free Goods’, *Open Democracy*, 19 August 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/antitrafficking-rehabilitation-complex-commodity-activism-and-slavefree-goo>.

one another—there’s the problem’.<sup>25</sup> Some years later, queer ethnographers set about ‘understanding how persons in the process of taking on a new, ostensibly sexual, identity, find themselves talking as much about kinship as sexuality’.<sup>26</sup> The way relations of mutual support, friendship, and kinship are created through both trans-ness and sex work in Teresa’s story adds a crucial, material dimension to these arguments: it shows how such modes of relationality among working-class people of non-conforming genders and sexualities can constitute ways of surviving across regimes of disposability and illegalisation.

Besides the threat of actual death, illegalised sex workers were subject to other forms of violence and hyper-exploitation, which they tried to navigate together. Eleni, a local cis woman who started selling sex as a divorced mother barely scraping by on a minimum-wage job, described similarly vital processes of community-building in Omonioia. In her first year at work, she was blackmailed into repeatedly providing free sexual services by a man posing as a policeman. While not a case of police abuse in itself, her story suggests how illegality produces opportunities for exploitation for a diffuse host of actors; this man recognised and appropriated for his benefit a structural relationship between sex workers and police that prevailed in my field and elsewhere,<sup>27</sup> wherein the former were prey to tactics ranging from arbitrary arrests and rapes to fines and bribes. It was only after talking with other women in Omonioia’s cafes that Eleni realised the man was scamming her and sent him packing. Finding companionship on the stroll allowed Eleni to counter at least some of the pervasive exploitation and violence that came with being an illegalised worker selling sex in public space.

Consequently, and as other scholars have shown,<sup>28</sup> while necropolitics partly rests on the decision to ‘let die’, it is inextricable from slower processes of exploitation and precarisation that can reach the point of extermination. This confluence

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<sup>25</sup> M Foucault, ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’, in P Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 1, The New Press, New York, 1994, pp. 135–140, p. 136.

<sup>26</sup> K Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> T Blanchette, G Mitchell, and L Murray, ‘Discretionary Policing, or the Lesser Part of Valor: Prostitution, Law Enforcement, and Unregulated Regulation in Rio De Janeiro’s Sexual Economy’, *Criminal Justice and Law Enforcement: Global Perspectives*, vol. 7, 2017, pp. 31–74.

<sup>28</sup> B Santos *et al.*, ‘Sex Work, Essential Work: A Historical and (Necro)Political Analysis of Sex Work in Times of COVID-19 in Brazil’, *Social Sciences*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010002>; N De Genova, ‘Viral Borders: Migration, Deceleration, and the Re-Bordering of Mobility during the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Communication, Culture and Critique*, vol. 15, issue 2, 2022, pp. 139–156, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcac009>.

became apparent during the pandemic, when state policy towards informal workers offered renewed tools for familiar forms of labour discipline.<sup>29</sup> Besides financial penalties, this involved the ‘re-bordering’<sup>30</sup> of both international mobility and people’s movements within national territories. Restrictions on mobility were accompanied by a proliferation of checkpoints that subjected illegalised workers to intensified policing and confinement, even as they had to continue making a living under worsening conditions. In Athens, sex workers faced lockdowns and measures that shut their workplaces, criminalised their and their clients’ presence in public space, and left them without the state compensation registered workers were entitled to. Teresa angrily enumerated the trans friends and work acquaintances who ended up homeless, incarcerated, or even dead in the aftermath of this crisis. For my part, I observed interlocutors whose ways of working had become obsolete either go into huge debt or having to make sense of new and shifting landscapes of work, mobility, and illegality, while navigating a still uncharted health risk. Some who had previously relied on a mix of brothel work, street solicitation, and escorting, shifted decidedly towards the latter. As the lockdowns stretched bleakly into months, the most daring women began arranging trips to smaller towns, where there was more demand, since the usual traffic of mobile workers had stopped due to the travel bans. Facing the risk of fines for ‘unnecessary travel’, interlocutors exchanged information about different towns, accommodation, and policing patterns; this temporary hustle got them through tough months of sporadic work in the Athenian market. Considering how most were relatively recent trans migrants whose statuses ranged from asylum seeker to undocumented, they found themselves with no alternative income, and running expenses such as inflated rents and legal fees. Their participation in a community where workers exchanged information, taught each other new ways of working, supported sick friends, lent each other money, and shared working and living spaces, was literally life-sustaining.

All these small but fierce acts of support are worlds apart from interventions usually described as ‘rescue’ and can only occur within communities of shared understandings and material conditions. As the stakes of queerness, criminalisation, work, and violence intersect, such practices of surviving together evoke Allen’s reflection that sometimes, ‘managing to *be*... is at some very basic level a resistance in a global political economy in which, as Audre Lorde reminds us, the traded, enslaved, and still marked “were never meant to survive”’.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A Dziuban, M Możdrzeń, and A Ratecka, “‘Very little but a lot’: Solidarity within the sex workers’ community in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic”, *Gender, Work, & Organization*, vol. 28, issue S2, 2021, pp. 366–377, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12677>.

<sup>30</sup> De Genova, 2022, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Allen, p. 30.

## Chosen Families, Brokerage, and Entering ‘the Life’

In her landmark study on chosen families, Weston refers to queer kinship as the product of cooperative histories of collective survival.<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, many anthropologists working on sexuality have connected kinship and community to labour and economics. Ferguson’s research among gay men in Senegal testifies to the importance of spaces, that, like Omonoia and various other gay and trans hangouts, are hubs for commercial activity and non-normative sexualities. In such spaces, young men ‘learn about what it means to be gay, learn to stand up to abuse, and discover a new language and new possibilities for sexual identification. More striking, they learn about the sexual labors that are so deeply intertwined with this community’.<sup>33</sup> This process is facilitated through men’s incorporation into kinship networks, wherein parents/mentors introduce newcomers to gay life and sex work.<sup>34</sup> Other studies have shown how familial discourses among sex workers and their pimps construct belonging while providing a moral and affective framework for exploitation.<sup>35</sup> In her research with Nigerian sex workers operating under debt indenture in Europe, Plambech describes how facilitators arranging their travel were often themselves deportees from Europe, while madams were current or former sex workers who had completed the same trajectory. Showing that increased reliance on facilitators results from restrictive migration policies, she notes that ‘migrant women often voiced ambiguous moral perspectives about their madams in which they were simultaneously viewed as role models, mother figures and exploiters’.<sup>36</sup> In all these scenarios, the boundaries between facilitation and community, debt and obligation, are blurred, and navigating common realities as illegalised migrants, workers, and sexual minorities does not necessarily correspond to easy distinctions between solidarity and exploitation.

In my field, I approach the relationships extending from madams and brokers to chosen families as a continuum that responds to the same issues of criminalisation, precarity, entering competitively structured working spaces, and heterogeneous notions of community and family. The familial idiom in Teresa’s story is interesting here, especially considering the role of the ‘mother’ as the older, more experienced

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<sup>32</sup> Weston, p. 115.

<sup>33</sup> J L Ferguson, “From the Heart”: Sex, Money, and the Making of a Gay Community in Senegal’, *Gender and Society*, vol. 31, issue 2, 2017, pp. 245–265, p. 254, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243217690715>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257–259.

<sup>35</sup> K Weinkauff, ‘Yeah, he’s my Daddy: Linguistic Constructions of Fictive Kinships in a Street-level Sex Worker Community’, *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s & Gender Studies*, vol. 8, 2010, pp. 14–33.

<sup>36</sup> Plambech, pp. 194–195; see also P Testai, ‘Debt as a Route to Modern Slavery in the Discourse on “Sex Trafficking:” Myth or Reality?’, *Human Security Journal*, vol. 6, issue 1, 2008, pp. 68–77.

sex worker who introduces a younger one to the job. In our group discussions, Mary and Teresa, both local trans women in their fifties, described it as mostly a supportive relationship, that includes helping one's mother as she gets older and struggles. This obligation for care reflects a long-standing pattern in elderly care and kinship in Greece, but also speaks to the abandonment that specifically older queers can encounter. For one, state provisions for care are sparse in Greece, and care labour for elderly people and children is usually carried out by kin networks or private domestic workers, who usually themselves constitute a devalued migrant workforce.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Yiannakopoulos has described what aging has meant for older generations of gay and trans people who survived multiple forms of criminalisation: 'As they grew older, they were in and out of prisons, elderly homes, and brothels where they worked as support staff. Many died in poverty'.<sup>38</sup> As he showed, people's luck varied depending on class background and relationship with families. The few who survived did so through the support of lovers and other queers. This perspective further illustrates how friendship, kinship, and eroticism are not only about desire or identity, but also collective survival.<sup>39</sup>

Besides 'mothers', scenarios where the various women facilitating sex work are called 'madams' or '*patrones*' (female patrons), exhibit a more complex mix of support and exploitation,<sup>40</sup> wherein obligation is quantified as debt. Among trans sex workers, madams are usually older workers who have contacts and know-how and use that to facilitate newcomers' entry into the industry. Brokerage in these cases is a retirement strategy, which can occasionally become very exploitative and be condemned by other sex workers. Mary spoke of people 'who live parasitically, cases where the relationship is pure exploitation'. Another interlocutor explained there have been:

*different madams over the years, older trans women who had saved up money from sex work and bought real estate that they rented to others. Many women enter into a lot of debt to work in their flats, like, Christina still owes money to this madam even though she quit working for her a while ago. Obviously, she isn't going to repay all of it, but it's a constant hassle when they see each other.*

<sup>37</sup> A Lyberaki, "'*Deae ex Machina*": Migrant Women, Care Work, and Women's Employment in Greece', GreeSE Paper no. 20, Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe, November 2008.

<sup>38</sup> K Yiannakopoulos, 'For a Trans\* History: *Kinaidoil*fags in post-war Greek society', Lecture given as part of the lecture series 'Anthropology of Gender: Current Dimensions and Perspectives', at Panteion University in Athens, Greece, April 2022.

<sup>39</sup> See Allen; Foucault.

<sup>40</sup> See also: N Mai, *Mobile Orientations: An Intimate Autoethnography of Migration, Sex Work, and Humanitarian Borders*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018, p. 171.

Such examples are not uncommon. Christina, a trans woman from the Greek provinces, started out without savings or support from her family, so she had to rely on a madam to find a room in a working flat. These rooms offer a workspace close to the stroll, condoms, clean sheets, etc., but are highly overpriced. This is because rentals are expensive in the area, but also because landlords assume that trans tenants are selling sex illegally, so they either overcharge them, or prefer to rent to families or otherwise heteronormative people. For trans brokers who have saved up from sex work and bought real estate there, this constitutes an economic opportunity, where they provide working spaces to newcomers ensuring that they will avoid problems with neighbours and landlords and can start working and repaying their debt.

The ways debt can produce severe forms of exploitation among migrant sex workers are familiar and have been noted by numerous scholars.<sup>41</sup> However, it should be emphasised that this is not unique to the sex industry and points to larger processes of capitalist appropriation of productive and reproductive realms.<sup>42</sup> In my field, these kinds of agreements represent the more profit-oriented side of a continuum of mediation involved in entering the specific stroll. The more someone can rely on her community, the less dependent she is on such forms of brokerage and indebtedness. Yet, the distinctions are not entirely clear-cut. The continuities between community and economics within chosen families are evident in the following dialogue between two interlocutors:

- If a girl goes out in Syngrou without backup, she will get beaten up. Someone needs to 'take you out' on the stroll. I was lucky because I knew a lot of working women before I went out. I knew my sisters, I knew others from the bars where we partied. Of course, in her way, Natalia [her trans mother] profited economically from me, mommy dearest... She would say, 'how I like this plant, would you buy it for me?' Her apartment had twenty pots of plants which were all personally paid for by me... or she would just go into my wallet while I was asleep and get money without telling me, but I knew.
- The way I see it, you create grounds for demands and rights, you are obligated, she says, since I have helped you, you have to be on standby for whatever I need. It's an unwritten law.
- I was still lucky, I [started work] without much drama because people had my back.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*; see also, among others, O'Connell Davidson; Testaí.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example: R Andrijasevic, 'Forced Labour in Supply Chains: Rolling Back the Debate on Gender, Migration, and Sexual Commerce', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 28, issue 4, 2021, pp. 410–424, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068211020791>.

- Siblings, mothers, aunts...it's a reality.
- It's like the story of geishas, fictive families, it's an international thing. When I saw the movie [referring to *Memoirs of a Geisha*], I said this is like us, and then I heard from trans friends abroad it's the same. It's probably a matter of need since many of us don't have families.

This mix of materiality and affinity, mutuality and economics, is not unique to the sex industry either. For one, many interlocutors found themselves involved in such relationships of support and exploitation within their biological families. Often being the most cash-ready among their relatives, they economically supported or gave loans to them, which they did not always get back. For some trans women, not having a nuclear family of their own meant that they disproportionately took on the gendered work of caring for elderly relatives, babysitting siblings' children, etc. Such examples evoke the classic feminist caution against regarding the family as a black box of mutuality, and its emphasis on how familial relationships are stratified according to gender and age. Indeed, since the 1970s, Marxist feminists have approached the entanglement of the economic and the intimate, support and exploitation, as key features of the institution of the family, showing that care is value-producing labour that is overwhelmingly carried out by women.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, researchers have shown how obligations based on expanded idioms of kinship form a crucial survival strategy in contexts of state-organised devaluation, racism, and impoverishment. Stack's study of working-class Black communities and her examination of the way kinship is acquired as friends, relatives, and partners come to share reciprocal obligations<sup>44</sup> movingly illustrates how affinity is a thoroughly material matter. This perspective links back to queer families as theorised by Allen and Weston: relationships built through everyday work, presence, eroticism, and reciprocity, throughout one's life, amidst multiple forms of state violence.

Finally, the way relations based on care work and obligation exist alongside relations of brokerage in my field, connects the discussions on debt, precarity, and productive and reproductive labour. If we examine communal obligations and debt relations together, issues raised by Graeber and Butler in very different theoretical works begin to resonate. Where the former uses the history of debt to ask 'fundamental questions about what human beings and human society are or could be like—what we actually do owe to each other',<sup>45</sup> the latter's early work

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<sup>43</sup> V A Goddard, *Gender, Family, and Work in Naples*, Berg, Oxford, 1996; M Dalla Costa and S James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Petroleuse Press, New York, 1976.

<sup>44</sup> C B Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*, Basic Books, New York, 1983.

<sup>45</sup> D Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, Melville House, New York, 2011, p. 18.

looks at community as pervaded by dependency and vulnerability, ‘our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another’.<sup>46</sup> The value in exposing debt as a social relation that is contestable and dynamic, rather than a neutral, technocratic, yet thoroughly moralised fact, is undeniable. Indeed, we saw that the disciplinary force of debt is not always all-encompassing and, depending on what other options they have, sex workers may leave working arrangements that they find too coercive. When it comes down to it, the ability to leave one’s debt unpaid is more a material than a moral issue. At the same time, this core dependency Graeber and Butler speak about is not abstract either. As with ‘community’, generic notions of collective mutual responsibility risk glossing over wildly stratified material realities and labour divisions. Whether we look at debt as the basis of human sociality, or as a relation that can quantify obligation in ways so impersonal they become dehumanising, what is less explicit in these analyses but ubiquitous in my field, is labour as a life-sustaining but exploited and differentiated capacity, within families, strolls, and workplaces. The connection between debt and labour exploitation is by now obvious, yet Butler’s vision of mutual obligation and care also belies a world of work, that is, the work of social reproduction.

## Devaluation and Intersectional Solidarities

So far, I have shown how friendship, kinship, and sexuality are crucial for collective survival amidst state violence. I finish by considering how sex work itself offers a material basis for community that traverses the boundaries of queerness, migration status, or ethnicity. As interlocutors encountered one another in the spaces where they hustled, and simultaneously faced overlapping processes of illegalisation and devaluation, shared tactics and agendas emerged. These testify to the potential connections wrought from what Mezzadra and Neilson call ‘the multiplication of labour’,<sup>47</sup> whereby groups of workers may fragment or find unexpected common ground.

As I have already discussed, interlocutors experienced progressive devaluation, even exclusion from the sex market as they grew older and their faces more familiar in the spaces where they worked. Growing old on the job often meant having to live with less: decreased demand, lower prices, accepting things one normally avoided. Some women shifted towards low-level brokerage, scraped by on state benefits or help from their ‘daughters’, or diversified their services. One strategy was to collaborate with newer sex workers, who benefited from their know-how while offering older workers a fresh way to market their services. Newcomers were often more sought-after but less experienced: by working together, they could learn more safely, while mature workers did not lose clients as much and did not

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<sup>46</sup> J Butler, ‘Violence, Mourning, Politics’, *CUNY Academic Works*, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Mezzadra and Neilson, p. 7.



have to position themselves so competitively towards newcomers.

Mary switched to this mode of collaboration as her main way of working, when she saw that her ad was getting less and less attention. She was active in various dating apps and talked with queer men through her blog about sex and sexuality. Many of these men were younger migrants struggling to find decent work in Athens but hesitating to sell sex on their own. In the collaborations that ensued, Mary taught them how to work, handled their common ads, and enriched what she herself had to offer with services they could sell as a team. They shared the money equally, and this became a regular way of escorting for them. As she said:

*It's about staying afloat and being able to book appointments. Alone, my presence in the ads is dead and buried. For my partners, it is the only way they accept to work. They feel scared or insecure to sell sex on their own, sometimes religion also plays a role... They try to find other jobs, too, but things are hard.*

Linking back to Teresa's story of sisterhood, sharing dates for group sex emerges as a common strategy that includes various combinations of cis and trans, migrant and local, experienced and inexperienced men and women. Such collaborations can be understood as a way of working more safely, a response to clients' fantasies, and a pragmatic way of upgrading one's profile in an ageist market that constantly requires fresh faces and services. Mary's comment further suggests that people team up to escape the devaluation and exploitation they experience along their trajectories in the labour market at large. This issue of working conditions in other sectors resonates with Mai's point that 'most migrant sex workers decide to work in the sex industry to escape the exploitation they face in the "straight jobs" available to them'.<sup>48</sup> It also complicates 'the current discursive matrix of prostitution, which...turns on the notion that [those] who sell sexual services [are cisgender, heterosexual women that] have never engaged in any other livelihood strategy'.<sup>49</sup>

Still, people's ways of dealing with devaluation varied. Solidarities were forged and ruptured, as the intensification of labour and devaluation unfolding in Greece in the last decade materialised in each working space. After fifteen years of working in Omonoia, and having reached her sixties, Eleni posited that the advent of the debt crisis and the saturation of the industry with workers facing rising economic pressures have had an impact. 'Nowadays, if a new girl arrives, everyone looks for ways to get rid of her—unless they realise she has a pimp who will beat them up, so they leave her alone'.

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<sup>48</sup> Mai, pp. 3–4.

<sup>49</sup> Shah, 2014, p. 153.

The more recent trajectory of Beatriz, a trans Latina, testifies to that. Upon her arrival in Greece, Beatriz started working in Omonoia, and was violently chased out by another trans sex worker. Nevertheless, while strategically getting a boyfriend/pimp in order to stand on a street corner, Beatriz started building relationships with other workers and allies. In an LGBTQ event for refugees, she became friends with a local trans activist, who ended up hosting her until she found her footing. Not having to pay for a hotel anymore, she saved up money, dumped the boyfriend, found a job in a brothel, and started organising her life on her terms.

Overall, interlocutors agreed that solitary newcomers often had to rely on brokers to work without harassment. Although current conditions have clearly had an effect, Eleni's depiction of a communal past of better relations, fewer workers, and more work, may exhibit some idealised nostalgia, and my material across groups and workplaces suggests that solidarity, competition, exploitation, and community coexisted in some mix before, as they do now. Eleni herself, despite her pessimism, continued to exchange clients and advice with colleagues during the time she participated in my research. Her closest work friend was Lilyana, a sixty-nine-year-old cis Bulgarian migrant who was encountering the harsh reality of aging in sex work. She was trying to find a stable job as a brothel cleaner, but consecutive lockdowns made that impossible. On occasion, she took over Eleni's regulars when Eleni could not meet with them, and the two women supported each other daily. Knowing her friend charged lower prices due to her age and economic difficulties, Eleni advised her to ask her own regulars for Eleni's higher tariff. Extending beyond collaboration, the quality of their friendship became clearer over the years, especially after Eleni talked about struggling with whore stigma and only being out to her estranged husband (an old client) and her colleagues. Despite the violence, competition, and perennial fatigue of places like Omonoia, it seems the stroll is also a space where people can find companionship and communicate in a shared language.

## Conclusion

When asked about how she understands violence in her work, Lilyana said: 'As you grow older, it's torture. You don't have work anymore. Clients want younger women, unless they are your regulars. This job has an expiration date, and we don't get pensions.' Her response constitutes a brilliant and pragmatic twist on the debate about violence in the sex industry, shifting the focus onto the deeply structural violence of being part of an illegalised workforce, and growing old without any semblance of economic security. Like with Teresa after her attack, or my interlocutors during the lockdowns, what sex-working women are up against is not only the rapes, exploitation, or police abuse: it is also the need to keep going in the face of all that, to survive, build connections, and create something where nobody—and certainly not the state—will guarantee their future.

In none of the accounts presented is community simple or straightforward. Instead, notions of affinity are dynamic and heterogeneous, and rest on ongoing relationships of mutual obligation and support that take work. People do not just participate in bounded and singular ‘communities’ based on being a woman, a sex worker, trans, gay, working-class, or of a particular race or ethnicity. Rather, solidarities are formed across these positions as people inhabit the same spaces, encounter common problems, exchange information, and defend and depend on one another. This illuminates the connections that emerge among queer, migrant, and local informal labourers as they face overlapping forms of illegalisation in the sex industry and beyond.

In this article, I have tried to expose the violence, hurt, and exploitation that come with ‘community’, but also its life-or-death importance in people’s lives. Grassroots forms of support hold the promise of becoming legible to one another, finding a common language to speak about violence and harm, and perhaps even ways to survive them together. In doing so, they pose a stark contrast to perspectives that collapse all violence and exploitation into a discourse about human trafficking and portray sex workers as abject victims waiting to be rescued. Not only do such narratives align ominously with the state projects that produce these very conditions, but, most importantly, they conveniently neglect to consider what people are rescued into, and how they are expected to survive in contexts of continuing devaluation and dispossession.

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