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To survive, but not merely: sex work, struggle, and the recreation of
inequality in contemporary Athens

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Abstract

This anthropological research uses sex work as a point of departure to ask wider questions about labour, the state, and the continuous remaking of class relations across multiple axes of differentiation. Relying on close collaboration with women occupying different positions as illegalized sex workers in Athens, it traces how their labour processes are shaped in a dialectic with state policies on work, migration, public order, and public health. Rather than focusing on a single, seemingly bounded community of sex workers, it weaves together the stories of cis and trans, local and migrant women of different ages that negotiate a variety of citizenship statuses.

Although sex work has been officially legalized in Greece for about a century, the complementarity of regulatory mechanisms with the production of a vast sphere of illegality has been a steady characteristic of the sector, whose exact expressions have been re-elaborated based on changing material conditions and the reconstitution of available workforces. For its intents and purposes, this system is successful, in disciplining workers (albeit never completely), and diffusing value to a host of other actors across economic domains and spatial territories. The seeming contradictions, the discretionary and selective enforcement of different policies, should therefore not be attributed to a “weak” state unable to outline successful methods of containment, but rather, understood as a specific and long-standing *modus operandi*.

Overall, one contribution of this research and its “patchwork” methodology is an alternative way of studying (sexual) labour, that takes seriously the messiness of different kinds of work, people, and temporalities at play in each given context. The analytical choice to work with people who inhabit different positions in a complexly stratified industry offers a window into the history of work and class in Greece, including in terms of its crucial connection to successive migratory waves. Looking at their trajectories in sexual commerce, it becomes clear that the continuous recreation of inequality through difference is a violent process that involves struggle; both on the part of the capitalist state and the interests it serves, and on the part of the people it targets. The study addresses the different forms taken by such struggles, individual

and collective, by working across the distinctions between productive and reproductive, formal and informal labour. In doing so, it focuses on the interweaving of paid and unpaid work, ranging from sex work to marriages, and situates sex work vis-a-vis state-recognized forms of work, including wage labour and social policy programmes for employment. It shows that examining prostitution as a “separate” domain of illicit activities and criminal organization obscures the concrete and fundamental articulation of sex industries with state planning and formal sectors. Finally, instead of a binary between “free choice” and “trafficking”, exploitation and resistance to it are approached through the dialectic of struggle. The continuum of exploitation, dispossession and isolation that workers face emerge as the key forces grounding extreme forms of coercion, while workers’ practices of informal organization and community-making are highlighted as (however imperfect) modes of collective survival and social reproduction.

Keywords: Sex work, anthropology of labour, class relations, migration, social reproduction, Greece

Περίληψη

Η παρούσα ανθρωπολογική έρευνα παίρνει τη σεξουαλική εργασία σαν αφετηρία για να θέσει ευρύτερα ερωτήματα για την εργασία, το κράτος, και τη συνεχή αναδιαμόρφωση των ταξικών σχέσεων βάσει πολλαπλών αξόνων διαφοροποίησης. Βασιζόμενη στη στενή συνεργασία με γυναίκες που κατέχουν διαφορετικές θέσεις σαν παρανομοποιημένες σεξεργάτριες στην Αθήνα, σκιαγραφεί πώς η εργασία τους διαμορφώνεται σε μια διαλεκτική με κρατικές πολιτικές για την απασχόληση, τη μετανάστευση, τη δημόσια τάξη και υγεία. Αντί να εστιάζει σε μία, φαινομενικά, κλειστή κοινότητα σεξεργατριών, διαπλέκει μαζί τις ιστορίες cis και τρανς, ντόπιων και μεταναστριών γυναικών διαφορετικών ηλικιών που διαπραγματεύονται μια πληθώρα νομικών στάτους.

Παρόλο που η σεξεργασία είναι νομιμοποιημένη στην Ελλάδα εδώ και περίπου έναν αιώνα, η συμπληρωματικότητα των μηχανισμών ρύθμισης με την παραγωγή μιας ευρείας σφαίρας παρανομίας αποτελεί σταθερό χαρακτηριστικό του τομέα, του οποίου οι ακριβείς μορφές αναδιαμορφώνονται μέσα στο χρόνο βάσει μεταλλασσόμενων υλικών συνθηκών και ανακατατάξεων του διαθέσιμου εργατικού δυναμικού. Για τους σκοπούς του, το σύστημα αυτό είναι επιτυχές στο να πειθαρχεί τις εργάτριες (αν και όχι ολοκληρωτικά) και να διαχέει την αξία σε μια ευρεία γκάμα υποκειμένων σε διαφορετικούς οικονομικούς τομείς και χώρους. Οι φαινομενικές αντιφάσεις και η επιλεκτική επιβολή των διαφόρων πολιτικών, δεν θα έπρεπε λοιπόν να αποδίδονται σε ένα «αδύναμο» κράτος ανίκανο να σχεδιάζει επιτυχείς μεθόδους ελέγχου, αλλά αντίθετα, σε ένα συγκροτημένο και μακροχρόνιο τρόπο λειτουργίας.

Μία γενική συνεισφορά της έρευνας και της μεθοδολογίας της είναι ένας εναλλακτικός τρόπος μελέτης της (σεξουαλικής) εργασίας, που λαμβάνει σοβαρά υπόψη την πολύπλοκη συνύπαρξη διαφορετικών μορφών εργασίας, ανθρώπων, και χρονικοτήτων στο εκάστοτε πλαίσιο. Η αναλυτική επιλογή συνεργασίας με ανθρώπους που κατέχουν διαφορετικές θέσεις σε μια βιομηχανία με σύνθετη διαστρωμάτωση προσφέρει ένα παράθυρο θέασης της ιστορίας της εργασίας και της τάξης στην Ελλάδα, καθώς και της κεντρικής της σύνδεσης με διαφορετικά μεταναστευτικά κύματα. Κοιτώντας διαφορετικές διαδρομές της σεξουαλικής εργασίας, γίνεται σαφές ότι η συνεχής επανεφεύρεση της ανισότητας μέσω της

διαφοράς είναι μια βίαιη διαδικασία που περιλαμβάνει πάλη· και από την πλευρά του καπιταλιστικού κράτους και των συμφερόντων που αυτό εξυπηρετεί, και από την πλευρά των ανθρώπων που στοχοποιεί. Η μελέτη αφορά τις διαφορετικές εκφάνσεις αυτής της πάλης, ατομικές και συλλογικές, πέρα από διαχωρισμούς μεταξύ παραγωγικής και αναπαραγωγικής, επίσημης και ανεπίσημης εργασίας. Συγκεκριμένα, εστιάζει στην αλληλοδιαπλοκή έμμισθης και άμισθης εργασίας, από τη σεξεργασία μέχρι το γάμο και τοποθετεί τη σεξεργασία σε σχέση με μορφές εργασίας που αναγνωρίζονται από το κράτος, συμπεριλαμβανομένης της μισθωτής εργασίας και κρατικών προγραμμάτων για την απασχόληση. Δείχνει ότι το να εξετάζεται η πορνεία σαν ένας «ξέχωρος» τομέας παράνομης δραστηριότητας και εγκληματικής οργάνωσης συσκοτίζει την υλική και θεμελιώδη σύνδεση των σεξουαλικών βιομηχανιών με τον κρατικό σχεδιασμό και τους επίσημους οικονομικούς τομείς. Τέλος, αντί για το δίπολο μεταξύ «ελεύθερης επιλογής» και «σωματεμπορίας», η εκμετάλλευση και η αντίσταση σε αυτήν προσεγγίζονται μέσω της διαλεκτικής της πάλης. Το φάσμα της εκμετάλλευσης, της συσσώρευσης και της απομόνωσης που αντιμετωπίζουν οι συγκεκριμένες εργαζόμενες αναδύονται ως η βάση ακραίων μορφών καταναγκασμού, ενώ οι πρακτικές ανεπίσημης οργάνωσης και δημιουργίας κοινοτήτων των τελευταίων υπογραμμίζονται ως (ατελείς) τρόποι συλλογικής επιβίωσης και κοινωνικής αναπαραγωγής.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: σεξεργασία, ανθρωπολογία της εργασίας, ταξικές σχέσεις, μετανάστευση, κοινωνική αναπαραγωγή, Ελλάδα

Introduction

I.1 Sex work and the dialectic of struggle

I.1.1 Sex work as a point of departure

This research is based on a long-term engagement with sex-working women in Athens, and uses sex work as a point of departure to ask wider questions about reproductive labour, the state, and the continuous remaking of class relations across multiple axes of differentiation. Relying on close collaboration with a handful of women occupying different positions as illegalized workers, the study follows their labour processes and traces the ways these are shaped in a dialectic with state policies on work, migration, public order, and public health. Rather than focusing on a single, seemingly bounded community of sex workers – a specific stroll, an ethnic group, exclusively trans or cisgender women, and so on – it weaves together the stories of cis and trans, local and migrant women of different ages that negotiate a variety of citizenship statuses. Putting their experiences together is an analytical choice that reflects my experience in the field, where workers shared spaces, tactics, and preoccupations, and met and interacted with one another in places of work and sociality. It also aims to bring out the complex effects of connection and fragmentation within multi-ethnic working-class spaces, brought by overlapping processes of devaluation and labour management that rely on this mix of regulation and illegalization. Overtime, I came to work more closely with sex workers who were locals, from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and Latina workers from Cuba and Brazil. This synthesis is not meant to be representative or exhaustive, and was the result of the relationships I was able to establish with specific women, in conjunction to the dynamics and historical juncture I encountered. Working with people who share their reliance on sex work but inhabit distinct positions in the ongoing remaking of labour relations offers a different window into the history of work and class in Greece, and its connection to successive waves of migration. In that sense, part of the contribution of this study is to offer an alternative way of studying (sexual) labour that takes seriously the messiness of different kinds of work, people, and temporalities at play in each given context.

Drawing from feminist/queer research on sexuality, migration, and work (Gutierrez Garza 2019, Kempadoo 2016, Mai 2018, Plambech 2016; 2014, Shah 2014), critical migration studies (De Genova 2002), and approaches in the anthropology of global labour (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008, Steur 2022), my analysis situates sex work within labour systems that are at once spatialized and globally connected, and within a world of work that cuts across formal and informal, licit and illicit, paid and unpaid divisions. In the domain of sex work studies, I draw from the work of scholars who analyze sex work in connection to questions about public space, the regulation of mobilities, transnational economies, and other labour sectors, and who theorize gender in its inextricable co-construction with class, race, and sexuality. I also rely on De Genova's landmark theorization of the production of migrant illegality, and his insistence that researchers examine the processes through which certain populations are differentially included in the nation-state for the purposes of maintaining a cheap and docile reserve of workers. Finally, following the call of anthropologists of global labour that ethnographers "address the continuing recreation of inequality and class polarization" (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 5), I use sex work as a vantage point to untangle the overlapping processes of illegalization and other forms of dispossession that underwrite the trajectories of labourers in the sex industry. Drawing from the experiences of women whose position in the workforce is marked by their race, ethnicity, gender identity, migration status, geopolitical location, and age, I examine how differentiations and connections emerge and are negotiated on an individual and collective level. Adopting an understanding of class that stems from this tradition in the anthropology of labour involves an insistence to its continued relevance, and a processual, dynamic view of "the ever-evolving antagonistic relations that people enter into in their efforts to earn a living" (Steur 2022: 108; cf. Kalb 2015).

Sex work offers a good point of departure to study these wider processes because it is often a pit stop, a complement, or a long-term strategy for people who do not find regular access to other labour sectors, or who actively negotiate their position within them. Although sex work has been officially legalized in Greece for at least a century, the complementarity of regulatory mechanisms with the production of a vast sphere of illegality has been a steady characteristic of the sector, whose exact

expressions have been re-elaborated based on changing material conditions and the reconstitution of available workforces throughout different periods of Greek history. Both because of its liminal status as a pervasive yet invisible and often criminalized income activity, and because of the tendency of populations who are already marked by their differential inclusion in worker-citizenship to take it up, the study of sex work, particularly in its lower strata, illuminates a host of processes that are at the core of state logics about labour, mobility, and social reproduction. As these logics become territorialized, the multi-ethnic spaces that characterize urban sexual commerce become an imprint of global processes of dispossession and geopolitical transformation. The connections and dislocations wrought from these processes are traceable in the strolls and other spaces of work and socialization discussed throughout this research, and become part of the hierarchies that structure local industries, bringing people together and fragmenting them at the same time. In that sense, my perspective owes a lot to E.P. Thompson's view of class as "a fluid movement of real people in real contexts, trying to make sense of their common experiences and relationships" (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 7). From these combined perspectives, it becomes clear that the continuous recreation of inequality through difference is a violent process that involves struggle; both on the part of the capitalist state and the interests it serves, and on the part of the people it targets. Highlighting the practices of sex-working women in a constant dialectic to the state and the various actors who seek to profit from their labour, my analysis addresses the different forms taken by such struggles.

This dialectic crystallizes around a term borrowed from some of the workers whose stories take a central part in my research. As I discuss below, Cuban migrants brought the concepts of *la lucha* (the struggle) and *luchando* (struggling/hustling) to Europe, using them to connote sex work directly but also to make bigger claims that situated their (predominantly reproductive) labour within mixed and shifting political understandings of work and class struggle. To say that these understandings are mixed and contested is to pay due attention to the ways empire and capitalism feed on the unevenness produced by markers such as gender, race, and geographical hierarchy (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 7). To say that they are shifting aligns with the method

proposed by Eric Wolf and other anthropologists of global labour, and their insistence that we focus on the histories of working people rather than reducing them to static typologies (Wolf 1982, Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 7). All this involves looking at processes and relationships rather than fixed identities, on emerging connections and divisions rather than bounded objects of study. Any attempt to study sex work will meet with an excess of practices, spaces, meanings, positions, ways of surviving and forms of containment that demand such an approach. On multiple levels, it is this sensibility that underwrites my own method here.

1.1.2 Bringing *la lucha* to Greece

My own familiarity with the Cuban concept of *la lucha* came directly and specifically from the way sex-working, trans, migrant women of colour used it to describe their work in Europe (and for those who had been involved in street sex economies back home, in Cuba too). Although I did not know it at first, this particular usage in the diaspora is situated in a much larger, complex constellation of discourses that span the history of the island from the Cuban Revolution until the present. The way Cuban migrant women spoke about their work in Greece co-exists with and complicates the ways in which “*la lucha*” has been used to describe the fight for revolutionary society at first, and the generalized unraveling of labour relations and the accompanying struggle to attain economic necessities and consumer goods in Cuba’s two-currency economy after the Special Period, onto the present. In one sense, the transformations and strategies connoted by the concepts of *la lucha/luchando* in Cuba echo in the work of scholars researching post-socialist contexts in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, who grouped together people’s responses to the breakdown of labour and social reproduction that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union under the term “strategies for survival” (e.g. see Bridger and Pine 1998). Nonetheless, while the latter is a mostly descriptive concept coined by researchers, *la lucha/luchando* are emic terms that bear rich and contradictory political meanings as they are taken up by different people or the socialist state in Cuba and its diaspora.

Indeed, scholars working in Cuba cannot fail to address the importance of the term in local repertoires. The flexibility with which it has been used by different actors in different periods attests to the effort to maintain some level of legibility that

reconciles the changing realities and growing contradictions of the island's recent history. Particularly following the collapse of the USSR, the onset of Cuba's Special Period in the Time of Peace signaled a profound economic crisis in the island that simultaneously involved the partial dollarization of its economy and a widespread informalization of labour, particularly connected with the re-opening of the tourist sector. In that context, *la lucha/luchando* came to refer to a great variety of informal activities, including sex work, hustling foreigners, pilfering goods from state property, and buying and selling things on the go (Salas 2021: 6). While some researchers associate the repertoires of struggle strictly with illicit or at least informal ventures, others have noted how they also extend to the formal sector and reproductive labour (*ibid.*), providing a more holistic framework of everyday struggles for livelihood and social reproduction. By folding a wide array of activities into a shared framework that remains linked to the mythology of the Revolution, these concepts enable "those making a living by 'fraught means' to attempt to 'clean up' their endeavors while, crucially, staking a claim of belonging to the best traditions' of the people" (Salas 2021: 6, cf. Fernandes 2006; Gold 2016).

However ubiquitous, *la lucha* and *luchando* are taken up by different communities in ways that betray the latent complexities of class, race, gender, and sexuality, as these play out in matters of survival, resistance, and struggle. Following Williams (1976) and Kofti (2023: 13),¹ I approach *la lucha* as a "keyword" whose changing meanings and registers bear the weight of the island's recent history and complicated position in relation to capitalist processes. Attending to the connections but also the erasures of such an understanding of work offers a valuable window into the politics of labour it comes to address in each given context. Different scholars working on the island have pointed out the prevalence of the term as a national concept and as a "popular discourse of every Cuban's daily struggle" (Steuer 2022: 114), whose vagueness nevertheless glosses over the widening race and class differences that have become observable in the socialist context during the last decade (cf. Salas

¹ Specifically, I am inspired by Kofti's treatment of "communism" as a keyword that encapsulates the complexities of historical transformations in the context of post-socialist transition in Bulgaria (2023: 13). Her approach builds on the work of Williams (1976) and his exploration of certain "keywords" as a vocabulary for cultural and social transformation in the 20th century.

2021: 7). Adopting the concept uncritically does not take us very far in addressing the structural factors that decide how life chances, income generating-activities, and mobilities are allocated, nor the sliding scale and hierarchies of “struggle” that different activities fall on. On that note, some researchers have examined the concrete ways in which the term is taken up from a black queer perspective in the economies of the street, and as rooted in the unfolding racial, gender, and labour relationships from the Special Period onwards (Allen 2011).

Having noted some of the contextual contours of this idea of the struggle in Cuba, my own usage of it comes with certain caveats and involves several levels of translation. The first is the translation that black trans women enact when they use a complicated concept from home to speak about their work in the diaspora, and particularly migratory contexts in Europe. The second level has to do with the way I first perceived their usage of *luchando* as a striking description of their daily life and work, which I only later proceeded to historicize and contextualize. The third level involves my own act of “borrowing” it as an analytical lens, putting it in dialogue with the labour processes and understandings of other – local and migrant – sex workers in Athens that occupy the same spaces as Cuban participants. The way I saw it, the women’s struggles to make a life for themselves amidst growing dispossession and illegalization involved a lot more than just the direct sale of sexual services, and engaged their reproductive labour – paid or unpaid – in a host of ways that shifted with time. In my own research, *la lucha* therefore came to signify the continuum of feminized work that cis and trans women did, and their negotiations and struggles across various forms of devalued tasks that are assigned to them as a flexible, cheap, and often disposable labour force – including in the formal sector of the Greek economy. Taking seriously the situatedness and plasticity of this concept in the Cuban context (from the revolution to the subsequent unraveling of the island’s economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union, on to the current unprecedented crisis) does not preclude us from highlighting these connections, as well as the richness of analytical tensions that using “*la lucha/luchando*” to designate sex work suggests. In each chapter, I take up different dimensions of this central concept to build an understanding of the complex relationship between sex work and other kinds of

labour. Unavoidably, in this process of translation, some of the stakes and limitations of the use of the concept in Cuba are not as thoroughly considered. That being said, I try to maintain a balance between using it to make my points, and not bending it beyond recognition.

Sex work is laden with thorny issues about social reproduction, what counts as “real work”, and legitimacy in political understandings of labour. For that reason, entering this discussion of “struggle” from the starting point of sex work involves a number of implicit political arguments and twists to traditional Marxist understandings of work and the working class. It also means it may sit less comfortably with the more common-sense national repertoires of *la lucha* in Cuba, as well as moralistic discourses of dignified work and the struggle of “the common people” that surged in the memoranda and post-memoranda years in Greece.² Furthermore, highlighting the processual, ongoing character of struggle bypasses progressive teleologies of liberation, and can be used to make a point about sex work more specifically that goes beyond the binaries of freedom vs. coercion that haunt prostitution debates. Linking workers’ labour processes to such an understanding of continuous struggle while foregrounding the capitalist state illuminates the ways bodies and communities are marked as devalued on account of ever-expanding categorizations. Race, gender, and sexuality are inextricably tied to the myriad forms of capitalist extraction of value, and suggest we need to go further than the “nested typologies of class” (Kasmir and Carbonnela 2008: 6, Steur 2022) to keep up with the constant reshufflings and re-constitution of the labour force. In that sense, by borrowing a term that Cuban hustlers in the diaspora have already appropriated in an ambivalent dialogue to state socialist repertoires, I am not trying to offer up another homogenizing lens. Neither in Cuba, and definitely not in Greece, are we “all on the same boat”. If anything, one of the main points of this thesis is to maintain a focus on overlapping processes of (de)valuation that span multiple temporalities and

² By “memoranda” I am referring to the agreements (Memorandum of Agreement) for internal economic restructuring signed between Greece, European creditor countries, the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission during the Greek debt crisis. The three different memoranda were signed in 2010, 2012, and 2015, with various sets of austerity measures successively passed throughout this period. 2018 marks Greece’s official exit from the memoranda.

geopolitical articulations, that thrive on differentiation and fragmentation, but nonetheless coalesce in shared spaces, livelihoods, and struggles in the Greek capital.

I.2 Greece and the historical juncture

Conducting this study in Greece meant coming to terms with the specificities of the country's history, geopolitical position, and the particular juncture in which my research took place. Although a central factor for my doing research in Athens was my familiarity with the city and my ability to build long-term relationships there on account of it being my hometown, the particular field at the particular time offers an appropriate window into the questions I set out to study for other reasons too. I am thinking specifically of Greece's dual role as a regional hegemony and as a country that has been experiencing a deep recession of its own in the last decade. The recent reorganization of labour relations under austerity and the debt crisis came on top of a longer and ongoing history of dispossession and class formation, particularly since the country has been a reception point for multiple migrations. These migrations were met with practices of state management that have profoundly shaped Greece's labour dynamics. Particularly following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the industries I touch upon in this study expanded to an unprecedented level, making Greece a regional hub for sex work, domestic labour, and entertainment that drew the attention of workers, bosses, and clients alike. The imprint of these processes in the spaces I studied and in the Greek labour market at large means that class and dispossession must be studied in a longer-term framework, and cannot be limited to the common-sense emphasis on the "Greek crisis" and its aftermath.

I.2.1 The pandemic, the "crisis" and internal devaluation

My PhD research officially began in 2019 and was completed in 2025. A big part of my systematic fieldwork took place in and out of successive covid-19 lockdowns, which lasted around three and six months each and involved a striking reorganization of intimacy and the work that sustains it. The feminized, mostly informal sectors in which my interlocutors worked were hit especially hard. Most of the women I knew kept working through the pandemic, to the extent that they found clients and that spaces for them to work still existed. Many changed the way they did sex work, shifted their

focus towards elderly care or babysitting, and invested more in their personal relationships as sources of material support. Those who stopped selling sex did so largely because the strolls where they worked were now deserted, and because they could not easily move on to another type of sex work either. People who relied on face-to-face soliciting and screening clients could not all just switch to online work, whether that was performing on web-cams or securing in-person dates through online ads. Considering that most of the women's other incomes were also affected by the ban on city-wide movement that basically illegalized all informal work and associated travel,³ the lockdowns technically meant that my interlocutors would quite literally be disposed, thrown out from the previous arrangements that secured their social reproduction. For those who could not work, the lockdowns meant mounting debt, living with less, asking for "help" from clients, partners, and friends, and relying on occasional aid from NGOs.⁴

After two years of measures that heavily affected the sex industry and informal workers in general, many research participants encountered a landscape where sex work featured differently than before. For some women, this coincided with their ageing, which also played a huge role in the viability of sex work as their main income-generating activity. In any case, some (those who could) started to look towards openings in the formal labour market. This included subsidized programs for labour market integration for the unemployed, low-wage temporary formal jobs, and peer work in NGOs. While some women had worked in such jobs before, and had already started to plan for a future when sex work yielded less and less money, the deepening crisis accelerated these processes and made diversification more urgent, more demanding. Yet, if the sex industry was not going too well (at least for the workers), neither were the other sectors. Jobs were exhausting, badly paid, uncertain,

³ The two quarantines that were imposed during the 2020 and 2021 involved bans on "unnecessary movement", which included everything except medical emergencies, grocery shopping, visiting blood relatives, attending some religious ceremonies, exercising, and going to work. The latter included state-recognized jobs that could not be done "from home", and as such made all the movements of informal workers illegal. Besides sex workers, this heavily affected care and intimate workers such as babysitters, cleaners, elderly carers, and so on, who often had to cross big distances in public transport to offer services in the wealthier suburbs of Athens, while risking fines.

⁴ This included primarily supermarket coupons that were passed around twice to some sex workers after crowdfunding campaigns by sex workers' rights groups.

temporary. These ventures into formal, “legitimate” work were not construed as a way out, but more as another strategy research participants took on to scrape by.

Besides the more direct impact of the pandemic, which was literally happening during my fieldwork, my research took place amidst a generalized capitalist crisis and its aftereffects, which materialized in the field in acute but complicated ways. The period of economic recession that began after 2008 in Greece and other countries of the southern European periphery was accompanied by waves of structural adjustment which involved policies of “internal devaluation” (tax increases, cuts in spending, reduction of welfare allowances, and a decrease in wages). In some parts of Greek society, austerity brought about “a severe crisis of well-being and social reproduction, illustrated by growing labour insecurity, economic hardship, food poverty, rising unemployment and increasing welfare dispossession and citizenship destitution” (Alves de Matos and Pusceddu 2021: 2-3). The ways these dynamics affected the livelihoods of sex workers are far from straightforward and not nearly homogeneous. On the one hand, since many sex workers were already more or less illegible to the welfare state and had only a periodic (if that) relationship with formal employment, austerity measures involved cuts in services and rights they had not been entitled to anyway. In that sense, the sharp decline in living standards experienced by some parts of the Greek population maybe had less of a direct impact on sex workers’ labour because many of them had not enjoyed the privileges of legible worker-citizenship before either. This had been either due to their migrant status or to the fact that their main line of work had been invisible and illegalized. Nevertheless, there were other, more indirect ways in which they were affected; in some stalls, the decreased spending capacity of their client base could mean either fewer clients or a decrease in tariffs. Furthermore, the deterioration of labour conditions and the increasing need of different parts of the population to complement their incomes, meant that new people entered the sex industry. According to some interlocutors, this led to increased competition as things tightened and workers navigated different levels of economic pressures.

In the post-austerity context, many of these dynamics continued to be felt, and the decade of “economic crisis” soon gave way to the pandemic and a new wave of

adjustments to the forms of work and social reproduction. From debt and austerity to the pandemic and the ensuing inflation, rising costs of living, and overall uncertainty as tensions and war built up in Europe and the Middle East, it became difficult to maintain a specific timeline of where “normalcy” ended and “crisis” started, or vice versa.

1.2.2 Dispossession in a global/regional frame

While far-reaching, the more recent re-organization of labour relations is hard to extricate from the longer-term realities of devaluation that successive waves of dispossession had already brought, coalescing and leaving their imprint on the lives of workers populating the Athenian strolls. These “episodes” were not experienced by everyone in the same way; arguably, it was during the time of my own research that these processes had expanded, touching on increasingly bigger parts of the population, albeit in differentiated ways. In fact, if primitive accumulation is not a one-time originary event but a continuous process in capitalist history (Federici 2004, Harvey 2003), its ongoing effects are reflected in the spaces of sexual commerce in Athens. The workforce one encounters there carries with it multiple processes of class formation and fragmentation, shaped by different ways of being illegalized and devalued, thrown together and pitted against one another. Favouring a longer-term perspective on labour relations that does not start or end with the “Greek crisis” suggests that there are continuities in the ways a cheap labour force is continuously produced through cascading differentiations that come to include more and more people. The sex industry attests to these processes in a complex but condensed way, that speaks to labour politics that extend far beyond the sale of sex itself.

Despite its position in Europe’s “less developed” southeastern periphery, from the late 1980s Greece saw its status upgraded. This was the result of a series of interconnected processes. For one, its entry into the European Union in 1981 meant access to funds and development infrastructure, as well as new possibilities for mobility (of people, goods, capital) towards other European countries. Meanwhile, Greece started to receive successive waves of migration which reshaped its role into a regional hegemonic force vis-à-vis its neighboring economies. These migrations started in the 1980s with the arrival of workers from Asia (particularly the Philippines),

Northern Africa, and some countries of the Balkans, and peaked in the 1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Greece expanded its role in the Balkan region, outsourcing a lot of its business enterprises to its post-socialist neighbors while at the same time relying on the inward flows of migrant workers from the same countries for a steady supply of cheap labour. The double processes of “elite mobility” and labour migration that connect Greece and the Balkans have been researched in depth by other anthropologists, who have shown that “the mobility of people and capital has followed complementary logics and directions” (Kofti 2023: 15; cf. Angelidou and Kofti 2013 for the case of Greek-Bulgarian relations). Researchers working on migration in the Greek side of things have equally emphasized its game-changing impact for the Greek economy and labour market following the end of the Cold War (Lazaridis and Poyago-Theotoky 1999: 719; cf. Petrakou and Dimitrakopoulos 2003: 25-6). Scholars investigating the “feminization of migration”⁵ have studied the immigration of Albanian, Eastern European, Filipina, and African women to Greece, and have pointed out how the rapid growth of the service sector from the 1990s onwards, particularly in the domains of domestic service, tourism, and sex-related entertainment, relied on the informal labour of these migrants (Lazaridis 2001: 74-5). Indeed, between the 1980s and 1990s, these industries became rapidly internationalized, the sex industry expanded and Greece became a hub for sexual commerce.⁶

In the last two decades, Greece has continued to be a reception point for different kinds of mobility that reshape the local economy, providing opportunities for the expansion of new sectors and domains of extraction, at the expense of newly arrived groups who find themselves having to navigate undetermined periods of waiting and containment in legal limbo, and a sliding scale of bureaucratic labels including “asylum seeker”, “unaccompanied minor”, “refugee” and “economic migrant”. Particularly in the wake of the “refugee crisis” of 2015-2016, and the arrival of unprecedented numbers of people from Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries of

⁵ By now this term is widely used to refer to the growing occurrence of women’s labour migrations across the globe, particularly in connection to the expansion of service sectors and the care industry. For a landmark work representative of the research on the feminization of migration, see Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003.

⁶ I discuss these processes at length throughout the chapters of the dissertation, particularly chapters 2 and 3.

the Middle East, the humanitarian/NGO sector underwent a huge expansion, taking a central role in social policy interventions as well as employment. This coincided with the Greek debt crisis in complicated ways. For one, it became an opportunity through which Greece could negotiate and access international funds on account of its frontline position on Europe's south-eastern borders. This gave rise to the mushrooming of numerous organizations and initiatives that employed workers of different statuses (including many volunteers) to manage, document, and process the newly arrived populations. The expansion of humanitarian governance to contain the combined effects of the "refugee crisis" and austerity meant that increasing numbers of people, including locals, came to occupy the position of "beneficiary" in an assortment of "social solidarity", humanitarian, and charitable initiatives (cf. Cabot 2018). In my field, such interventions materialized as projects related to refugees, HIV prevention, and the designation of different kinds of "vulnerable populations" made their presence known in strolls and other sites of interest where people negotiating all these different statuses lived, worked, and socialized. This study's research participants were caught up in these developments in different ways, as service beneficiaries, "peer" or "community" workers, and target groups at large. My own entry into the field began from a space constructed in the midst of these very processes. With time, I observed that the existence of different organizations dealing with sex work issues in Athens often relied on their capacity to reach different populations construed as targets for governance. Funding for HIV prevention, which is where the main bulk of institutional support sustaining sex work NGOs came from, was not always targeted to sex workers in general terms. Rather, it was more closely informed by the shifting institutional priorities of each given period, and included, for example, interventions regarding refugees and unaccompanied minors on account of their real or presumed resort to practices of "survival sex" to secure basic necessities and money, or, later on, projects for "trans empowerment".

In this context, and as my own research unfolded in close dialogue with diasporic Cuban workers' conceptualizations of labour and everyday struggle, Greece also came to occupy a new, less visible, position as a destination or transit point for Cuban migrations. While Greece has not been a traditional destination for Cuban

migrants like the US or, to a lesser extent Spain, throughout my research there was an observable increase in the numbers of Cuban migrants arriving in the country and participating in different kinds of migrant networks in the city. In my fieldwork, this materialized in the increasing requests of interlocutors to help newly arrived friends and acquaintances with asylum and residency applications. These migrations relied primarily on the Russian/Balkan route into the European Union and, for those who ended up and opted to stay in Greece, mostly involved temporary applications for asylum and spousal residency processes. For some years, Cuba and Greece became increasingly connected through these mobilities and the accompanying flows of people, capital, and goods.

Upon visiting Cuba and delving into local research on migration, the dynamics underwriting these mobilities became clearer, connecting the realities I observed in Greece to changing US policies. The opening and popularization of the Balkan route to Europe from 2017-2018 onwards was related to a series of transformations in US-Cuban relations and migration policy.⁷ In 2017, as part of an effort to normalize diplomatic relations between the two countries, the Obama administration repealed the Cuban Adjustment Act, a long-standing policy which had aimed to exert pressure on the Cuban political establishment by granting automatic residency to any Cuban arriving on US soil (provided that they were not first intercepted at sea). The first Trump presidency that followed undid this, but continued to make Cuban migration to the US difficult through the generalized tightening of migration restrictions and the reinstatement of the “Remain in Mexico” policy. Dealing with deteriorating economic conditions in the island, many Cubans started to look for other destinations in a more concerted manner. The Balkan route to Europe presented an alternative on account of the then visa-free policies of Russia and Serbia. These allowed migrants to reach Russia, then Serbia legally, and from there undergo a journey south, through Macedonia to Greece, or head west and eventually reach Spain. In that context, Greece became both a destination, and a pit-stop for Cubans’ eventual migration to Spain.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the changing policies around the Cuban Adjustment Act see González Maestrey 2020; for the new wave of Cuban migration to Greece, see Psaropoulos 2021.

Although there had been some Cuban migrants in Greece before,⁸ the sudden, concerted wave of Cuban immigration into Greece lasted from 2017 until around 2022, only to subside afterward. The route to Greece and the associated mobilities seemed to wind down by 2022-2023 on account of the Ukraine-Russia war and the termination of Serbia's visa-free policy, but a relationship between the two countries has by now been established. This has occurred both through the recent, relatively massive, migrations of Cubans to Greece, as well as sparser mobilities that had already been occurring through marriage and the connections established by Greek tourists and business-people who regularly visited the island. The sediment of these mobilities partly materializes in the participation of Cubans in the wider Latin American/Caribbean migrant networks found in Greece, involving people from Brazil, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and so on.

To conclude, the window on geopolitical transformations and processes of dispossession I offer here is clearly selective and nowhere near exhaustive. This is because I have chosen to focus on the dynamics that bore more directly on the lives of the research participants in this study. My extensive discussion of Cuban migration to Greece in spite of its relatively small impact in the country so far has to do with the importance of Cuban interlocutors in my research, as well as the fact that these dynamics are still new and have not been studied in any systematic manner to this day. The game-changing impact of Eastern-European and Balkan migration is discussed in more detail throughout the chapters, where my ethnographic material builds on the many analyses of other scholars before me.

⁸ Although I was not able to find hard data for these early migrations, anecdotal evidence and the experience of Cuban acquaintances in Greece suggests that many of them happened through marriage and were linked to the mobility of Greeks for tourism or business in Cuba and other islands in the Caribbean. In fact, several Caribbean migrants I met in Greece had been married to Greeks who were connected to the shipping and tourist/hotel industries.

I.3 Class, race, migration, gender: thinking across categories

I.3.1 The choice of interlocutors and the problem with symbolic identification

Different social movements have often zeroed in on sex work, migration, and transness, to bring forth claims against the separations that position sex workers, immigrants, and trans people as reviled. “We are all prostitutes”, “we are all immigrants”, and more recently, “we are all trans” have been some mottoes that have appeared throughout the years to posit these positionalities as grounds for universal experience and solidarity. No matter how well-intentioned, these statements are exemplary of a hollow, naively abstract, and even harmful position that can only conceive of political connections through seamless and unproblematic identification. Predictably, sex worker, trans, and migrant movements have criticized the idea that in order to be taken into account, they must either be posited as symbolic of wider struggles (Smith and Mac 2018: 37, Gleeson and O’Rourke 2021: 11) or excluded from them as threatening interlopers (Gleeson and O’Rourke 2021: 12).

When it comes to sex work, the tendency to use prostitution as a symbol for the wider disembeddedness and breakdown wrought by different social transformations has a long history (cf. Ferguson 2003: 3-10). In the tradition of historical materialism, this can be traced to Marx himself, and his emblematic usage of the prostitute as an allegory for the worker’s alienation under the new capitalist system (Marx 1964: 133). Although his idea that “prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer” (*ibid.*) could be seen as a move of including sex workers within the universe of working-class labour, Marx’s silence on reproductive work and the productivist focus that has defined orthodox Marxism thereafter would suggest otherwise. Similarly, Mac and Smith comment that, within feminist debates, sex has often been treated as a symbol which makes sex work *representational*, rather than concrete (2018: 37). As the two authors, sex workers and feminists themselves, point out,

“The difference between prostitutes and non-prostitutes and between current and former sex workers is fundamental not because of *identities*, but because of the *material conditions* of those who sell and trade sex. Only some people are *actually having sex for money* in the here and now – and others are not” (2018: 8).

As for gender and transness, when she is not outright rejected as a holder of “male privilege”, the trans woman in feminism is similarly relegated to “a representation of gender trouble writ large. Her own account can only be received with suspicion, yet much is demanded of her. Not only must she offer an account for her gender, but for yours as well” (Gleeson and O’Rourke 2021: 12). By positioning trans women as allegorical figures that must speak about larger processes of gender dissidence and proletarianization, “little space is left for the actual substance of trans life, the experiences of surviving in the context of separation that we already share among ourselves, and the resultant insights for a broader and refreshed view of capitalism’s reproduction” (Gleeson and O’Rourke 2021: 11).

Finally, well-intentioned attempts to deconstruct borders and national belonging and to reconstitute mobility as the basis for a fundamental, shared, human experience, may sometimes fail to consider the concrete implications of citizenship and migration status as actual people move, work, and live within nation-states. As long as they remain limited to symbolic affinities, they cannot tackle the specifics of how processes of illegalization differentially constitute the experience of migrants and those officially understood as citizens. The fractures of race and racialization take this problem further. Clearly, the migration apparatus and the production of illegality in Greece and elsewhere rest on deeply entrenched racial and colonial hierarchies. The production of value in the sex industry and the wider labour market feeds off from intertwined, if not co-constituted, processes of illegalization and racialization (see De Genova 2002, De Genova and Roy 2019). Nevertheless, connected as they are, the issues of migration, illegalization, and citizenship should not be used as simple stand-ins for race. My interlocutors included black women from Cuba, Brazilians of mixed and indigenous backgrounds, white Greek citizens, and women from the ex-Soviet Union and the Balkans who occupied differentiated positions in a continuum of whiteness that has been co-constituted with nationality, religion, and culture at least

since the 1990s.⁹ Besides their different racialized positions, their trajectories also testified to different moments in Greece's migration history and the state's management of people's movements and positions in it. Rather than subsuming race under class, migration, and illegalization, I have chosen to tease out how racial hierarchies manifested in the work and life trajectories of different research participants, by foregrounding specific instances in their work when these dynamics became palpable, as well as engaging with research on the racist construction of the Greek labour market.

In my interest to explore labour and illegalization through the starting point of sex work, and the ways processes of (de)valuation differentially incorporate ever-expanding categories of people into labour markets, I found it useful, if not necessary, to think across some of these categories (migrant, refugee, local, cis, trans, older, younger). In doing so, my attention remained on concrete relations rather than symbolic affinities. My interlocutors were working-class women who experienced their status as illegalized workers across many axes of differentiation, which resulted in mixed and constantly shifting positions in the sex industry and the labour market at large. My argument is that the generalized process of illegalization and categorization as "special" and devalued kinds of workers was something they shared, in ways that diverged but were intimately connected to the position of femininity in the capitalist organization of work.

This commonality is foundational for the choice of interlocutors and for the development of my research. Nevertheless, my materialist approach should not be confused neither with some of the aforementioned feminist arguments around undifferentiated sisterhood, nor with the unifying framework that the concept of *la lucha* has been used towards in the Cuban context. Keeping my focus on what I actually observed during fieldwork, I have tried to keep a balance between commonalities and axes of differentiation, and to examine how connections are made and unmade in real-

⁹ To be specific, as other scholars have shown, in the racial/national hierarchies that were established in Greece following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian and Ukrainian migrants were deemed "whiter" than Albanians or Bulgarians. Based on these analyses, "whiteness" itself emerges as a differentiated, constructed position in Greece, that is co-constituted with issues of nationality, religion, and culture (cf. Lazaridis 2001).

life settings. This holds true for the circumstances of cis and trans interlocutors, for the connection between sex work and other “women’s work”, for processes of racialization, and for the continuum of illegalization that underwrites migration status and participation in an illicit industry. On the one hand, this means refusing the segregation of different struggles and groups as entirely separate objects of study that are irrelevant to one another, especially when these are found to share spaces, tactics, ways of working, and relationships, while simultaneously being marked by the state as distinct but in some ways equivalent pools of cheap and exploitable labour. On the other hand, it is important to remain aware of different experiences, and of the ways racism, migrant status, gender identity, age, ability, and so on continuously co-construct one’s class position and value as a worker in shifting capitalist organization. Moreover, it would be amiss to ignore the real impact of fragmentation within “communities”, which involve their own divisions, outsiders, and relationships of exploitation.

I.3.2 Gender struggle, class struggle

In effect, throughout this thesis I try to make the experiences of cis and trans, migrant and local, working women of different backgrounds speak together, while trying to avoid easy claims to transcendence. Neither am I keen to make this analysis about comparing experiences, creating a yardstick for measuring oppressions. The stories of my interlocutors, combined with a close look at state practice, can hopefully tread along these tensions, and offer insight to capitalist processes of rendering certain bodies devalued and exploitable, as well as the tools people devise to survive, build communities, and live meaningful lives within and against this logic of separation and disposability. In doing so, I draw heavily from queer/trans and feminist Marxist approaches that understand gender and sexuality as foundational building blocks for the dynamic unfolding of capitalist labour relations. For cis and trans women alike, class struggle is also a struggle against imposed gender expectations, from devaluation and exploitation at work to the construction of the nuclear family as a space where given gender and class positions are reproduced through labour divisions and property relations.

In fact, if gender is not an essential quality that rests on biology but rather a particularly sticky and deeply ingrained way of organizing labour and social roles, then the ways my interlocutors' struggles encapsulate contestations over work and gender can become clearer. For the trans protagonists in this research, it is perhaps readily apparent how their mobility and labour trajectories ran parallel or were entangled with their gender transitions. The struggle contained all that creative work it takes to negotiate, subvert and re-make assigned gender roles and practices, alone and in community – and to survive the process. It was also heavily underwritten by all the ways this meant they were subjected to structures that marked them as devalued, abject, expendable, even criminalized. At the same time, even if to a lesser and definitely more implicit extent, cisgender interlocutors' struggles also eventually illuminated subtle refusals, appropriations, and forms of acquiescence to rigid gender and sexual placements and the work attached to them.

In *Translated Woman*, a book about the life and work of Esperanza, a cisgender working-class woman from rural Mexico, Ruth Behar describes Esperanza's life story as "a long meditation on [Esperanza's] own engendering" (2003: 278). Esperanza's eventual, at the time unthinkable, choice to live without a husband, is weaved through her labour trajectory as a street peddler and the tactics she found to survive outside marriage and the nuclear family. Behar opens the book by saying Esperanza was striking in how she refused "to act like *a woman of her class*: she was neither demure nor defeated" (2003: 3). The main part of the book details her negotiations around motherhood, family, marriage, and work. By the end, her class disobedience emerges as deeply connected to the negotiation of imposed gender roles. Behar ends by reflecting that "Esperanza's struggle to define herself, through gender and in spite of gender, ambiguously gendered rather than passively gendered, points the way to the possibility of true gender transformation" (2003: 296).

Decades later, *Transgender Marxism* brings some of these tentative connections to light more forcefully. In her contribution to the volume, O'Brien explicitly links labour and gender struggles, suggesting that trans workers fighting to survive within and outside of work "are the leading edge for working-class people to discover the power and pleasure in refusing the gender expectations imposed on

everyone” (O’Brien 2021: 57). In the introduction to the book, gender transitions are described as closely tied and somewhat akin to class struggle:

“Transition, too, must come to be understood by revolutionaries as a response to its own form of *hunger*. The longings that drive so many to reforge lives for ourselves that leave us thoroughly proletarianised, or cast out, rendered surplus. Those cravings and cavings-in that clinicians have long attempted to desiccate under the catch-all term ‘dysphoria’. In truth, our moments of euphoric coping are enmeshed with the moments in which we are struck dumb by gut-churning dread” (Gleeson and O’Rourke 2021: 9).

These refusals to be “well-adjusted” in a world that demands that one lives small and docile are as much enmeshed in history and the capitalist world as class struggle is. They are understood by the authors as a constant fight against hegemonic logics, which always threaten to selectively incorporate or undermine ways of living that are perceived as threatening. If, as Audre Lorde pointed out, survival itself can be a form of resistance for those who were marked as disposable and worthless (see Allen 2011: 30), we can start to think about the nerve it takes to try to live one’s life and practice a certain, if fleeting, kind of freedom. The audacity to want more than just grueling work, to live one’s gender and sexuality against the grain of asphyxiating common sense, to be mobile and go to places when one is supposed to stay put, to clear up paths for others to follow, to find moments of joy and companionship, and to strive for a mutual recognition and community that goes beyond state legibility and hegemonic categorization.

In such an understanding, freedom is not a teleological end point, but rather, as Wendy Brown put it, “a permanent struggle against what will otherwise be done to and for us” (1995: 25). The stakes of this struggle are very high: consider the myriad forms of intimidation, punishment, and violence that weigh in to put working-class women back in their place, discipline them with fear and shame, and remind them not to ask for too much and to never let their guard down. The central concept of this research, *la lucha*, which Cuban interlocutors used to connote sex work itself, therefore bears the weight of this fight for a life worth living, as well as the forms of

discipline that racialized, working-class, migrant, gender and sexual dissident, women encountered.

I.4 Key ethnographic perspectives and connections

This study places itself in a consistent dialogue with work conducted in places that may at first seem counter-intuitive or remote. Besides research from Greece, Southern Europe and the Balkans, as well as some important ethnographies examining dynamics in the US (Bernstein 2007), many of the key perspectives I take up and rework come from India, Mexico, Brazil, and the Caribbean. Clearly, “geography always matters for the ways in which we explore the world and interpret its logics” (Mezzadri 2019: 37). Far from random, the connections that I have identified between research conducted in these settings and my own findings have to do both with the lived realities in each context, and with the tools that researchers have developed to analyze them.

In the cases of Cuba, Brazil, and the Balkans the connections are first and foremost practical: they are brought up by the circulation of people, ideas, practices, and capital between these countries and Greece, and are present in the trajectories of the research participants in a direct sense. Nevertheless, the resonance in Greece of analytical approaches of scholars working in India, Latin America and the Caribbean more widely suggest that there are other commonalities to consider here. For one, I am thinking of the central – albeit different – role of informality and wagelessness in each context, and the way research conducted there must come to terms with the artificiality of the formal/informal binary in understandings of labour and value (Mezzadri 2019, Cabezas 2009: 13). In Greece and other southern European countries, women’s work has been particularly delegated to informal or quasi-informal status, and the bulk of the feminist political understandings of value that I rely on throughout this thesis were actually borne out of precisely such contexts (Dalla Costa and James 1975, cf. Mezzadri 2019: 37). While the standard employment relation that characterized the Fordist era in the US and parts of Europe by now seems to have clearly been the exception rather than the rule, in “the majority world” (Mezzadri 2019) the pervasive and long-standing informalization of labour relations takes place in tandem to states’ active regulation of certain parts of socio-economic life, and

simultaneous reliance on expanded processes of illegalization. By focusing our attention to the ways people make their living in these diverse contexts, it becomes particularly clear how social reproduction plays a key role in the generation of value and the extraction of surplus (*ibid*). For example, sociopolitical perspectives from India highlight the importance of state policies of quasi-illegalization that include but also extend beyond migration to issues about housing, forms of livelihood, and people's presence in public space (Shah 2014, Chatterjee 2004).

Meanwhile, scholarship from Mexico has offered groundbreaking analyses on the production of both illegality and a cheap labour force on either side of the US-Mexican border. At least since the 1980s, feminist authors researching maquila production and sex work have analyzed how gender, race, and sexuality come to constitute markers of disposability in a global circulation of value spanning industrial and non-industrial settings, and the ways the strict regulation of women's bodies feeds into that process (Fernandez Kelly 1983, Wright 2006, Hennessy 2013, Veloz Contreras 2017). Finally, in their own ways, South Asian, Latin American, Balkan, and Southern European contexts bear the imprint of a complicated mix between state welfare models, flexible capitalism, and different histories where socialist ideologies have had an impact.¹⁰ The result is that analyses of labour and social reproduction emerging from a prolonged engagement with these geographies can display surprising similarities; often, these are exactly the nuances that theories emerging from the US or Western Europe may fall short in capturing when they are applied uncritically in other contexts. Having said that, thinking together with the aforementioned analyses is done across important differences whose role must not be underestimated either.

The lasting colonial dynamics underwriting Latin American and South Asian contexts are a case in point. In contrast to certain analyses of austerity and EU-Greece

¹⁰ This point was made in correspondence with Keralan anthropologist Shilpa Parthan, as we discussed the commonalities and divergences between our research projects in Kerala and Athens. She attributed the scope of similarities that are often discernible between Latin American, South Asian, and European field-sites (as opposed to research focused on the US) to the fact that "in those contexts, one contends with the complexity of the co-existence of rampant late capitalist logics with welfare states, as well as invocations and histories of socialism and communism in mainstream politics" (Parthan, personal communication).

relations that emerged in the memoranda years and that drew such connections by positing Greece as practically a “debt colony” of Germany or the E.U. (e.g. Kotzias 2013), I am not arguing here that Greece is in any kind of colonial relation or that its socioeconomic realities necessarily have more in common with the Global South than with the rest of Europe, in every way. More importantly, it is crucial to refrain from seeing Greece as simply a dependent nation-state unable to organize exploitative relations in its interior and vis-à-vis other countries (an argument that can be made for most nation-states whether they are post-colonial or not). Greece’s position as a focal point at the crossroads between the European Union, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Northern Africa, makes for a complexity that involves different levels of local, regional, and global hierarchies. The point here is that these can be better understood *relationally*, in concrete terms, and not in isolation. To be precise, besides an indebted country that was caught up in relations of dependency with creditor countries and the IMF for the best part of the 2010s, and besides a sending country for migration abroad since the 1960s, Greece has also been involved in center-periphery dynamics as a regional power and as the receiving country of multiple Eastern-European, African, Asian, and Latin American migrations, for forty years and counting. Especially from the nineties onwards, the Greek economy has been built on the dispossession and exploitation of migrants from neighboring regions, testifying to international flows of labour power and capital that have been crucial to both sending and receiving ends. These dynamics are impossible to ignore in my field, since they manifest in the concrete struggles of local and migrant interlocutors who try to make a living in modern-day, post-memorandum Athens, by engaging in a sex industry that has been profoundly reshaped by state policies on migration and the mobilities they targeted since the 1980s. Making sense of realities observed in Greece by thinking with specific contexts in the Global South, therefore, does not mean erasing their distinct political histories, the specific material conditions of their populations, and the complex geopolitical articulations at play in each case. The same top-down processes may have different outcomes in different social geographies,¹¹ or different long-term dynamics

¹¹ For example, consider the different kinds of trans politics that emerged out of strikingly similar programmes of gender equality in Kerala, Argentina, and Greece, as discussed in Chapter 5 and through the findings of Parthan (forthcoming), Cutuli (2015) and myself in each context respectively.

in statecraft and political struggle may translate to similar realities on the ground. Put in dialogue with my own material, what these approaches certainly do share is their commitment to re-conceptualize labour and class in ways that reflect the actual relationships that have unfolded in each society, moving beyond a “North Atlantic parochialism” (Cowan et al. 2023: 11) that takes regular waged employment as the norm.

Here, it is important to add that my engagement with Greek scholarship involved dealing with the relative absence of contemporary work on sexual labour. With some exceptions focusing on sex work and trafficking in the 1990s, which I discuss at length in later chapters, the dynamics of the sex industry have been understudied in Anthropology, even though it has been a huge and expanding sector at least in the last decades. The same goes for trans/queer labour. Recently, some relevant work on these counts has emerged by historians, which I draw upon in my analysis of state practice. Furthermore, considering how the sector of domestic work has received consistent scholarly attention in Greece, I have engaged with these perspectives and sought to complement the picture they paint by highlighting the concrete connections between different kinds of paid reproductive work. This is easier to do if one starts from sex work than the other way around, and part of the contribution of this study involves tracing these links, both from the top-down (in terms of state planning and the management of labour) and by looking at workers’ trajectories on the ground.

1.5 A note on terminology

In the context of sex industry studies, terminology has been a topic of heated debate, and different ways of speaking about sexual exchanges have carried heavy political connotations. The same goes for some other terms I use throughout the study. For that reason, I offer some disambiguation of my usage here.

Work and labour: Throughout the dissertation I use work and labour interchangeably. If there is a difference between the two, it could be said that work describes an activity, while labour is an analytical concept that carries a political charge that connotes the ways these same activities are categorized, valued, allocated and exploited.

Sex work, prostitution, transactional sex: Although I use all of these terms throughout my analysis, sex work and transactional sex more closely reflect my perspective on the blurred boundaries and extensive continuum of feminized work that engages one's sexuality. I use prostitution mostly in reference to state policy, feminist debates, and in historical overviews, as I feel it better reflects the language and the perspectives used in these contexts (cf. Bernstein 2007: 17-8). While each term bears a different charge, none of them is perfect and they all have been criticized in different ways by sex workers themselves. I use them interchangeably to reflect this diversity and because I believe that the nuances of sexual labour cannot be exhausted in the politics of terminology. Furthermore, although sex work encompasses a huge variety of face-to-face, online, and pornographic work, the forms of sexual labour I am exploring in this research concern embodied, face-to-face labour more strictly.

Illegalization and criminalization: Again, I use both terms in slightly different but overlapping ways, but employ illegalization as a key analytical framework that best reflects the articulation of state practice and sex work in the Greek case. I discuss this choice at length in Chapter 3.

Queer: In some parts of the text, I use the word "queer" as a shorthand¹² to broadly refer to people that engage non-normative genders and sexual practices in their daily lives, who find themselves outside or not quite inside nuclear family arrangements, and the ways these positions intersect with sexual labour. Rather than an identitarian qualification, I am working with an expanded notion of queerness that draws from Cathy Cohen's landmark essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" (1997). That being said, none of the women I worked with would use the word "queer" to describe herself, and neither were they in any way attached to the most postmodern narratives of queer theory.

I.6 Timeline of the research and structure of the chapters

Although the phase of systematic fieldwork for this study lasted between 2020 and 2022, I had been involved with issues related to sex work beforehand, and continued to spend time with my closest research participants after this more intensive research

¹² For a similar choice to use this term with caveats, see Stout (2014: 25-6).

period. Living in the same city and maintaining relationships with people I had grown close with meant that the material and insights presented here extend to a more ample timeline, as new ideas and arguments were added in chapters whose main material was already written.

The chapters that make up the dissertation were written over the course of three years. The first chapter I wrote was the second one, on the state policies that affect sex work in Greece. An initial version of the sixth chapter appeared as a research article in the Special Issue “Migration, Sexuality, and Gender Identity” of the *Anti-trafficking Review*, edited by Svati Shah and published in 2022. The rest of the chapters were written in the order in which they appear, ending with a reworked version of Chapter 6. Although the contents underwent a lot of editing throughout the years and particularly as I was finalizing my dissertation, the level of engagement that each chapter offers does reflect my own deepening intimacy with the women I worked with and the issues I was writing about. Having started to plan this research when I was around 24 years old, and completing the PhD eight years later, I grew up with it in ways I had not entirely anticipated.

In the final months of the writing process, I was given the opportunity to spend a month in Mexico through a research exchange program with the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, and afterwards another month in Cuba with the University of Havana. In the first case, participating in departmental seminars and meeting with local scholars working on issues of sexual labour allowed me to delve deeper into the debates and analyses that line Latin American social science, particularly the tools from feminist Mexican ethnography that constitute an important influence in my own work. In the case of Cuba, I was able to enrich my understanding in both bibliographical and ethnographic terms, as I interacted with other social scientists, attended seminars on Cuban migration and economy, and visited trans organizations. While one month was not nearly enough time to conduct actual fieldwork, this trip and the connections I made there shed a new light on various themes discussed throughout this work. Some of these provisional ideas have made their way into the chapters, but to go deeper further research would need to be done.

Attributing due importance to my ongoing engagement with people and matters relating to “the field” long after the fieldwork period, I have maintained a layered style in my writing. Instead of homogenizing all my findings into one steadfast argument written in retrospect from some arbitrary end point, I have tried to write in a way that reflects this long and unfinished process of learning in dialogue with the women, as our lives unfolded and took unforeseen turns. The result is what Deger has described as a “spiral” argument (2006: xxxi) that is built on and complicated with each new chapter, and that unavoidably involves ellipses, silences, and blind spots. The chapters reflect a kind of chronological structure, both in terms of what happened in the lives of the women, and in terms of my own research process and the ways our relationships developed. With time, we built more trust among each other, and I became more aware of just how many things I did not know. As life complicated any certainties I had started out with, I changed my mind about a lot of things, and revisited ideas that began looking too naïve, romantic, or orderly. I have chosen to keep some of the resulting discordances in the text as a reflection of this process, and what I see as the impossibility of producing an authoritative, totalizing, and seamless narrative (cf. Deger 2006: xxv).

After the Introduction follows Chapter 1, which revolves around methodology. There I outline the main methods I used, the details of participant observation, as well as issues of access and ethics. I go over the different stages of my study, from preliminary research and NGO work, to independent research and my eventual visit to Mexico and Cuba. I also delve into a detailed discussion of my positionality and the challenges, blind spots, and affordances of my analytical/methodological approach.

Chapter 2 is the first ethnographic chapter. It situates my discussion of sex work within the context of Athens, by offering a view into the central stroll of Omonia, where my fieldwork started and where all research participants found themselves working or passing through in different capacities. I use my initial engagement with Omonia to set out some of the main axes and concerns of the dissertation, particularly regarding the ways sex work coexists with other forms of labour, the ways it meets with regulatory mechanisms that diffuse value towards various interested parties including the state, and finally, going deeper into the question of knowledge production in sex work

settings. By saying I put sex work in its place, I am speaking both metaphorically (i.e. introducing the terms of my analysis) and literally, as my discussion of Omonia involves making an argument about public space as a terrain of struggle. Space is understood as a means of production, claimed from above and below through distinct practices of territorialization, appropriation, containment and community-making. I highlight the issue of access to spaces as access to survival itself, and the forms of regulation of public space as one of the means by which dispossession and accumulation take place. By extension, this connects the state's management of public space to localized relations of power, such as the activities of pimps and middlemen in strolls and indoor work.

Chapter 3 examines the state projects that come to bear on the lives of sex workers. It introduces one of the main analytical tools of the study, i.e. the notion of illegalization, and outlines how it is relevant for sex work in Greece in ways that include but also transcend the strict scope of migration governance. In line with the previous chapter's arguments about public space and the territorialization of class relations, this chapter provides a detailed account of relevant state policies and how they translate on the ground, as top-down struggles for the subordination and containment of labour. Following a historical overview of the ways the Greek state has regulated prostitution from the 19th century onwards, I show that its consistent preoccupation with the control of sexual labour rested from early on on the legislative frameworks on prostitution combined with policy on public health, public order, migration, and work. I argue that there are important continuities in the state's management of sexual work throughout history, and that the regulation of prostitution has been intricately tied with wider concerns about work, social reproduction, sexuality, and mobility from the start. Finally, contrary to analyses that attribute the widespread exploitation and illegality in the sex industry to a weak state or inadequate/corrupt law enforcement, I point to connections between regulation, illegalization, labour discipline and the circulation of profit as a consistent *modus operandi* in the management of prostitution in Greece.

Chapter 4 follows the movements of research participants across different jobs and sexual/intimate relations. By delving into workers' trajectories, I further advance

the point I introduce in Chapter 2 about undoing the exceptionalism of prostitution. This move rests on examining the stakes and processes of valuation identified in marriage, sex work, and “straight” but low-paying jobs; in other words, on placing paid sexual labour within the women’s own struggles. The choice to examine sex work within women’s struggles with feminized labour, and to understand these struggles in relation to capitalism and the state means making an argument about value but also about the discipline that underwrites gendered forms of work. Labour and value are approached not simply as economic issues, but rather as political. This approach is indebted to feminist and Global South perspectives, that since the 1970s have sought to expand understandings of labour and value beyond the formal wage relation, as well as recent analyses that explicitly bring feminist and postcolonial arguments together with a historicized and geographically grounded understanding of informality and informalization (Bernstein 2023, Cabezas 2009, Cowan et al. 2023, Mezzadri 2019). Bringing such analytical perspectives together with my field material, I explore my interlocutors’ labour processes, focusing on their movements in the so-called informal economy, from sex work to other service work to marriage. The last section of the chapter traces the circulation of value that is generated from these paid and unpaid forms of work, as it flows towards the state, local actors and sex industry middlemen, families and communities that migrants have left back home.

Chapter 5 continues the discussion of the previous chapter by focusing on research participant’s activities with wage labour and subsidized employment programs in the formal economy. It builds on materialist feminist and queer analyses of political economy to provide a structural argument about how certain bodies and groups are marked as exploitable in ever-expanding capitalist categorizations. I show that the ways workers are differentially integrated into the labour market on account of inhabiting labels such as woman, trans, migrant, etc., traverse binary distinctions between “inclusion” and “exclusion”. Maintaining a focus on state practice and particularly active labour market policies, this chapter suggests that illegalization can operate in tandem with so-called re-integration. Criminalized sex work and the legitimate economy of wage labour or social policy programmes do not stand on opposite sides of “hustling” and “having made it”. I use the concept of the revolving

door (De Genova 2002: 437) to signify the cyclical, rather than linear, movements of workers between formal and informal, licit and illicit economies. Ethnographically, I rely particularly on the labour trajectory of one research participant, a local trans woman in her fifties called Teresa. Besides the specific insights that she herself offers on her work, I use her story to tease out the dynamics that underwrite (sex) workers' longer-term movements across sectors, mediated by employment policies that pinpoint their value as "the permanent labor force of the temporarily employed" (Wright 2006: 88). The chapter ends by bringing the material of chapters 4 and 5 together, and I return my attention to the sex industry and the operation of disposability and value that connects it with other sectors.

Chapter 6 concludes the main body of the dissertation by examining collective forms of struggle. The ways research participants devised to survive together in and through sex work are approached as a form of grassroots labour organizing. Nevertheless, following Jafari Allen's attentiveness to the ways people "build community in the face of terror" (2011: 132), I argue that what is at stake with these practices extends far beyond the sex industry. More aptly, they are positioned at the core of social reproduction for working-class, migrant, gender and sexual non-conforming people, whose lives intersect as they are marked as disposable, exploitable to the point of extermination. The chapter unpacks their collective efforts to alleviate some of the most pressing realities of criminalization, violence, exploitation and devaluation in their daily lives. I look at examples ranging from mobilizations to help co-workers and friends in detention, sharing know-how and information about dangerous clients, and working in groups, to the formation of chosen families as a practice that bridged sex work concerns and the organization of kinship and social reproductive work among trans working-class women of different generations. Finally, I consider how these practices both traversed and were defined by the cross-cutting differentiations of workers that bore the markers of gender non-conformity, racialization, illegality, and migrant-hood, in their experiences of sex work. Tracing links from the dynamics of brokerage all the way to chosen families, I shed light on an expanse of social practices that were in complex and often conflicting relationships with one another, but seemed to respond to the same core issues of illegalization,

invisible work, access to competitive working spaces, and heterogeneous notions of community and kinship.

The conclusion that follows brings together the main arguments of the study, and zooms out of Athens to provide some tentative thoughts about the global connections that tie it to other contexts, particularly in light of my visit to Cuba. It closes with a short epilogue that returns to the politics of research in sex work contexts.

Chapter 1. Methodological perspectives and challenges

Introduction

This chapter covers issues around methodology, the particularities of how I conducted fieldwork and how I approached the topic of sex work, and the different phases of my research, from the preparation I had done and my engagement with sex work issues before the embarking on the PhD, to the official research period and the expansion of my field when I visited Cuba towards the end of the writing process.¹³ After that I move to discussing issues of ethics and positionality, particularly in light of the difficulties inherent in sex work research across class and racial differences. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on the stakes of the mixed methodology I chose, what it did and did not allow me to address, and the unavoidably partial view of sex industry dynamics I offer in my study.

1.1 The stages of the research

1.1.1 Preparation and access prior to fieldwork

The foundation for my PhD research was set many years before I officially embarked on the doctoral project. Prior to applying for the PhD, I had already been active in service provision and advocacy politics for sex workers' rights for almost five years, starting in early 2017 in collaboration with community projects in Copenhagen, where I was studying for my Master's degree, and continuing in my hometown Athens from 2018 onwards. Upon my return to Greece, I volunteered in Red Umbrella Athens, a non-governmental organization for the empowerment of sex workers, for a period that spanned three years and overlapped with the first year of my PhD.

Branching out from Positive Voice, the association for HIV positive people, RUA ran -and continues to do so, under a slightly different organizational form - a day center for people working in the sex industry. At the time of my participation, this space was located within Omonia, one of Athens' central and most historical strolls, which also was the starting point of my research. Prior to the pandemic, the day center was open

¹³ Some parts of this chapter appear in my discussion of research methodology in the article "Workers, Migrants and Queers: The Political Economy of Community Among Illegalized Sex Workers in Athens", published in the *Anti-Trafficking Review* in September 2022 (see Sampethai 2022).

twice a week, one day for male sex workers and one day for women (cis and trans), and provided counseling, condoms, STI tests and education, makeup, clothing, company and legal support. Some of the counselors and volunteers offering the services were current or former sex workers themselves, and the organization operated at least partly on a logic of peer services and community-led work. In collaboration to Positive Voice's outreach projects, we also undertook streetwork in different areas of the city where sex work takes place, primarily focusing on street sex work but also having access to indoor venues like brothels, sex cinemas and studios.

Through my work there and in streetwork activities I started to form a partial cartography of the Athenian sex industry, and familiarized myself with many workers, having informal conversations with them in the day center and their working spaces. This provided a first, schematic view of sex industry demographics, some of the dynamics between sex-worker groups and other mediators (the police, brothel service personnel, facilitators providing working flats to workers), and the role of NGOs in sex-workers' lives and tactics. This knowledge provided a backdrop to the more systematic field research I conducted subsequently, and had a big role in shaping my ideas about feasibility, scale, and the kinds of questions I could ask as a researcher.

Throughout those years, besides my involvement in different sex work sites, I helped organize workshops about sex work and attended advocacy conferences with sex workers, activists, and service providers. I built a local and international network of contacts, within academia and sex workers' rights movements. This enhanced my understanding of the debates about sex work, different legal frameworks and their effects on working conditions. Through these connections but through independent study, I maintained an overview on relevant policy reforms and debates, public discourses about sex work, labour, and migration, as well as a focus on historical research throughout my research.

1.1.2 Early research stages

Having entered Red Umbrella Athens with an explicit idea of building a foundation from which I could subsequently conduct ethnographic research in Athens, after some years we started discussing how I could begin this project in collaboration with the

group while maintaining independence and clearly separating my role as a researcher and as a service provider.

By late 2019-early 2020, and following consultations with the day center staff, I started to communicate to sex workers who were regulars at the day center and who already knew me as a volunteer there for years, that I was also embarking on a separate, university-based research project. In these early stages, maintaining clarity that my capacity as researcher and their possible participation in my project did not bear at all in the operation of the day center and the services they would get there was important to safeguard both endeavours and the position of the participants in them. In these first couple of months, I conducted some individual and collective discussions in the day center, as well as my first recorded interview with a worker from Omonia.

Navigating my double position as ethnographer and volunteer was complicated, and involved some confusion on the part of both NGO staff and sex workers, who were accustomed to research taking place there, but not familiar with the particularities of anthropological fieldwork (see also Gutierrez Garza 2019: 25). Other researchers working in spaces that are mediated by NGOs' gatekeeping practices have written about the complexities of these kinds of access. In the case of ethnography conducted in Greek refugee camps operated by a synergy of state and NGO actors, Rozakou has pointed out how "the politics of access is intertwined with the politics of representation and the politics of knowledge itself" (2019: 79). At stake here is not simply a matter of allowing or precluding the presence of researchers, but rather, enabling specific forms of access; as a result, spaces like the refugee camp are at the same time "inaccessible and over-researched site[s] that...[nurture] particular representations of the 'migration crisis'" (*ibid*: 72).

In my own case, I quickly realized that the boundaries that had been set – with good reason – for volunteer conduct in the day center did not allow for the development of long-term relationships such as those on which anthropological fieldwork is based, and this made it impossible to begin constructing more profound relationships based on personal involvement and reciprocity. At the same time as I was

hitting these first snags in my research, the covid-19 pandemic hit, and Greece was soon put into a months-long quarantine. The day center closed temporarily in response to the measures, the NGO resuming only its outreach operations to a limited and adjusted extent sometime later. Simultaneously, an internal restructuring took place in the NGO staff, wherein the contact person who was responsible for matters relating to my research, a close and valuable colleague, was let go. It was at this juncture that my research shifted more decisively towards an independent, word-of-mouth model, while maintaining a looser connection with RUA for some more time. Nonetheless, I owe my access to the field and a wealth of insight to both the accumulated knowledge of the RUA team and the work of the specific members with whom I consulted, collaborated and volunteered during the preliminary stages of my research.

1.1.3 Independent research and sex workers' informal networks

At first in direct collaboration with RUA and then through looser processes of introduction and through my own initiative, I started arranging interviews and informal discussions with sex workers I knew from volunteering. Through these first participants I gradually gained independent access into various groups – local trans sex workers, (mostly trans) Latinas engaging in recent chain migrations from South America and the Caribbean, and multi-ethnic street-based workers in Omonia. Throughout the years I interacted with an array of sex workers and other sex industry participants who were aware of my status as a researcher, but worked most closely with six women. My fieldwork started officially in January 2020, continuing systematically until 2022 and on a more social level with workers I grew close with throughout the period of writing. I was able to rely on this more ample and long-term research methodology because I conducted research in the city where I live, and this meant that my engagement with sex industry participants spanned a timeline both before and after the strict “fieldwork phase”.

After the first exploratory discussions about my research and what it involved, I began with interviews that primarily aimed to get a sense of my interlocutors' larger trajectories in the sex industry. I asked questions about the types of work they had engaged in (sexual or otherwise), the ways they took safety precautions to protect

themselves from harm, how they learned the job, their relations with co-workers, what expenses they had and how they paid for them. In most cases, after the first interview we switched to a more everyday research relationship, where we delved deeper into specific themes, or discussed issues as they emerged in women's daily lives, from relationships to money problems and work decisions. I did formal individual interviews with five women, two focus group discussions, and relied on ongoing, though less formalized, discussions alongside participant observation for the rest. I visited people in their workplaces, homes, and hangouts, attended birthdays and wedding parties, accompanied people to public and medical services and helped as research participants and their friends juggled overlapping forms of criminalization.

Transitioning to a multi-sited model that relied more on participant observation and daily relationships of reciprocity rather than an interview-based model mediated through an organization was a response to many factors. For one, as I already noted, the kinds of relationships I wanted to form did not fit within the organizational model of NGO work. On a second level, as I discuss in Chapter 2, the field itself underwent important transformations during the time of my fieldwork. I continued to conduct qualitative research in and out of the pandemic, but the shifts in public space and the dispersion of sexual commerce that took place at the time impacted the ways of working and socializing, and by extension some of my research relationships. In particular, as my access to Omonia's street-based workers depended on spatial dynamics that were shifting and fracturing, and meanwhile these workers were experiencing major crises in their livelihoods, I could not maintain the same continuity of presence there. As a research participant put it when I asked to plan a follow-up talk between lockdowns in June 2020: *"There is no work and we are all on edge. Let's talk in autumn if things have calmed down."* In autumn, the government announced another quarantine that lasted for six months, plunging illegalized workers into a new normal of dispossession. In the aftermath of these processes, I lost contact with many of these workers, who retired from sex work, moved indoors, or changed jobs entirely. As I left the day center, which subsequently also moved its headquarters to another neighborhood, my regular presence in whatever was left of the stroll in Omonia was interrupted, and I became little more than a passer-by.

Since all research participants found themselves having to constantly diversify or live with less to cope with the changing landscape of the crisis and the pandemic measures, the rest of my fieldwork became enmeshed in these rhythms, moving towards a more active involvement in people's daily conundrums. I followed specific women in their labour trajectories as they alternated between the street, brothels, online sex work and other work. These extended beyond the initial center of Omonia, into other strolls and more dispersed spaces of work, and communities that were formed across shared workplaces, neighborhoods, and as people found themselves caught up in different processes of criminalization. I followed women as they moved around in their neighborhoods and all over Athens, and kept in touch with them as they travelled to the provinces for work or, in one case, left Greece altogether. Rather than a bounded fieldsite in the traditional sense, my field became the sum of the connections between spaces that were in constant dialogue with one another (Shah 2014: 16). This not only included different areas where sexual commerce takes place, but also spaces extending beyond the sex industry itself, to other labour sectors, neighborhoods, and places of socialization. As other urban ethnographers have pointed out, this interconnectedness implies that urban fieldsites are "not a given space but must be found and produced" (Gutierrez Garza 2019: 24). Through my regular contact with these main research participants, I also met and interacted more casually with many of their friends, partners, and colleagues, often being called to help out in pending legal matters, medical emergencies, and so on.

Through my everyday, personal involvement with workers, complexities, 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, helped migrants send remittances home, learned and explained bureaucratic procedures, searched for lawyers, negotiated with landlords, assisted women with their online profiles, spoke with husbands about residence permit procedures, visited people in detention and accompanied others to court. They came to my apartment, I dropped by their homes and workplaces, we ate, celebrated, chatted, and did paperwork together. Beatriz, one of my closest

interlocutors, liked to joke I was her *secretaria*; indeed, the research relationships that flourished were those where we could work for one another.

In such situations, the boundaries between research, mutual aid, and sociality can get blurred, and informed consent needed to be addressed continuously. I discussed with research participants how or whether I could write about workplace dynamics or legal procedures that were still unfolding. I took care to anonymize people in my writing but also to one another. I worked to maintain boundaries within communities and in NGO contexts, and to differentiate between one-on-one relationships and more collective interactions. Depending on people's wishes, I would record our discussions or take notes when we spoke in relatively private spaces; on all other occasions I would write detailed notes after I was home.

1.1.4 Visit to Mexico and Cuba

A few months prior to completing my dissertation, I was given the opportunity to participate in an Erasmus+ mobility in Mexico and Cuba, with the aim to build on my engagement with Mexican/Latin American scholarship on the one hand, and to gain some insight on Cuban labour dynamics and migration, on the other. I stayed for one month in each place, in November and December 2024 respectively. My stay in Mexico and my collaboration with the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla was more of a bibliographical nature, and allowed me to connect with scholars whose work came to inform my own work, particularly in terms of the arguments on disposability presented in Chapter 5. As for Cuba, although my stay there was short, it was a crucial step in connecting the dots between global, geopolitical dynamics that seemed remote but nevertheless manifested in striking ways in contexts as local as Greece, Athens, Omonia, and the very neighborhoods my interlocutors and I circulated in. The trip enriched my understanding of the key analytical concept of the study and the ways it is used and travels to other places as Cubans migrate. Visiting Havana, meeting the families of Cuban friends, interviewing activists who had organized with the trans migrant women I met in Athens when the latter still lived in Cuba, and participating in the exchange of opinions, experiences, and politics assessments that was constantly taking place around me as people talked about work, migration, family, gender, race, sex, and socialism, was an overwhelming but deeply instructive experience. It taught

me a few things about what people leave behind when they migrate, what suffocates them as they strive for something different but also what they miss from the wealth of communal relations, ways of organizing and living with others, of being understood effortlessly in some ways but not in others. I have tried to include some of these first insights in my analysis, to the extent that it bears on the research and that it enriches the tensions and potential avenues for thought opened by the concepts of struggle I chose to work with.

1.2 The spaces of the study

The Athenian sex industry is a vast space of moving parts that involves a great diversity of labour regimes, workplaces, people, and ways of offering sexual services. My research focuses on a small part of sexual commerce in the city, and touches on the ways this extends to other parts of Greece through the mobilities of workers for seasonal or longer-term work. For purposes of clarity, I offer here a brief cartography of some of the main strolls and neighborhoods of Athens that appear consistently throughout the chapters, and the connections and differences between them.

Omonia: As I discuss at length in Chapter 2, Omonia is a central and very old sex work stroll that was the starting and main point of reference for my fieldwork. It houses cis, trans, local, migrant, refugee, women and men of different ages, and the sex trade there operates in a variety of spaces and under different regimes. Workers solicit there at all hours, from the street, from bars, from sex cinemas and hotels.

Surrounding areas in the center: Omonia borders on other areas that were important in my interlocutors' daily lives as spaces of work, socialization, and housing. Many of the women and their communities lived or circulated in the nearby neighborhoods of Victoria and Patisia, which are more residential working-class and migrant neighborhoods. This included the brothel street of Fylis, where most of the participant observation I did in brothels took place. Fylis Street, Liosion Avenue, and some parts of Metaxourgio are all old brothel areas bordering on Omonia from its north and west sides respectively. The brothels in these areas employed primarily cisgender women, with the exception of certain trans brothels. Workers had different ethnicities and legal statuses, including Greek, Eastern European, Balkan, and Latina

women. Though working conditions varied, most brothels employed one or two people as service personnel (women or in some cases gay men) and two-three workers who alternated in shifts through the week. The brothels were usually open for the better part of the day and the night. In the cases I observed, workers were paid on the basis of how many clients came, and usually a fixed amount of their first earnings went to the brothel boss. Service personnel usually had a fixed day wage.

Sygrou Avenue/Kallithea: Sygrou is the other main sex stroll I discuss in the study. Located in the South of Athens and spanning a certain part of Sygrou Avenue, this is a night-time stroll that at the time of my research was only for trans women, many of whom were Greek (including internal migrants). Sex workers solicited from the street or their cars, and many took their clients to rented rooms or apartments that they also used as housing in the area. Besides street-based solicitation, Sygrou Avenue is a big point of reference for the sexual entertainment industry, and on it are located many strip clubs, which are nonetheless not a part of this study. According to some workers' narrations and sparse oral histories, the sex stroll in Sygrou Avenue was formed when cis and trans/feminine sex workers moved north, following the closure of Trouba, the red-light district of the port of Piraeus, during the years of the military Junta.¹⁴ The surrounding areas of Koukaki and Kallithea also housed important spaces for trans women, including the first trans cabaret of Athens called "Koukles" (Dolls), and the offices of the Transgender Association (ΣΥΔ). Finally, many of my trans Latina interlocutors, particularly Brazilian women, lived and worked in Kallithea, primarily with sex ads from their homes or rented temporary accommodation.

Kavalas Avenue: Further west towards the outskirts of Athens, this was another night-time street stroll where cis and trans workers solicited clients, on foot or from their cars. It is not discussed at length in the study, but some interlocutors occasionally solicited from there following the pandemic.

1.3 Methods

Besides participant observation and my imbrication in personal, long-term relationships of reciprocity, I employed a set of methodologies in my research that

¹⁴ For more information on Trouba, consult Zavvou 2023.

complemented this more empirical knowledge and offered other kinds of insight for the questions I was asking. These included the collection of life stories and long-term work trajectories, historical research, and discourse analysis.

1. life stories and work trajectories/ narrative analysis

Taking the lead from scholars working with “subaltern” populations and their discussions on the challenges in speaking, being heard, and communicating in a shared language (Spivak 1988, Das 2007), I approached sex workers’ ways of narrating their lives as dynamic, intersubjective practices in a context “where survival is often predicated on secrets and silences” (Shah 2014: 40). Considering the stigma and the illegality attached to sex work, instead of examining stories based solely on factuality, working with narratives means doing interpretive work, considering what is at stake for the interlocutor, why the story is told this way and what it does for them strategically and personally (Murray 2014: 468; Shah 2014: 160-1). I thought a lot about how sex workers framed their choices of different kinds of work while recounting their life trajectories, and how these framings changed according to the context or quality of our relationship. Taking seriously how the work of sex work scholars has called “the totalizing idea of the knowability of urban sexual commerce into question” (Shah 2014: 40), I continued to put these narratives in dialogue with the more subtle hints and non-verbal forms of communication that gradually opened through my daily interactions with workers, who let contradictions or lies become obvious, or even explicitly reformulated past claims, when they thought the time was correct. Despite their unavoidably constructed nature, life histories provided valuable insight. They shed light on the changing meanings of different kinds of work at specific points in sex workers lives, e.g., as they grew older and tried to secure more stable employment or retirement, dealt with new economic pressures and caring responsibilities, or when being an invisible worker became a pressing problem. Furthermore, situating their life trajectories in geopolitical dynamics helped contextualize processes of economic decision-making and class formation on multiple scales, from crises that transformed the local landscape of labour relations to global politico-historical junctures that extended far beyond Greece.

2. historical material

In his early work on the production of migrant illegality, Nicholas De Genova (2001) advanced an argument that was at once political, epistemological, and methodological. The idea that the production of illegality (in the context of migration and beyond) has been a crucial process at the core of the political economies of many nation-states in specific historical junctures involved situating its usefulness as a labour policy at these points in time, and examining the tools employed by the state apparatus to achieve it. A critical attention to the law was required to do that, shifting the focus from “illegal groups” in an essentialized/naturalized sense to the *processes* wherein their illegality and differentiation is continuously produced (De Genova 2001: 423, cf. Coutin 2000: 23). This methodology was inextricably tied with ethico-political considerations involved in migration research. As De Genova put it, “only by reflecting on the effects of sociolegal, historical contexts on research does it become possible to elaborate a critical anthropological perspective that is not complicit with the naturalization of migrant ‘illegality’” (2001: 423). It is this commitment and the associated “methodological double-emphasis [...] on the productivity of the law as well as its historicity” (De Genova 2001: 424) that underwrites my own extensive engagement with the history of the Greek state’s regulation of prostitution and its connections to wider concerns about labour, sexuality, public order, public health, and social reproduction. Throughout my research, I delved into these histories by looking at primary and secondary historical sources. In recent years, historical studies have emerged in Greece that offer valuable insight on the relation between prostitution and the state, sexuality, women’s work, and the production of urban space.¹⁵ Most of the research directly related to prostitution relies on state and hospital archives documenting sex-workers’ encounters with institutions, through policing, urban planning, and public health and public order policies.

3. discourse analysis in media and fora

Occasionally, sex work and trafficking make the national news, in sensational stories about gendered violence, or alternatively, through the interventions of NGOs, feminist groups, and sex-workers’ rights organizations. Alongside policy discussions, such

¹⁵ For example, see Hantzaroula 2012, Vassileiadou and Gkotsi 2020, Zavvou 2023, Yiannakopoulos 2024.

pieces make up the public discourse on sex work. They constituted some of the repertoires against and within which my own interlocutors narrated their lives and processes of decision-making - through scripts of victimhood, survival, or empowerment - and where contradictions also eventually started to emerge, as trust was built and interlocutors began to illuminate more complex realities. Juxtaposing public and intimate discourses from the field helped identify contradictions and the effects of such explanatory scripts on sex work, as epistemic conditions also shape the terms for speaking about or inhabiting this position, illuminating the sometimes “impossible choice” workers have to make “between framing their stories in terms of constraint or freedom” (Berg 2021: 489). As other researchers have argued, the stories circulating about sex work speak volumes about “knowledge production, classed struggle, consent, brittle masculinity, and the politics of cash” (Berg 2021: 487). Additionally, as the pandemic resulted in a spatial fragmentation of the field, in terms of my own, my interlocutors’, and organizations’ regular presence in streets and other workplaces, media reports and sex clients’ fora offered another – highly mediated-view into the field, that was cross-referenced with my own experience and interlocutors’ accounts.

1.4 Ethics

1.4.1 Research as a material relationship

There is an unstated, yet recognizable trope in social science that often accompanies the work of ethnographers working with marginalized populations or in domains where illegality and violence are pervasive. The social status assigned to the – usually male – researcher daring into dangerous territory and taming it, getting close to the gritty suffering and violence of it all to tell the story,¹⁶ is a persisting marker of the Anthropology’s unfinished colonial history, that can also be discerned in Sociology’s long-standing preoccupation with urban marginality.¹⁷ Taken to its extreme, it means

¹⁶ For a critique of what they call “the cultural appropriations of suffering” in anthropology and journalism, see Kleinman and Kleinman 1996.

¹⁷ Sociology as a discipline in fact developed by taking up the study of “urban marginality” and associated social problems, in response to the rapid processes of urbanization and industrialization in the 20th century. A well-known example of this focus was the Chicago School, which put sociological methods and theories of the 1960s to the test by using the city of Chicago as a “veritable social laboratory” (see Giardello 2016).

that the more those “studied” go through, the more the drama, the more capital reserved for the ethnographer who is at the frontline.

This capital is not just symbolic but very concrete. Like any relationship, research relationships are at once intimate, political, affective, and material. While in many parts of the world migrant and informalized workers see their working conditions deteriorating or being subject to constant shifts, and academia displays a growing interest in studies about sex work and other precarious/feminized labour, it is simultaneously becoming “easier to make a living writing about sex work and harder to make a living doing it” (Berg 2021: 487). Ignoring this only serves the interests of academics at the expense of the people we work with, which can feel particularly ironic when one studies labour, class, and invisible work. These contradictions are pervasive in both NGO and research contexts, where the material basis of the relationships involved remains an “open secret” (Hennessy 2013: 94). The political economy of non-governmental organizations not only offers specific services to “beneficiaries”, but it also needs the very communities it is supposed to be supporting for its own programming, funding, and credibility, as institutions compete for access and legitimacy (*ibid.*). The notions of “transparency” or “community participation” so favoured in these settings do not even begin to cover the negotiations that transpire. At the same time, the presence of researchers in the field also involves a lot of calculations on the basis of mutual interest, both between them and the organizations they may collaborate with and between them and research participants.

Having grappled with this issue for years, I have concluded that there is no way “out” of the problem of the inherent asymmetry of anthropological research. At best, we work with the hope that there might just be a way through. After shifting my research decidedly to an independent mode, this is what I tried to do and was able to navigate together with some of my closest interlocutors, to different extents and in different ways. In that sense, “consent” and the negotiation of the terms of the research relationships and the work involved in maintaining them ranged from a one-time discussion in the case of interviews and looser relationships that did not involve a committed participation in the research, to a continuous, dialogic process occurring within ongoing personal relationships with close interlocutors. In the case of long-term

relationships, and as Cutuli has noted reflecting on her own research with *travesti* political organizations in Buenos Aires, the commitment to the women I worked with unfolded “as an urgency and a challenge, something that was learned by “being there”” (Cutuli 2013: 110) – and I would add here, sticking around after the research itself was over. By building these connections and by being there in the long-term, I became a part of the very networks and strategies I was studying, invested in the relationships and understanding them not only from outside but through my direct implication in them. In that sense, acknowledging what Gutierrez Garza describes as the “predatory nature of our research enterprises” (2019: 28), involved becoming an “asset” (*ibid.*) that the research participants could use to their benefit. More or less pressing needs arose constantly, and putting my skills to work for the women and their friends became one concrete way to reciprocate the labour and knowledge they were putting into the research, as well as to take an active position in the power relations that underwrote our interactions.

Overall, it became clear to me that if I wanted to have any kind of meaningful relationship, I would have to make myself useful to my interlocutors, “work” for them as they “worked” for me. This meant being attentive and learning from the ways they measured our relationship, and allowing them to change over time. Besides making myself useful, I tried to respect women’s methods of time management, combining my fieldwork with their breaks or slow days at work, accompanying them to errands they had to do and needed help with, and not taking up much of their precious free time unless it was on their own initiative. For some women, the appeal of our relationship also rested in the possibility of having a *confidante*, someone who knew enough but was still outside the drama of their communities and work. The first time we met for an official interview, after telling me a version of her life story, Beatriz bid me goodbye by saying: “*this is nice, we can do it regularly like psychotherapy*”. As it turned out, that was the only interview we did as such, and she was clearly exaggerating the level of trust we had established between us at the time. Still, some of these relationships became places where women could vent and narrate parts of their lives, even if this was in a gradual and partial way.

1.4.2 Positionality

Questions of reflexivity have been addressed in Anthropology in different ways since the 1980s. In more recent years, the discussion of positionality has become a growing preoccupation in sex work studies on more specific terms (cf. Plambech 2023). This is partly due to the nature of sex work as a phenomenon that has been both overstudied and that remains very stigmatized and subject to catastrophic forms of intervention, where differences of class, race, gender identity and citizenship status between researchers and research participants can be particularly blatant. In that spirit, and without entering into a confessional mode or making this about myself, some things bear saying here.

Although I was obviously conscious of the huge asymmetry between being a white, Greek, middle-class cis female PhD student and the different positions that my interlocutors inhabited, throughout the years of my research the distance between us took very concrete forms. For one, Berg's aforementioned observation that more academics can now build careers by writing about sex work, while sex workers are finding it increasingly hard to survive by actually selling sex (2021: 487), materialized in sharp ways. As I received a grant for my PhD, published an article on the political economy of sex workers' communities, and got job and travel opportunities on account of my research, the women I was closest with dealt with unemployment, increasingly precarious and low-paid work, debt, prison sentences, and, in some cases, escalating violence. It was not only the ways we could make our living from our respective jobs that were diverging significantly, but even the fundamental question of how and whether we would survive in the process.

Meanwhile, as we gradually started to share aspects of our daily lives, I became more aware of just how much ethnographic researchers demand of our interlocutors when we set out to get to know them. It is probably one of Anthropology's main premises that it is a worthwhile endeavour to know about the lives of others, to such an extent that we put ourselves in the position of "studying" people and their habits systematically and in the long-term. Considering the centrality of this in ethnographic methodology, it is not often enough put into question *why* we do it or whether, in fact, producing knowledge in an abstract way is in itself a good reason to claim that type of

one-sided access into people's lives. Clearly, the root of this taken-for-grantedness is to be found in Anthropology's co-constitution with colonialism, wherein the latter provided an entire worldview that answered both why it is *useful*, and why we are *entitled* to do that. We enter fieldwork with the expectation that people will disclose intimate details about their stories, fears, and desires, that they will analyze painful or shameful events of their lives with truthfulness, and that they will trust us with what we do with all that knowledge. Yet, should we be put in their position, we are rarely keen to do the same with the honesty we ask for in others. Our motives, our biases, our hopes, and the ways we change in the process of doing research so close to other people, are not always considered part of the analysis, even though they filter it in profound ways.

The more time I spent doing research, the less confident I became that there is a way to do ethnography that is completely free of this colonial weight, or that these problems can be resolved in any definitive sense. I did, however, understand that, as long as we decide to continue, it is crucial for ourselves, for our relationships with the people we collaborate with, and for the work we end up producing, that we try to answer these questions as best we can. In my case, besides being a woman, there is nothing self-evident that connects me with the participants of this study, or with the topic of sex work itself. Looking back to the beginnings of my research, I understand now that I was searching for some kind of reassurance in a place where it would mean a lot, namely in the practices and lives of women who were waging their survival and their determination to practice a certain kind of freedom against many and significant odds. In retrospect, I feel a certain anger at my implicit yet probably obvious desire to hear and see positive things I could learn from, things that would suggest that creativity, community, and joy can still exist even in the debris of systematic structural violence and dispossession. While this may not be such a bad thing to hope for, in the early stages of my engagement with sex work I tended to look for hints of that in what was more readily accessible; i.e. the scripts of empowerment that prevail as the counterpoint to narratives of trafficking, abjection, and women's complete and utter victimization in the sex industry.

Overtime, as I saw women I was close with and their friends struggle, I admired their audacity and their dynamism, but I also realized that easy arguments highlighting sex workers' agency can end up setting another impossible standard that they must fulfil in their interactions with outsiders, whether they be researchers, policy-makers, or non-sex working allies. In fact, many of my own first discussions with the protagonists of this dissertation involved exactly these kinds of performances, for my benefit. Our need for comforting and legible narratives about sex work reflects back on the pain that violence and structural inequality cause us, but also on the white, middle-class guilt many of us experience knowing that their worst expressions do not threaten us in the same way (or, further yet, that our relative comfort relies on other people bearing the brunt of extreme exploitation). My critique of the mainstream sex workers' right rhetoric highlighting agency and the normality of sex work, developed throughout the dissertation, is partly borne out of my own shifting position, and my realization that the women I worked with were already doing a ton of emotional labour, without adding the task of assuaging the guilt of researchers and allies by constantly embodying "the empowered sex-working professional".

For me, understanding violence, inequality and the ways people collectively devise to live through and against them in real time, was important because I felt confronted with them on many levels, personal and political; in my daily life in Athens under a constant state of emergency and encountering their traces in episodic, spectacular, and more banal ways, in the stories of loved ones and the experiences I shared with them of diverse forms of gender and sexual discipline, and finally, in growing up with a grandmother who had survived the Nazi concentration camps and had been trying to connect the fragments of her life and tell the story ever since. As a counterpoint to narratives of progress and the recurring "amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible" (Benjamin 2019: 200), doing this work involves tracing the connections but also the degrees of separation and complicity that underwrite how different people marked by gender, class, race, sexuality, geopolitical location, and history, experience our social realities, what we are exposed to in the process, and how the strategies we devise can break down or reinforce these separations. Since I already believed that one crucial way of understanding, learning

and organizing with others was from the ground up, through relationships, I saw anthropological research as a prolonged opportunity to do that. My decision to carry out research in my hometown in a way that would extend beyond the usual limits of the PhD “fieldwork phase” was a conscious move towards that direction. Before starting I was already clear that any kind of politics that does not build on long-term relationships will most probably end up being another disastrous intervention, as is often the case with so-called feminist missions to “rescue” sex workers, or to eradicate sexual violence and exploitation from the top-down and by singling out as isolated phenomena realities that are inextricably connected.¹⁸ By and large, I understood the process wherein arguments related to gender equality and violence against women, as well as the zero-sum game of trauma politics, are employed to install hostile policies that contain and entrap working-class, migrant, and racialized people, while offering a hegemonic language in which to talk about exploitation, inequality, and harm. What I had not anticipated completely was just how complicated the relationships borne out of research can be, and how difficult it is to navigate the asymmetries that already exist with other women when class and racial differences are also mediated by the fact that you are “studying” them to make an academic argument.

By the time I reached the end of my PhD, a lot of things had happened in our lives that made these problematics more pressing. Although as a student I tried to navigate them as best I could by following my instinct and my interlocutors’ own cues, looking forward into the future I feel both the need to find ways to do research more collaboratively, and the need to refrain from doing any research at all, depending on the context. If the work and time we all put into this dissertation results in opening up opportunities to continue in a professional capacity, excluding interlocutors from the streams of value that circulate in academic production now feels less negotiable to me, particularly as they grapple with work realities that do not seem to be getting better anytime soon, and which in themselves are the main topic of the research. In

¹⁸ Here I am thinking of the growing popularity of carceral feminist paradigms, and the ways different feminist arguments about violence and exploitation have been co-opted by states and other institutions to promote policies favouring the expansion of criminal justice solutions linked to racial and class domination, at the expense of working-class, migrant, and racialized women themselves (for some feminist critiques of this process see: Abu-Lughod et al. 2023, Bernstein 2010, Draper 2024).

other words, I have been thinking about different methods of redistribution: for example, how key research participants, whose role here is in fact closer to co-creators, can see their work valued by being paid for it and for the ways their life stories are used. At the same time, having maintained old friendships and built new ones through years of presence in “the field”, my personal life itself has changed a lot, coming to include people I would never have met and gotten close with otherwise, but who are not themselves “research participants”. Although clearly no relationship is ever simple, the relief of not having to navigate the extractive nature of research on top of all our different positionalities and experiences, is itself indicative of the cognitive dissonance that ethnography entails and my own need to set boundaries in that.

1.4.3 Documentation, appropriation and knowledge production

The fact that what I offer here is a partial view into the Athenian sex industry through the trajectories of specific women cannot be emphasized enough. For one, our insight is largely produced through the relationships we build with the people who participate in the research, and, as Deger has emphasized, all accounts of informants and ethnographers alike are positioned and partial (2006: 28). Rather than aiming for some kind of abstract universality, it is important that we are “explicit in exploring and acknowledging the crucial significance of working with *particular* informants” (Deger 2006: 27). Unavoidably, the concreteness of these relationships offers specific kinds of insight in terms of the dynamics I explore, what I do and do not write about.

The gaps and omissions are both a result of what I was able to see, and a conscious choice about documentation. The latter comes with an awareness that knowledge production about illegalized populations such as sex workers is not innocent and carries certain risks. Despite what we often like to assume about our work, “more and better evidence may not offer the material benefits to sex workers it aims for” (Berg 2021: 486, Shah 2021). Different interested parties, including bosses, clients, police and policy-makers pushing harmful legal frameworks, “have their own reasons for wanting access to sex workers’ stories, and they read them strategically” (Berg 2021: 486). In a situation that is polemical and not just on a discursive level, writing on sex work is easily appropriated for ends far exceeding the aims of the

author: “every complaint can be read as evidence of workers’ abjection rather than their capacity for critique; every story of workers’ creative hacks is mined for ideas of new loopholes to close” (*ibid.*).

The politics of documentation here are a veritable minefield and cannot be easily done away with. I did my best effort to write in a way that would not result in clear labels or categories that could be appropriated by hostile perspectives, and that follows the complexities of experience and everyday life as loyally as possible. I maintained a small scale in terms of my engagement with sex-working women, and a detailed and rigorous attention to the state always in view. I do not offer statistics or any kind of quantitative data, nor ask questions that could be answered with them. I kept stories partial not only because I cannot claim any kind of totalizing knowledge of what happened in women’s lives, but also as an active move that appreciates the importance of maintaining some level of illegibility. As Afsaneh Najmabadi has noted in her research with trans people in Iran, this illegibility

“constitutes a strategic survival shield [...] that allows trans persons... to get what they need from doctors, officials, psychologists, friends and families, journalists and filmmakers, and historian-anthropologists. The success of this strategy depends on giving select information or no information at all. There is a point in the production of partial ignorance” (Najmabadi 2014: 13-4).

Conclusion: the stakes of this methodology

As I already discussed in the Introduction, and as will have become apparent throughout this methods section, the way I conducted my research slightly departed from the traditional frameworks of PhD-associated fieldwork, as well as the norm of sex work studies, on several levels. I conducted open-ended research that spanned six years, and involved different stages of involvement with sex work where my role changed considerably (most notably from a volunteer/service provider in NGO work to independent researcher). This research involved different positionalities on my part, different kinds of access and relationships, and crossed over to different spaces, sectors of work, and communities that traversed ethnic, citizenship, and gender identifications. I also conducted fieldwork in and out of the covid-19 pandemic, whose overall impact remains to be evaluated in a comprehensive, longitudinal way.

While some of these specificities were a result of situations outside my control, most of them stem from analytical choices I made as I became more acquainted with my field. Clearly, these decisions have had a big impact on the data and the arguments I was able to make, and this impact makes for both the strengths and the limitations of my approach. My choice to focus in depth on the long-term trajectories of a few different women that did not belong to a single easily identifiable group apart from being illegalized sex workers, allowed me to shed light on the connections and the fragmentations that emerge among them as they share spaces and working patterns, and to point attention to the multiple state policies that shape their realities beyond a strict focus on prostitution policy. This is important because the reality on the ground is always messier than the artificial delimitations we decide to follow in order to narrow down our field and specialize our knowledge on say, a specific migrant group, or the impact of a specific legal framework on working conditions. In daily life, the separations are never quite that neat, neither in terms of identities nor in terms of de facto state practice. While I do not claim to have an exhaustive “sample” that accurately represents sexual commerce in Athens (if that could even exist), each woman’s trajectory brings out specific, key issues that I believe are crucial connections to make if we are to make sense of sex work and its situatedness within wider labour dynamics and state practice. Rather than searching for a seamless model that “explains” sex work in general, the points where their stories diverge and converge speak volumes about the complex criss-crossing of positionalities and processes at play.

Having said that, adopting such a methodology opens certain avenues at the same time as it forecloses others. As Candea has argued, the attention to the complexity of interconnections between different spaces should not lead to a new kind of anthropological holism that claims to offer totalizing narratives and explanations (2007: 169, 179). Tracing women’s movements across different types of work, in the sex industry, in wage labour, in marriage, and in care economies, cannot provide an equally extensive analysis of each sector and its particular dynamics. I have delved into other sectors to the extent that it was possible and that the insight was made available to me through my interlocutors’ lives, and have complemented my ethnographic

findings with the studies that have already been conducted in the domain of domestic work, cleaning, active labour market policies, and unpaid reproductive work in Greece and elsewhere.

When it comes to sex work itself, the vast diversity of a constantly moving industry cannot be captured in any single ethnography, and it was not my aim to do that. The data on which my observations rely is quite variable, due to my analytical choices and the issues of access they have entailed. Generally, it is common practice for sex work researchers to collaborate closely with workers and to also search for a more structural oversight on industry dynamics by establishing connections to sex workers' organizations, NGOs, and state institutions, most commonly the police (e.g. Bernstein 2007). Considering my critical attention to state practice and particularly concerning the most direct role of the police in the management of the sex trade in Athens, working with the Greek police was out of the question for me. My involvement in the sex workers' day center and its outreach activities for the preliminary years and first months of my fieldwork did provide me with a general cartography of at least a part of the Athenian sex industry, and granted me limited access to workplaces and strolls that was mediated by service provision and the rapport that had already been established through years of work from the NGO team. This access, as I already discussed, was valuable as a backdrop and as a structural view into the dynamics and hierarchies of sexual commerce, but could not serve as much more for the purposes of ethnographic research. For one, establishing the kinds of relationships ethnography involves was contrary to the NGO's protocols; even if it had been allowed, it would not have been possible to exist in all of these spaces in a more in-depth research capacity. As it happened, I have relied on data stemming from varying degrees of engagement with people and spaces, and have tried to refrain from using them beyond their limitations. My discussion of street-based sex work in Omonia and Syggrou rests on close, long-term engagement with key interlocutors, as does my discussion of home or hotel-based work through ads. As I discuss in the following chapters, my arguments concerning the operation of brothels stem from different kinds of access too. The material I have from Beatriz's workplace is insight borne out of trust, long-term participant observation, and her own ways of talking about her work over a period of

time including brothel closures during the pandemic and her more explicit critique after she quit that job some time later. I also work with the more general insight I gained from years of outreach activities in brothels in three different neighborhoods, which provides a view on questions of turnover, demographics, sex industry hierarchies, and so on, but does not extend to the depth of my ethnographic material with Beatriz. Clearly, there are many gaps here, and the dissertation would have looked very different had I decided to focus specifically on brothels in a specific neighborhood, rather than following workers' movements from street-based to brothel work, to ads and back to the street.

The specific way I ended up studying sex work as a mobile and adaptive strategy that involves different ways of selling sex had a lot to do with the advent of the pandemic, which precipitated sharp transformations in people's working patterns. Since in 2020 most of the traditional spaces of sexual commerce became more or less untenable, at least for a while, studying a specific stroll or working in brothels was impossible. I had no choice but to mirror the movements of workers as they scrambled to adapt their income-generating activities. Nevertheless, seeing how things transpired after the quarantines, and having now a longer-term view of the multiple crises that constantly reshape public space, labour relations, and sex workers' position in them, I believe that the pandemic, exceptional as it may seem, provided me with a very extreme and early lesson about the stakes of informalized, precarious labour and how it is always/already subject to the vagaries of capitalist transformation. The progression of my research came to reflect these vagaries, as the changing circumstances strengthened my bond with some interlocutors, and meant eventually losing touch with others, particularly in the case of Omonia after the pandemic.

Finally, for a study that started in Omonia, and then extended to the rest of Athens and workers' mobile work in Greek tourist destinations, over the course of the last years my research took me to places and sowed the seeds for relationships and connections I could not have anticipated. The emphasis on Cuba was such a pathway I had not expected to take. My interest in it developed organically as I got to know Beatriz, whose influence in this project has been huge. Not incidentally, I attribute this partly to her own interest in making sense of her life, being understood and teaching

others through her story, which she always took for granted would be important to share. Through her and after knowing her friends and colleagues, I became increasingly acquainted with the Cuban-diasporic repertoires of labour and struggle that provide a red thread and, in my opinion, a striking conceptual framework for the processes I observed in the Athenian sex industry at large. The opportunity I got to visit Cuba in the end of my PhD only confirmed the richness of analytical connections and differentiations that these understandings carry. It would have been equally eye-opening, albeit another PhD project, to be able to trace similar links in other contexts that are tied to Greece by systematic migration, particularly in the case of the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Tracing the multiple points of resonance and divergence in my interlocutors' perspectives cannot fail to account for the socialist backgrounds of migrant women from Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Cuba, particularly the ways their specific perspectives and shifting experiences of what constitutes labour are caught between this socialist legacy and the global transformations brought by the collapse of the USSR. At this point, I have only been able to touch on some aspects of these processes that weigh more heavily on the Cuban context, due to time limitations and to the different levels of engagement I had with each group of workers. The fact that I spoke some Spanish upon starting my fieldwork, and the time and patience invested by Cuban interlocutors in teaching me more so we could talk more easily, clearly played a huge role in opening up this avenue for communication and mutual aid between us. Nonetheless, the potential of this move of extending the scope outside Greece has nowhere near been exhausted, and this study would be much enriched by a similar engagement with the Balkans. For now, I worked with what I had and tried to make different places, concepts, and people speak to each other analytically.

Chapter 2. Putting sex work in its place – so to speak

...Και όταν έρθουν στην Αθήνα, πολύ γρήγορα θα έρθουν και από την Ομόνοια, όπου ένα ποσοστό τους θα κολλήσει. Εδώ, δεν αποκλείεται να συναντήσουν και συμπατριώτες τους, με τους οποίους θα συνεννοηθούν περίφημα, ενώ στο χωριό δεν τολμούσαν ούτε να τους ατενίσουν επί πολύ. Και έτσι με τ'όνα και με τ'άλλο παρουσιάζεται αυτό το υψηλό ποσοστό, που κάνει ορισμένους ηλίθιους να ανησυχούνε ή να καυχιούνται: «Εμείς στο χωριό μας δεν έχουμε τέτοια!» «Μα, πώς να έχετε, ω ανθρωποφάγοι!» Γιώργος Ιωάννου, Ομόνοια 1980 (1987: 38).

...And when they come to Athens, very soon they will come by Omonia too, where one percentage will stick. Here, it's not unlikely that they will meet some of their compatriots, with whom they will communicate all too well, although in the village they wouldn't dare to even gaze upon them for too long. And with this and that, emerges this large percentage, that makes some idiots worry or brag: "we don't have that kind of thing in our village!" "But, how could you have, you cannibals!?" Giorgos Ioannou, Omonia 1980 (1987: 38).

Introduction

This chapter introduces the ethnographic body of my study, and fulfils a dual role. Apart from discussing ethnographic findings in their own right, it uses my initial engagement with the central stroll of Omonia to establish some of the key axes that run through the entire study, even as it extends far beyond Omonia itself. In the first section, I literally locate my research as it started from a specific sex work area that involved its own distinct dynamics, ways of working, policing patterns, workforce synthesis, and history. As the "first and the last resort" to secure paid work for migrant and local working-class people, Omonia condenses some of the key processes that underwrite Greece's labour/class history from the 20th century onwards, including the daily struggles of a now multi-ethnic workforce to make a living and the top-down processes of state planning for the management of labour and the "dangerous classes". The latter have involved some of the cruelest, most obvious forms of containment, discipline and exploitation, and have been tested on different populations that passed through or were housed in the area. After describing the

parallel – albeit very different – stories of arrival in Omonia of one of the key research participants of the study, and myself as a researcher, and offering some information on what makes Omonia the commercial hub that it is today, I move on to analyze how it has been produced as a space through a long history of state projects of territorialization, and the practices of workers themselves as they inhabit, work, and meet one another in the area. I focus on internal and foreign migration, the twin concerns of public order and public health, and the regulation of sexuality as some key aspects of the interconnected processes of class formation and the production of space. By highlighting how these dynamics unfolded both from the top-down and through the practices of workers, I begin to situate sex work within a larger world of work and social reproduction, which remains a central lens throughout my study. Next, I discuss issues relating to the knowability of sexual commerce in Omonia and elsewhere. I do this first by exploring how Omonia constitutes a central, hyper-visible and over-policed neighborhood of Athens that nevertheless is experienced in strikingly different ways by the different people who inevitably pass through it. I then discuss some of the epistemological challenges of conducting research on the sex industry, particularly when it takes place across such a considerable class and racial divide. I end the chapter by addressing the transformations that took place in Omonia while I was conducting fieldwork, accelerated by the pandemic, and setting the scene for my shift towards a more multi-sited research approach.

2.1 Beginnings, or locating the study

2.1.1 Arriving in Omonia – as a worker

“I arrived in Athens at dawn, where the trains from Thessaloniki come. You know, in Larissa station [the central railway station of Athens]. I got out and didn’t know anything, I started moving, I walked for a while and somehow ended up in Omonia. I must have gone around in circles because it wasn’t that far after all... I didn’t know what was there but I could see people looking at me. Soon one guy approached me and asked me if I would go somewhere with him. That’s how I learned about Omonia”.
(Interview excerpt with Beatriz)

According to her narration about her arrival in Greece, Beatriz, a trans woman from Cuba in her forties, took the newly established “Balkan route” from the island to

Europe: she flew to Russia taking advantage of the free movement agreement it had with her country, stayed there for a while working with sex ads, passed on to Serbia – at the time also visa-free for Cubans - where she lived in a camp for asylum seekers for year while simultaneously selling sex on the street passing as a cisgender woman (*como mujer*), and finally came down to North Macedonia and crossed the border to Greece in early 2018. She had no idea where she was, she intended to reach Athens on foot, to get there “*out of sheer stubbornness*”. In the end she managed to board the train and this is how her life in Athens began: with her arrival in Omonia.

Whether she was guided there or arrived by chance, Beatriz had found Athens’ main point of reference for commercial networks for makeshift livelihoods and queer sexualities. One of the oldest sex strolls in Athens, and many other things besides that, Omonia is first and foremost a place where you go to find work. And true enough, Beatriz quickly understood how things worked there. She rented a room in one of the hotels and started working. Her entry into the stroll was not easy, and she soon encountered street hierarchies and gatekeeping that made it hard for her to just claim a corner and solicit from there. Another trans sex worker, who according to Beatriz “ruled the street”, promptly chased her out of the stroll and attacked her. In order to be able to work, Beatriz ended up resorting to the protection of another local “boss”, who became her boyfriend while offering her protection on the stroll.

In these first months in Athens, Beatriz started building a social network that consisted of alliances of necessity and – gradually - relationships of trust, keeping in mind to get by in Omonia but also not to get stuck there. At some point, in an event held in a small queer collective in the neighbourhood, she met Luli, a local trans person involved in anarchist/anti-authoritarian/worker politics, and who eventually ended up being her close friend. Having dealt with homelessness and street life himself in the past, he offered to let her stay in his flat. This is how Beatriz managed to leave the hotel, and after working in Omonia for six more months (“*por seis meses, seguí luchando en Omonia*”), she saved up enough money to search for her own apartment. “*If I hadn’t stayed with Luli back then, I don’t know if I would have ever left Omonia. I paid the hotel every day and had no money left to save...*” Finally, she did it, and in the following years, through acquaintances, friendships, and her own resourcefulness, she

built a life for herself. By the time she became a participant in my research, she was working regularly in a brothel four days a week, had her own sex ad set up so she could work independently from home on her days off, and had secured a part-time job as a performer in a club where she was formally registered as a worker.

Beatriz's story is run through by various forms of intimate, sexualized work that extend way beyond the world of Omonia. Nevertheless, her trajectory is not linear. At least two years after she first found herself working and living in Omonia, Beatriz began the process of her more permanent regularization in the country. She was aware that her then pending LGBT asylum application would sooner or later receive a final rejection,¹⁹ which would expose her to the threat of detention and deportation. So, she started looking for a friend or acquaintance to have a civil union with, and realized that few people were actually willing to proceed with something like that. She and Luli looked into doing it together, but they encountered some bureaucratic complications. With the date of her next interview at the Asylum Service growing nearer, she called Manolis, an old client from Omonia, whom she had always gotten along with, and asked him for help. After many talks with lawyers, and reassuring words by Beatriz's friends who explained the process to him, he accepted.

The civil union was now official; then came the day of celebration. The couple borrowed a car and went out to the recently inaugurated fountain of Omonia square to commemorate the day with photos, which would at a later stage also serve as proof for the validity of their relationship before the Greek immigration authorities. Upon her return at her apartment for the party, Beatriz recounted with a laugh how everyone, regulars, policemen, and passers-by at Omonia stared in astonishment as she, a black trans woman, was photographed in her sparkling wedding dress. *"I even ran into an old client who gaped at me, asking 'Beatriz, don't you remember me?'"*

For the rest of the day, Beatriz was happy and tired, and kept repeating in Spanish *"Lo logré!"* (I made it!). Her return to the stroll as a married woman was

¹⁹ Most of the LGBT Cuban migrants I met had applied for LGBT asylum, but the chances of getting their application approved were in reality slim, since in the Greek asylum system Cuba is not considered a place where LGBT people are persecuted. For many of the trans women I met, this was a first step in getting some temporary papers, and they also looked for other ways to get regularized.

triumphant, holding a promise of upward mobility, away from the daily reality of fines, police sweep operations, deportability, and overall precarious work that was so pervasive in Omonia. Of course, married life and acquiring and maintaining a legal status in the country eventually proved to be complicated and rife with potential lapses, and as such to require constant work besides the sex work she was engaging in as a livelihood. Her struggle was not nearly over, and throughout the years Beatriz returned to Omonia occasionally, to see friends, get services, and to hustle out of her car.

2.1.2 Arriving in Omonia – as a researcher

In comparison to other interlocutors who worked in Omonia for years and were regulars of the area by the time I met them, Beatriz's stay on the stroll was short. She did not "stick" there like others had. Although she was passing through and returning, I feel her story is appropriate to start with. For one, it reflects my trajectory as a researcher. My own fragmented engagement with the Athenian sex industry also started from Omonia. Even though the specific stroll is not in itself the subject of this research, Omonia is a huge point of reference, that I pass from and return to throughout this thesis. Besides my initial familiarization with the area through my volunteer work at a local day center for sex workers, and my engagement with workers who were more or less consistently making a living there, the rest of the study also comes back to Omonia and to the sex-gendered livelihoods that flow through it, in significant ways. My Latina informants complemented their income from online sex ads by going out to Omonia at nights; they also hung out there. Some local trans women from other parts of the industry found their way back to Omonia, not to sell sex but to work in NGOs, capitalizing on their peer status as current or former sex workers as they grew older.²⁰ I met Teresa, another central figure in this research, through the work that she did in such an organization. Various other people with different levels of involvement in transactional sex came to Omonia to meet friends, network, and receive NGO and state services.

²⁰ Since these jobs were competitive and finite, this was not an option for everyone. I discuss NGO work in more detail in Chapter 5.

This leads us to the second point that Beatriz's story already illustrates, especially considering her "return" to Omonia to get married; sex work (in Omonia and elsewhere) coexists with a multiplicity of labours and strategies that combine intimacy, "care", sex, survival, and mobility, and extend far beyond the direct exchange of sexual services for money. Accordingly, what interlocutors look for and find in Omonia can come to include marriage, NGO work, "helping relationships" with longer-term sexual partners, and various kinds of feminized jobs such as cleaning in the stroll hotels.

Taking all these matters into account, entering the frame through my engagement with Omonia is a first attempt to put sex work in its *place*, to situate my research locally and analytically. In other words, to make an argument about the ways labour relations are spatialized, and to understand sex work together with the other kinds of work that my interlocutors did as they struggled with illegalization and devaluation.

Clearly, the sex industry and the various ways of exchanging sexual services for money are extremely diverse. Furthermore, it has been noted repeatedly by numerous scholars that there is no one recognizable labour relation that can be defined as sex work, and accordingly, no unified subject that can be called a sex worker (e.g. Cabezas 2009, Shah 2014). Likewise, with this study I do not wish to make any kind of decontextualized claim about what it means to sell sex, or to argue that the bits I saw of what takes place in Omonia are somehow representative or generalizable. Rather, if we think in Candea's terms (2007), Omonia can be approached as an "arbitrary location" that offers a necessarily incomplete view onto sex industry and labour dynamics and upsets easy claims to both holism and boundedness. Exactly because Omonia is a specific place and starting there had a huge impact on my analysis, what this chapter does is to set the scene for the labour and class relations I will be talking about, situating the sexual exchanges I discuss in their context. Eventually, my fieldwork led me to other places too, including ones linked to online and indoor sex work. Nevertheless, the people I met all pointed back to makeshift livelihoods and struggles that inevitably passed through the meeting points where a multi-faceted and multi-ethnic working class congregates to socialize and find work.

The following analysis paints a picture of Omonia as precisely such a place, marked by distinct state projects of territorialization and labour management, and simultaneously people's own resourcefulness as they stroll, wait, cruise and hustle for various livelihoods in the street economy. In doing so, I am engaging with theories about the social production of space, both in philosophical terms and vis-à-vis the sex industry specifically. Following Lefebvre and urban ethnographers (e.g. Shah 2014: 32, Hubbard and Sanders 2003), I approach space as a social product that is continuously created and negotiated through processes of governance and people's activities, but also as a means of production. This means that class struggles are inscribed in space (Lefebvre 1991: 55), in an ongoing contestation without prefigured outcome:

"The space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. The social and (political) state forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely; the very agency that has forced spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strives to run it into the ground, then shackle and enslave it." (Lefebvre 1991: 26)

When it comes to sexual commerce, ethnographers have shown how the production of strolls and red-light districts is a process that includes the practices of the state, local stakeholders (shopkeepers, neighbors, and sex industry bosses), and the workers who dwell there (see Shah 2014: 32, Hubbard and Sanders 2003: 80). Such an understanding goes against a strict separation between "the state" and "civil society", showing how the two can work together through formal and informal policing practices that serve a variety of local and state interests. Approaching space as a means of production highlights the issue of access to spaces as access to survival itself, and the forms of regulation of public space as one of the means by which dispossession and primitive accumulation take place. By extension, this connects state projects about the management of public space to localized relations of power, such as the activities of pimps and middlemen in strolls and indoor work. If we apply Lefebvre's theory to Beatriz's story, it is easier to understand how gaining and maintaining access to work in spaces like Omonia is not a simple matter. On the

contrary, it is subject to rather profitable practices of policing and gatekeeping, that extend from bribes and fines paid to the police to other kinds of mediation and pimping, linking the profits generated across the state apparatus and the mafias.²¹ At the same time, these perspectives allow us to consider the practices of workers themselves, and the ways they make use of different spaces, appropriate them to their own ends to create livelihoods and communities. In other words, and as I show in more detail in the last chapter, shared spaces and meeting points are also part of workers' social reproduction.

Starting with Omonia – but not staying only there – helped me situate sex work within a larger world of work. It also highlighted the stakes of public space in people's strategies for survival and social reproduction. Seen as such, the ways in which the state intervenes, manages, and contains people's presence and activity there constitute a class politics, a politics of labour. This politics extends beyond the local and the national level. While I maintain an analysis rooted in local realities, to understand these it is crucial to situate Omonia and the larger sex industry in a more global framework, as a focal point where geopolitical relations and processes with different historical depth intersect and become expressed.

2.1.3 Why Omonia? The area and its labour force

While Omonia's name translates to "concord" in Greek, the reference to national unity becomes ironic in a place where class, racial, and geopolitical relations are so deeply and cruelly spatialized. Currently home to a multi-ethnic working class, a heavily policed area at the heart of Athens, and yet the most renowned spot for illicit hustles and makeshift livelihoods, Omonia has been important for the politics of both work and sex from early on. Throughout the 20th century, it has persistently operated as a

²¹ These linkages periodically surface in the news as "scandals" wherein current and former members of the police force collaborate or are active parts of mafia organizations. However, instead of considering these cases to exemplify corruption, my own point is that they are structural, resulting from specific policies of regulation and illegalization. I elaborate more on the circulation of value produced from sex work in the following chapters. For a similar argument on the connections between the policing of different neighborhoods in Istanbul and sex workers' reliance on organized crime, see Güler 2020: 160.

key point of arrival for internal and foreign migrants searching for work. Omonia was and remains a dumping ground for those at the bottom of the labour force, as well as a contested but nonetheless designated zone for stigmatized sexual exchanges, including public sex, transactional sex, and same-sex erotic encounters. It bears the covert histories of migrant labour, illicit economies, and non-normative sexualities, and has been the main place where the nation's "others" have roamed, worked, waited, looked for connection, made communities, and been exploited, at times to the point of extermination.

When I speak of "Omonia" I am referring both to Omonia Square itself, but also the surrounding area and side streets, extending towards the neighborhoods of Victoria, Exarcheia, and all the way to Metaxourgio. The extended area around Omonia is best described as a commercial center, a transport hub, a place to socialize and look for work and information as a newly arrived migrant, and a base for NGO and state services.

Omonia is located in the city center of Athens, and is full of cheap hotels, cafes, restaurants and shops that range from global chains to small neighbourhood enterprises and migrant delis. Its centrality in commerce of different kinds is partly related to its position within the transport map of the city, and its long-standing character as a pit-stop for travellers who are arriving or passing through. From Omonia pass most of the central bus and metro lines for the rest of the city, as well as direct connections to nation-wide transport, including the railway and international bus services. In addition, from the 1980s onwards and particularly following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has been the point of arrival and departure for bus routes connecting Greece to Balkan and Eastern European countries, carried out by travel agencies with offices in the area. Omonia houses various employment agencies and well as spaces of more informal networking, including official and unofficial religious centers for different migrant communities (Noussia and Lyons 2009: 613). It is a base of operations for many state, NGO, and philanthropic projects that target migrants, the homeless, drug users, and sex workers, through reception centers or street-work and outreach.

Finally, as an old cruising and meeting spot for gay men, a hangout for trans women, a place to score, sell, and use drugs, and one of the oldest areas of street-based and indoor sex work, Omonia's name bears enduring connotations of classed and sexual transgression. From the beginning of the 20th century when it housed brothels up until now, it accommodates the lowest end of the local sex trade,²² in hotels, cafes, sex cinemas, and on its streets.

During the time of my research, the labour force that participated in sexual commerce in Omonia consisted of local and migrant men and women, both cis and trans, whose ages ranged from the mid-teens to the early seventies. People used the area to different extents, to work, socialize, score drugs, and some also lived there, sleeping rough, in temporary lodgings and hotels, or in rented apartments. Legal statuses varied, including migrants who had achieved different degrees of regularization, asylum seekers, people with recognized refugee status, undocumented people, and locals with Greek citizenship. The labour force comprised Asian and Middle Eastern, Balkan and Eastern European workers, people from Athens and the rest of urban and rural Greece, and occasionally Latin American/Caribbean migrants. Some African women also worked the streets near Omonia late at night. Cis and trans women either openly solicited from the street, or worked straight from hotels. Male workers hustled the streets more covertly, mixing sex work with other income opportunities, or using sex cinemas and cruising spots to solicit more directly. Sexual exchanges ranged from systematic, daily sex work to more ad hoc and complementary transactions, and also included exchanges for drugs, accommodation, and other necessities. Besides the street, the cinemas, and the hotels, certain cafes and restaurants were key spots for the sex trade, wherein workers took breaks, chatted, or solicited, at times entering into different sorts of agreements with the business owners.

Although I discuss this in more detail later, it should be noted from the outset that the dynamics of sex work in the area are not static, and shifted as a result of

²² For a breakdown of the hierarchical spatial structure of the sex industry in Greece, see Lazaridis 2001: 87. While since then the sex industry and the places where it takes place have undergone many transformations, street work, particularly in Omonia, remains probably the most stigmatized and exposed kind of sex work in the city.

policing, covid-19 lockdowns, regeneration projects, and consecutive economic crises. Throughout the time of my research, the field was changing: workers moved between areas and workspaces, some spots closed down temporarily or for good, and certain kinds of sex work became increasingly untenable. I began to see how different places exist in dialogue and flux with one another, being spatially, empirically, and conceptually close. Omonia itself was connected to and bordered on other key areas for work and social reproduction, including Victoria Square and its surroundings, Pedion tou Areos (Athens' biggest park and another cruising spot), and the brothel neighborhoods of Fylis, Metaxourgio, and Liosion Avenue. This meant that my research in Athens would have to be definitively multi-sited (cf. Shah 2014: 16) and processual rather than bounded.

2.2 Space, territorialization, and social reproduction

2.2.1 Labour, migration, and the production of space

In his ethnography *Mobile Orientations*, Nicola Mai sets out to describe the ways criminalized and sex-gendered livelihoods become territorialized, tolerated and organized in delimited urban space (2018: 41). He offers the examples of two spots in Rome and Seville where young migrant men hustle and look for income opportunities, through selling sex, pickpocketing, and different odd jobs in the formal or informal economies.

“As I hung around the places and scenes of male sex work in Rome, I noted the coexistence of previous strata of marginality and migrancy: the Pasolinian, peri-urban *borgatari* and southern Italian internal migrants of the 1960s and '70s; the North African migrants of the '80s; and Albanians and Romanians, the latest wave of young men looking for a better life. While I hung around on Piazza della Repubblica [...], my mind often wandered to the other roadside pick-up places for deskilled jobs in similarly irregular, but 'straight', sectors – for example, agriculture and construction – which I had often come across just a few hours earlier [...]. All of these pick-up places were sites marked by the constant renegotiation of informal economies and makeshift livelihoods across different historical periods in the development of the capitalist economy” (2018: 41).

In Mai's research, some familiar themes emerge: the territorialization of illicit economies, different spaces of work and solicitation that exist in dialogue to one another, and histories of class and mobility. All of this is recognizable in Omonia. For the Greek context, Omonia is par excellence a place where makeshift, often illegal, livelihoods are territorialized, heavily policed yet somehow "tolerated". Mai discusses the relation between heavy, constant policing, and thriving informal economies and criminalized livelihoods, as the result of simultaneous processes of routinization and informalization (2018: 42). Similarly, in Greece, what may first appear as a paradox illuminates a crucial fact about the sex industry and its relation to the state: the ways in which informal labour is rendered illegal, exploitable, and devalued are not random or haphazard, but organized, regular, and profitable for the state and other mediating actors. The dialectic of illegalization and regulation, policing and "tolerance", constitutes *labour policy*, which includes but is not limited to sex work. For my purposes here, the issue is understanding how processes of territorialization are part of this policy, and how the state participates in the production of public space, specifically of a space such as Omonia. In other words, how Omonia became what it is.

Although no comprehensive history of the area has been written as such, studies dealing with themes such as migration and refugees, sex work, "survival sex" and "trafficking", city planning, policing, and sexuality, inevitably pass through Omonia. It therefore becomes possible to begin piecing together its history, and to tentatively trace the state interventions that produced the spatialization of class relations that one encounters there.

In his study with Albanian migrant workers during the 1990s, Psimmenos introduced the concept of the "periphRACTic space" (2000). By this he tried to describe the production of urban enclaves where different kinds of marginalized populations are housed, heavily policed, and put to work under conditions of extreme exploitation and isolation. The position of Albanian migrants in Greece during the 1990s is paradigmatic of how specific populations are constructed as cheap, disposable labour through interconnected processes of illegalization and racialization. Although Greece received migrants from many Balkan/Eastern European countries, Albanian migration

has received more attention and analysis, and there are good reasons for that. Its importance is not solely a matter of numbers, but has to do with its role as the par excellence temporary and illegalized labour force through the “revolving door” system: it was arguably here that the Greek state most systematically tested and perfected the methods of management I discuss and analyse throughout this thesis. In that specific study, Psimmenos (2000) shows how this process, at least in the first years, took a very spatial dimension in the case of Omonia. His analysis showed how minors and adults working in the Athenian sex industry were cordoned off from their communities and the rest of the population, their isolation bolstering their entrapment in hotels and sex strolls under extremely labour-intensive conditions set by local and foreign bosses.

While the 1990s are often identified as the peak of such territorialization, it is worth taking a more *longue-durée* approach to this history. It is at least from the early 20th century that Omonia and the port town of Piraeus emerge as two key centers for commercial activity, migrant communities, sex work and non-normative sexualities. Both accommodated an organized sex trade in various businesses of “ill repute” as well as in state-run brothels. Not incidentally, Piraeus and Omonia were also the first areas to house infrastructure of the newly established Town Police in the interwar years. Piraeus acquired its Town Police even earlier than Athens, on account of state concerns with policing the refugee populations²³ from Asia Minor that arrived there around the time of the Greco-Turkish war (1919-1922) (Fotakis 2016: 68-8). Athens quickly followed, and the first police buildings and zones of jurisdiction were all located in Omonia; the brothels in the streets surrounding the square were part of the first police patrol routes in the city (Fotakis 2016: 51).

²³ Following Greece’s defeat in the Greco-Turkish war in 1922, hundreds of thousands destitute people from the Greek minority fled Asia Minor for Greece in a very short time. In the aftermath of the violence, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) stipulated population exchanges between Greece and Turkey, and the permanent relocation of almost all remaining Orthodox-Christians in Turkey to Greece. Refugee populations were housed in different parts of the country, in refugee settlements with very adverse conditions. For an in-depth study of this history and the conditions encountered by the refugee communities that were settled in Piraeus, see Hirschon 1989.

It seems, therefore, that Omonia's position as a reception point and housing area for migrants and refugees extends back at least a century (cf. Noussia and Lyons 2009: 606), and so does its connection with the sex trade, exploitable labour, and policing. In discussing the settlement of Albanian workers in Omonia in the 1990s, Psimmenos produces the following genealogy:

"The same residential neighbourhoods were used to accommodate the first wave of migrant labour from rural Greece (1920-1930s), the refugees of Asia Minor (1922-) and the American high-ranking military personnel (1950-67) in the nearby American bases. During the 1970s, due to low-cost housing, the decline in entrepreneurial activity, and the outward flow of city dwellers, the area of Vathis and Omonia was officially used by the then governments as a shelter for war and political refugees. The area was systematically used for the provision of temporary accommodation for Greek-Cypriot (1974-75), Kurdish, Iranian and Iraqi political refugees. [...] The majority of these people were in the same third class hotels (which our study concentrated on for the analysis of Albanian migrants), whilst later they were rehoused in more permanent types of accommodation. The official policy, in relation to the first wave of migration, was the provision of collective temporary shelter to families in need, prior to any UN and governmental final decision on the reallocation of migrants. The same policy line was followed in the case of the second and third flows of migration that were connected with the Iran-Iraq war and the Israel-Palestinian conflict, respectively. The policy of first assistance, based on the idea of collective sheltering prior to the transfer of populations to a more permanent type of accommodation, began to be obfuscated with the arrival of the first wave of economic migrants. The increasing demand for a cheap labour force in the area, the ever-increasing flow of economic migrants due to the collapse of local economies, and the rise in informal employment have all played a crucial role in the formulation of a new social policy towards the area. [...] The policy of first assistance was to be transformed into a policy of institutionalized exclusion, which indirectly or directly produced and reproduced collective spaces for a temporary labour force" (2000: 90-1).

Despite the differentiation made by Psimmenos himself, the early policies of "first assistance" and the subsequent ones of "institutionalized exclusion" appear quite blurred and seem to exist more in continuity rather than juxtaposition. If

anything, it seems the politico-economic juncture of the 1990s became an opportunity for the Greek state to elaborate and perfect these policies on a perhaps unprecedented scale, as it received the mass migrations from the ex-Soviet bloc. In the following decades, these processes of territorialization continued and came to encompass more populations, re-elaborating the racial hierarchies that dominated the labour market accordingly. After the mass arrival of migrant workers from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the ex-Soviet Union in the nineties, Omonia continued to be a point of reference for migrants and refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. During the “refugee crisis” of 2015, new targets and panics surfaced, particularly around the figure of unaccompanied minors from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.

From 2016 onwards, Latin American migrations became more observable, as new flows and routes were opened in response to geopolitical transformations. For example, the ongoing crisis in Venezuela led to the arrival of Venezuelan workers who were put to work in Athenian brothels under tourist 3-month visas, and for a while constituted a steady flow of feminized labour in Greece;²⁴ meanwhile, the tightening of US migration policy towards Cubans under Trump’s first spell in government contributed to the opening and temporary popularization of the “Balkan route” to Southern Europe (ex. Spain or Greece), through Russia and Serbia (see Psaropoulos 2021). Depending on the route and type of work they did, Latina sex workers involved in these newer mobilities passed from different parts of the sex industry, a few of them working in Omonia but most coming there to get services from NGOs or, for those who stayed in Greece more long-term, to meet acquaintances, socialize, and network, and occasionally also solicit clients. With the exception of Cuba and Venezuela, the dynamics bringing different migrant populations from Latin America to Athens were harder to decipher and seem to have unfolded in various ways over a longer period of time. In the case of Brazil, a Brazilian migrant community with its own cultural association has been active in Athens since the 1970s, although its demographic and

²⁴ As far as I know, these short-term labour migrations from Venezuela have not been written about or covered in the news in any thorough way. My own limited knowledge of them came from my work in the day center for sex workers and its outreach activities in brothels and strolls between 2018 and 2020, and my assistance to Venezuelan sex workers as a translator when they visited the day center. At the time, according to their testimonies, they made use of a route through Mexico and flew to Greece for cyclical three-month stays using tourist visas, after which they were to return to Venezuela.

migration pattern are unclear, if even homogeneous. My own interlocutors, which were cis and trans Brazilian women engaging in sex and domestic work, had arrived from 2013-2014 onwards, and at least a few of them had migrated through different kinds of agreements connected to drug smuggling between Brazil and Europe. In order to maintain their anonymity in the face of pending trials and criminal records, as well as their safety, I do not delve in this matter here.

2.2.2 Public order, sexuality and Omonia as a medical object

Over the years, the overlapping processes of territorialization in Omonia have been accompanied by the proliferation of state services and NGOs, which by now are part of the economies of the area. Predictably, a major point of intervention for these organizations has become the consistent linkage of HIV with a host of designated “vulnerable populations”. As a location where social problems are seen to persistently reside, Omonia is thus produced through interconnected biomedical, humanitarian, and criminological discourses, constructed by the state, NGO, and media actors that target the area. Amidst these representations, workers’ activities in the city are encoded in specific ways. As Shah puts it in their ethnography on sex work and migration in Mumbai:

“Produced simultaneously as populations to protect and to protect *against*, sex workers are also simultaneously apprehended within the auspices of contemporary governmentality as ‘slum dwellers’ or ‘encroachers,’ ‘people with HIV risk,’ ‘poor laborers in middle-class areas of the city,’ and ‘rural migrants in the city.’ In other words, women who do sex work may embody a divergently mapped set of populations to be regulated and are, within the contexts I have described and analyzed thus far, regulated as criminals” (2014: 143).

Although the exact relationships between public health, public order, migration, and labour policy and its impact on sex workers’ realities are discussed in detail in the next chapter, two examples from Greece’s recent history can take some of these points further. The events in question, taking place in the country’s post-dictatorship, “democratic” political landscape, provide a taste of the kinds of state

policies that are salient throughout this study, and the multiple and inter-connected entry points through which they make themselves felt in spaces like Omonia.

The first case involves the conflicts revolving around the bill *On venereal diseases and other related matters* («Της εξ αφροδισίων νόσων προστασίας και ρυθμίσεως συναφών θεμάτων»), which was proposed by the government of New Democracy in 1977 and then again in 1981, amidst the triumphant democratic climate of the *Metapolitefsi*, at which time it was ratified with some changes. This law, originally drafted during the Dictatorship of the Colonels in the 1960s, supposedly aimed to protect public health from the spread of STIs, by launching an assault on sex workers, homosexuals, and trans people, through mandatory testing and treatment, the abolition of medical confidentiality for said groups (or suspected ones), the criminalization of their presence and activities in public space, their imprisonment if they did not visit the doctor or comply to all restrictions on medical supervision, and even their banishment from the locations where they were found committing an offence. Men were referenced (and criminalized) as threats to public health and morals, and were conflated with pimps for female sex workers and underage people: the bill predicted their prosecution for offending public morals through “provocative” and “indecent” behavior, for “roaming” in squares, parks, and streets to attract other men, as well as for helping sex-working women, finding clients for them, or warning them for police raids and missions (see AMFI, issue 7-8, 1981). The legal term for gay men at the time was *kinaidoi* (κίναιδοι), which meant “those who move/disturb morality”. Although it was supposed to be about health, this piece of legislation aptly fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Order.²⁵ It precipitated extensive mobilizations by homosexuals, trans people, and sex workers, marking the official birth of public, organized LGBT movements in Greece. In the early statements by AKOE, the movement for gay liberation of the time, sex workers, gays, and trans people were

²⁵ This is a consistent pattern in most of the laws discussed in this chapter. Currently, what was the Ministry of Public Order has been renamed Ministry of Civil Protection, with which the Ministry of Migration Policy was merged in 2019. Throughout the histories I present, sex work, migration, public health, sexuality, and trafficking have all passed through its jurisdiction.

understood to have common interests against this bill, which was interpreted as targeting their social spaces and sexual practices across the board.

In the end, when a modified version of the bill was passed in 1981, the parts that directly criminalized homosexual activity were dropped, but most clauses pertaining to sex workers remained.²⁶ In conjunction to various public order ordinances that were conveniently vague in their phrasing (such as those regarding the offense of “public morals”), these continued to be used for arbitrary arrests and police harassment that especially targeted working-class gay and trans people, and of course, sex workers.²⁷ It became increasingly clear that what was at stake was not sexual identity or even sexual acts per se, but the use of spaces and the associated practices of labour and social reproduction. The assault on these continued, targeting spaces like public lavatories, sex cinemas, parks, and strolls, where sex work and the search for queer sexual encounters overlapped. Omonia and the trans stroll of Sygrou Avenue bore the brunt of patrols, identity checks, and arrests, under the ominously named “Operation Virtue”, whose effects and abuses are documented in the pages of queer political magazines of the time.²⁸ From the perspective of gay activists, this was straightforwardly understood as a mission to terrorize them and “to convince homosexuals to not frequent their hangouts, with the hope of destroying these spaces” (AMFI issue 16-17, 1984).

²⁶ Law 1193, Government Gazette Issue A-220/20.8.1981.

²⁷ AMFI issue 16-17, 1984; Papadogiannis 2022.

²⁸ AKOE, the Gay Liberation Movement of Greece started publishing AMFI, meaning “Bi” – “from bisexuality and doubt (amfisvitisi in Greek) in the late 1970s. AMFI covered the mobilizations around the proposed law on sexually transmitted diseases quite extensively. Another DIY magazine called Kraksimo (Gay Bashing) started being published in the early 1980s. Its editor was trans sex worker and activist Paola Revenioti, and it was a queer publication whose content regularly included topics on sex work. The front cover of each issue read “Every job for profit is prostitution”. An archive of most issues of both publications is available at ASKI, (Archives of Contemporary Social History) in Athens.

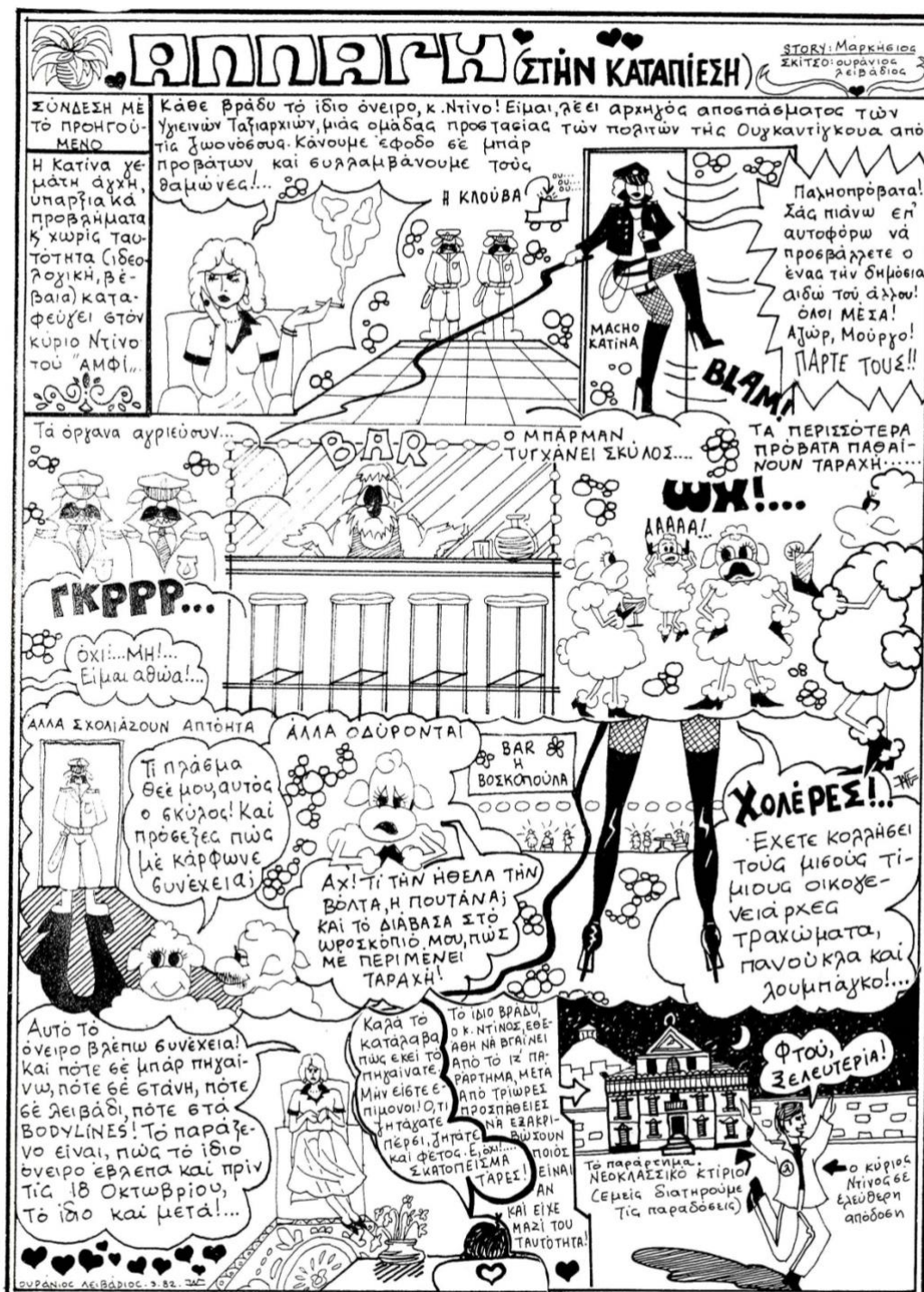


Figure 1. Comic strip published in AMFI magazine, issue 16-17, 1984. Entitled "Change (against oppression)", its subject is a raid at a bar by the "Health Brigades", who arrest all the regulars for "offending one another's public morals" and "infecting family men with trachoma, the plague and lumbago". Its surreal tone parodies the bogus charges and the arbitrariness of police harassment during the crackdowns on queer hangouts and sex strolls. Reproduced with permission from the AMFI archive found in ASKI (Archives of Contemporary Social History).

The ways public space is targeted in missions about “health” that complexly implicate sexuality, class, and migration are even more sharply illustrated in the by now notorious case of Greece’s criminalization of HIV in 2012, which continues to be a crucial part of Omonia’s political history. Restoring parts of the aforementioned law *On venereal diseases* («Της εξ αφροδισίων νόσων προστασίας και ρυθμίσεως συναφών θεμάτων»),²⁹ and amidst an intensification of public attention to issues surrounding migration, criminality, and the perceived “degradation” of the Athenian historic center, a bill was passed in 2012 that criminalized those who “knowingly transmitted HIV” to others as a form of “grievous bodily harm”.³⁰ Introduced as a public health policy against the supposedly alarming spread of HIV-AIDS, ordinance 39A *For the limitation of the spread of infectious diseases* («Ρυθμίσεις που αφορούν τον περιορισμό της διάδοσης λοιμωδών νοσημάτων») was used to target migrants, sex workers, drug users, and homeless women trying to survive in public space, through systematic police sweeps and forced testing that primarily took place in and around Omonia. At the peak of this mission, the names and photos of some of the arrested women were publicized in the media, breaching medical confidentiality, supposedly so that clients who had bought their services would be notified and get tested. Overturned in 2015, this law and the ensuing outing and imprisonment of HIV-positive women constitutes perhaps the more recent peak of spectacularized state violence in the name of public health.³¹ Yet, its extremeness should not preclude us from seeing its continuities and alignments with wider state policy and the processes that have shaped public spaces and illegalized labour over the last century. To be more specific, by “doing nothing more than protecting public health” (Ministry of Civil Protection 2021, quote by Minister of Health Antonis Loverdos), ordinance 39A operated simultaneously as a policy for public order, (sex) work, and migration, in line with the projects of territorialization that I have already discussed. The following quote from the then (as well as during part of this research) acting Minister of Civil Protection Michalis Chrisochoidis is telling:

²⁹ Law 1193, Government Gazette Issue A-220/20.8.1981.

³⁰ Bill 39A, Government Gazette Issue 1002/B’ 2.4.2012.

³¹ For more information, see the documentary *Ruins: Chronicle of an HIV Witch Hunt*, dir. by Zoe Mavroudi.

“The Ministry of Civil Protection is advancing a legal decree predicting that illegal aliens who are in the country and suffer from an infectious disease, *or belong to groups that are vulnerable to infectious diseases* due to their country of origin, or due to the use of prohibited narcotic substances, or even because they prostitute themselves or live under unacceptable sanitary conditions, will be detained.

What I mean: Those of them who need treatment, will be hospitalized in special hospital areas and guarded, while the rest will be detained in spaces where they will be sanitarily controlled and any danger for public health will be avoided.

Therefore, these abovementioned categories will not be circulating freely and uncontrollable, even if they have applied for refugee status and the examination of their application is pending” (Ministry of Civil Protection 2012).

This plan was hardly implemented as it was outlined, and it is doubtful whether such specialized hospital infrastructure even existed; the HIV-positive women arrested during the initial, over-publicized police sweeps in Omonia were kept in prisons, and the ministers themselves admitted in this same press conference that the first steps were more a policing plan than about “health”. Specifically, this policy aimed to enhance the jurisdiction of the police apparatus by allowing them to conduct mandatory testing at will, and also to identify, examine and process a large number of migrants and workers and, in that way, tighten supervision and control over them (Ministry of Civil Protection 2012, same interview). In the relevant announcements, prevention features prominently as a rhetoric, with frequent slippages between prevention in terms of health, in terms of crime, and in terms of exploitation. Sex work, migration, exploitation, organized crime, and disease are consistently conflated, and an extremely violent and coercive policy is referred to as doing its victims a favour, by protecting them from trafficking and monitoring their health. The following statement by the same Minister – who was notably also in charge of overseeing the re-examination of the regulatory framework on prostitution in 2020 – further testifies to the political entanglements between migration, anti-trafficking, public health, and public order:

“There are no [detention] camps, there is hospitality infrastructure. In these spaces people are kept until they are sent back to their country. They are fed, have excellent health services at their disposal, and are guarded in order to not be exploited by [criminal] networks. What is preferable for women who prostitute themselves – by the hundreds, in the streets of Athens and our cities – to move around freely without having medical tests, illegal in Greece and transmitting dangers every day to people, to our co-citizens? Or is it preferable for them to be kept in a space, to be tested, to be protected from the networks that prostitute them and then go to their countries?”
(*ibid.*)

Drugs, crime, HIV, homelessness, men who have sex with men, refugees, illegal migrants, sex workers, trafficked women, unaccompanied minors: as discourses and interventions collapse into one another from the top-down, the conceptual movement from “dangerous classes” to “vulnerable populations” and back again marks a constant slippage, which in turn consistently produces Omonia and its regulars as a domain for medical, police, and humanitarian intervention.

2.2.3 Looking for work at the *piatsa*: sex work and “unskilled” labour

A more empirical term that speaks to the ways in which livelihoods and relations of labour and social reproduction become spatialized, is “*piatsa*”. The word “*piatsa*” (πιάτσα, from the Italian *piazza*) means many things, primarily market, square, and street or spot where one waits for customers. It can refer to a space, a group of people that frequents or “is” of that space, a specific community sharing a common trade, or an activity: κάνω πιάτσα (*kano piatsa*), i.e. “to do *piatsa*” means to sell sex on the street. “*Piatsa*” is also the word that refers to the spots where workers go to look for day wage labour, usually in construction, agriculture, or odd jobs. Such pick-up spots are meeting places between workers and potential bosses, in most cases for manual, irregular and low-wage work. Overall, *piatsa* is a catch-all phrase that designates a network or community of workers whose conditions are linked, as well as the actual spaces where an array of temporary or piece-rate jobs are solicited; in some ways parallel to the umbrella notions of *la lucha/luchando*, it seems to provide a shared spatial and social framework for different kinds of livelihoods, which nonetheless remain subject to different levels of policing, containment, and stigma.

As I mentioned already, Omonia's status as a place where you go to find work is established both formally and informally. For one, it is underscored by the existence of various private employment agencies, which, alongside the low-cost hotels in the area, have often been a first stop for arriving migrants. Such agencies were a fixture of the Greek labour market in the first half of the 20th century, until the formation of the national organization for employment and unemployment (*OAED*, recently renamed *DYPA*³²) provided a more centralized way of connecting workers and employers.³³ However, private employment agencies still exist and tend to focus on the service sector, particularly the jobs carried out by a predominantly migrant, female labour force. Examples are private nurses for elderly people, babysitters, receptionists, cleaners, and at times, also employees for restaurants, bars, and hotels. Abatzi, in her landmark study of "bars with women" and paid female company in the Athenian nightlife during the 1990s, also mentions the big role of employment agencies in mediating the movements of sex workers and bar staff throughout such bars in Greece (2009). As a reception point for incoming workers, these employment agencies take up the task of classifying workers and negotiating their access to and terms for different kinds of work based on racist/ethnic criteria (Zisi et al. 2012: 103-4), in this way both contributing to and shaping existing stratifications in domestic and sex work markets.

While employment agencies may be the first stop for new migrants without social networks, after settling in, many people prefer to look for work through existing acquaintances. Furthermore, people may be putting different tools to use at the same time. The story of Theodora, a cis Romanian sex worker who had worked in Omonia regularly for more than a decade when I met her, is indicative on various levels. When she was around 30, she came to Athens looking for work. She visited a bunch of employment agencies around Omonia and eventually landed a job as a waitress working nights. However, while she was already frequenting Omonia during her job

³² OAED (ΟΑΕΔ) stands for Organization for Workforce Employment (Οργανισμός για την Απασχόληση Εργατικού Δυναμικού) and DYPA (ΔΥΠΑ) for Public Employment Service (Δημόσια Υπηρεσία Απασχόλησης).

³³ I discuss these official programmes on (un)employment and how they applied to my research in detail in Chapter 5.

search, she met someone who propositioned her and paid her to go to a hotel with him for 50 euros. This first experience did not seem too bad to her, particularly in comparison to her badly paid waitressing job, which she already hated. After one week, she quit her job and came to the stroll.

Of course, like many sex industry “origin stories”, this one too comes with certain caveats. Like in Beatriz’s opening segment, Theodora’s entry into sex work appears almost accidental, like something she stumbled upon. Told casually during a chat, her story does not speak volumes about what it is like to enter sex work without any know-how or community, to make your living through it in the long term, or about the forms of discipline and devaluation this sooner or later comes to entail. The reason I am referring to it here is because all things considered, it does help establish the literal and conceptual spaces that my analysis will unfold in. In other words, it illuminates Omonia as a place to look for work, and it also situates sex work alongside the other jobs interlocutors are presented with in the service sector and as they frequent the neighbourhood. It shows how for a certain part of the labour force, places like Omonia are “the first and the last resort for securing paid work” (Shah 2014: 42), and that “legitimized and stigmatized, legal and criminal income-generating strategies” (Shah 2014: 4) are practically and conceptually linked, not least through institutions that connect workers to employers on different degrees of formality. Most of the jobs available to this workforce, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, are usually labelled as “unskilled”, and in the case of feminized labour like elderly care, domestic labour, and sex work, this is further linked to their pervasive naturalization and association with gender roles (see Lazaridis 2001: 75). Nevertheless, the closer one looks, the more apparent it becomes that all these activities require considerable skills and “relational” (Cabezas 2009) or “emotional” (Hochschild 1983) work, from reading clients to setting and managing boundaries.

The multiplicity of labours being negotiated in places like Omonia testifies to the connections between sex work and other devalued, albeit “straight” jobs.³⁴ Sex work, agriculture, construction, fruit picking, cleaning, care and reproductive work,

³⁴ Cf. Shah 2014, for an analysis of *nakas*, day wage labour markets in India where migrants solicit contracts in construction and covertly sell sex.

were and are the main jobs available to migrant men and women in Southern Europe.³⁵ Apart from sharing pick-up spaces and constituting the realm of alternatives for this labour force, workers often combine or alternate between these sectors, or use one euphemistically to hide their involvement in another. The sex workers I met - local and migrant - often combined incomes from cleaning and elderly care, in some cases the side jobs originating in networking done in Omonia as well. For example, Adelina, an Albanian cisgender woman trying to regain custody of her son, got an extra job as a cleaner in a hotel that local sex workers, including herself, use with their clients. Eleni, a cis woman from Athens who engages exclusively in sex work, confessed that she tells family and acquaintances that she cleans houses for a living to avoid whore stigma. Similarly, in Mai's research, migrant men from Morocco who sold sex (and might or might not also have worked seasonally as fruit pickers), told their families and friends they were "picking strawberries". Gradually, the two livelihoods became so closely linked that the phrase *recogiendo fresas* became "a tongue-in-cheek expression used to designate selling sex" (2018: 72).

Following the example of other anthropologists of labour (Kasimir and Carbonella 2008, Kofti 2023: 9, Mollona 2009) and looking at the articulations between licit and illicit, "respectable" and marginal, formal and informal forms of work, the processes of class formation and wherein labour is managed, reshuffled, and directed towards different activities at different times start to become more visible. As an intervention in sex work debates more specifically, tracing these connections between spaces, kinds of work, and people provides a first step towards undoing the "exceptionalism of prostitution" (Shah 2014: 26). These links situate different sectors alongside each other, as the concrete alternatives that migrant and working-class people grapple with and across which they negotiate (to the extent possible) the forms of their exploitation or mobility, with the mediation of different actors. At the same time, these relationships are also identified as the results of top-down processes and policies dealing with labour, migration, and urban governance such as those outlined in the history of the area discussed earlier.

³⁵ For an analysis of these sectors in the context of Bulgarian women's migration to Greece, see Markova 2001, Angelidou 2013: 220-1.

2.3 Legibility, silence, and knowledge production between the stroll and academia

2.3.1 A square “in the know”

“...life on certain streets and avenues [...] unveils a kind of metaphysics of space, a poetic divinity, next to which thousands of people may pass without necessarily seeing anything, and which suddenly becomes sensitively tangible and terribly haunting for those who have a particular social stake in it” (Marabet 2015: 6).

“During the day, young migrant men mix with the crowds of tourists and inhabitants. The contrast between the grandeur of the archaeological monuments and other tourist sights, the affluence of the shops and restaurants, and the marginalization of the young migrant men selling sex provides the latter with relative invisibility, at least to the untrained observer” (Mai 2018: 41).

If what takes place in public space and in city streets is not interpreted the same way or even seen at all by its various inhabitants, Omonia is the epitome of a contested and multiply appropriated urban space. Its history as a meeting place for gay men, hustlers, queers, sex workers, and petty criminals means that a host of social meanings and covert relationships were folded there, visible to those who knew what to look for and cared to do so. Being knowing, perceptive, cunning, but also hustling and resourcefulness, are all meanings that relate to the class and sexual relations that have historically crystallized in Omonia. As a certain level of secrecy was necessary to maintain these relationships, whether they were about same-sex intimacy or transactional sex or both, it is interesting to consider that men participating in same-sex erotic relations in post-war Greece referred to themselves as “cunning” (*poniros*). Such a qualification pointed to a form of knowledge about the potential of spaces and interactions, and the ability to decipher the erotic nature of a same-sex encounter (Yiannakopoulos 2020: 186; cf. Yiannakopoulos 2024).

Nowadays, the activity that takes place in Omonia’s streets can still appear very different to random passers-by, the tourists that flock the city center of Athens, NGO workers, cops, clients, bosses, and hustlers. Omonia and the surrounding area reserve a special cartography for those “in the know”. Although I would not claim to be

nowhere near being one of them, I did learn to look at public space and time differently the more involved I became with the women who worked there.

Temporality marked a boundary in the activities in Omonia in more ways than one. The beginning of each month was pay day, when workers were expecting more traffic in clients. January was a dead season, people having spent a lot of money for the holidays and being left broke. Daytime and night-time formed a different kind of boundary, with shifts in the work force on the streets, more people taking advantage of the increased commercial traffic during the day, and fewer sex workers braving the night hours, in response to their own circumstances or to issues of access and intricate stroll hierarchies and turf agreements. In the course of each working day, workers scattered and re-emerged in response to more-or-less regular police patrols. During my time in the sex workers' day center, my initial curiosity as to why women seemed to want to take their break from the street and flocked the premises all at the same time, was replaced by an understanding that sexual commerce, NGO work, and policing took on a strange synchronization in the neighborhood's rhythms.

Besides the indubitable exposure, public space also offered certain affordances. Eleni, a local sex worker in her sixties whose family and friends lived in Athens, said she preferred to sell sex outside because she was in charge of her movements and visibility. Rather than waiting in a brothel or putting an ad online and not knowing who she was going to receive, the busy commercial streets of Omonia offered her more anonymity and a better overview of her environment. Other workers also preferred street work over selling sex in brothels, which they described as claustrophobic. Although opinions and preferences varied, these perspectives paint a different picture than the abjection normally associated with working or hanging around in public space.

Gradually, the topography of the area also took on a different light. Shops I had never noticed before stood out as locations of worker commensality, where women discussed good and bad clients, arranged group sex dates to give each other work, vented about their daily lives, and waited together. A café that had long passed its glory days transformed into a hidden feminist landmark. Fifteen years ago, a small

victory had taken place there: Eleni, new on the job, had begun befriending other sex workers. By building a community and exchanging information, she managed to get rid of a client who was blackmailing her for free sex. Then, a busy bus stop emerged as the main spot where a group of older sex workers solicited, unnoticed by anyone who did not have business with them. It became apparent that many people who had seemed to be hanging about aimlessly, or only passing through, were actually working or looking to hire someone who worked. The streets around Omonia suddenly seemed to bear all the drama of sustaining a secret life in public space. By and by, details, rhythms, places, and faces became familiar.

This niche cartography, albeit in its older instantiations within geographies of transgressive sexualities, has been celebrated with no uncertain hints of nostalgia by various gay authors who frequented and cruised in Omonia. Most aptly, a playful gay tune parodizing a famous Greek song of the '70s, which the self-taught folklorist Ilias Petropoulos recorded from gay men during his time in prison, has Omonia as its protagonist. Crafted in *kaliarda*, the underground coded language that gays, sex workers, prisoners, and trans women used at the time, the song jokingly qualifies Omonia as “a *knowing*, cunning square” (πλατεία τζιναβωτή, *plateia tzinavoti*) (Petropoulos 2010: 248). It takes us on a special tour of the area, telling us what is visible from the perspective of the queers, the misfits, the bosses and the hustlers that populate it. Invoking a whole world of semi-public meanings, activities and exchanges in one of the busiest and most central landmarks of Athens, it gleefully proclaims in mock tourist-guide style:

“Aged clients, young Apollos, pimps

This is Omonia square plus!” (Petropoulos 2010: 249)

2.3.2 Glimpses of Omonia: fieldwork and knowability

One day, when I was still volunteering at the NGO, a sex worker who was a regular both at the stroll and at the day center, appeared with bruises and hair that was haphazardly cut short. She did not want to talk about it. A cis migrant woman from the ex-Soviet Union, Dasha had lived and worked on the streets around Omonia for years. Despite being in a state of quasi-homelessness, she always found ways to keep her hair

in form, dyeing it in beautiful colours and loving to talk about where she bought her favourite hair dyes. Besides the beauty talk, it was she who leveled the most acute critiques to the day center staff, urging us to refrain from giving her and other sex workers advice or from generally saying too much, because *“if you don’t do this job, you can’t understand a thing”*.

In the coming weeks, it was implied by other women that someone had roughed her up and cut her hair off to warn her about repaying a debt. Eventually, her hair grew back and she dyed it purple; however, the memory of Dasha’s exposed head served as a nagging sign that she was, in fact, right, and I would never really understand what it feels like to live and work in Omonia, no matter how much research I did. Dasha’s appearance that day was one of the first piercing reminders of the high stakes that women on the stroll were dealing with. There was a whole part of their world that I only glimpsed in fragments. The debt and credit relations that existed in Omonia, for example, materialized only in the form of Dasha’s punishment. Even with women I eventually became close with, there were certain things they thought wise to never share with me. Although over time I learned to look at public space differently and pieced together new elements in Omonia’s labour cartography, the fact remains that what is offered here is only a partial view, consisting of what I could see, the parts people allowed me to witness, and of certain, now almost surreal, glimpses that unsettled whatever grasp I thought I was forming. Such glimpses include having one’s hair forcibly cut in public, the lynching of an HIV activist-drag queen by police and local shopkeepers on what was otherwise a regular Friday afternoon,³⁶ sex workers’ daily congregations in old Omonia cafes to discuss quotidian problems, instances of women caring for friends and co-workers who entered into psychotic episodes on the stroll, older workers chasing newer ones out to wipe out the competition, pimps checking out the day’s work traffic from the bars where they sat, and prostitutes occasionally ganging up against abusive passers-by who insulted them. These speak to the banality and the extreme-ness, the terror and the profoundness of what takes place in Omonia and places like it. The cruelty of having to return there for work day-in, day-out, some sex workers having reached their seventies and still needing to hustle to live, is

³⁶ For the story of ZackieOh’s murder, see *ZackieOh Justice Watch*.

accompanied by another reality, that, even when someone found work elsewhere or retired, they would often return to Omonia to talk to friends and to meet peers who could understand them. No matter how important it was to have a life outside of the violence, the competition and the perennial fatigue of Omonia, for some people, the stroll was also a space where they could communicate in a shared language.

Several years have elapsed since my introduction to the world of sex work, and the naivety that characterized my early NGO interactions has long dissipated. Nevertheless, thinking back to these experiences in Omonia allows me to address one final issue that runs through this research: the question of the knowability of sex work in any total shape or form, particularly across the vast distance that separates academia and the sex industry. One major implication is that the filtered image I encountered is a matter of survival for populations who navigate complex forms of state (il)legibility and control. This is at once a practical, political, and epistemological matter, and it involves recognizing “sexual commerce as an assemblage of highly mediated forms of knowledge, where survival is often predicated on secrets and silences” (Shah 2014: 40). Other scholars researching sex work have made similar observations: for example, Plambech (2014: 200) writes about how certain topics were termed “sealed-lips” issues by Nigerian sex workers and deportees. While in the case described by Plambech keeping one’s mouth shut had more to do with managing stigma within their communities, these silences are also a key aspect of fieldwork experience (Plambech, personal communication). In my own field for certain, the fact is that people omitted, twisted, avoided, or lied about certain issues in what was clearly a power-laden research relationship - even more so, in the context of NGO work. This is another dimension of the complex “relational work” (Cabezas 2009) that becomes necessary in the criminalized sex trade. Apart from a protective measure on behalf of workers whose livelihoods are illegalized, stigmatized and the target of constant social, medical, and police intervention and documentation, it is also a way of setting boundaries. In contrast to common stereotypes about sex workers that posit an always-already violated femininity, the women I ended up working with were very skilled, indeed experts, at setting boundaries where and when they were able to. In

doing so, they taught me a lot about how to conduct research by being attentive to their silences and refusals.

Another implication that logically follows is that, while sex workers often have to deal with various facilitators, bosses, and gatekeepers in the industry, some of which they straightforwardly refer to as pimps, the realities of exploitation and mediation in the field unraveled slowly, in some cases partially, and in others not at all. Although an illegalized sector like the sex industry is rife with bosses and middlemen of different kinds, from pimps and madams to landlords, online ad handlers, brothel owners, drivers, and others, I was able to approach these relations ethnographically only with interlocutors I grew very close with, and in most cases in retrospect. I wrote what I could perceive, and omitted things that remained sensitive or compromising for the women I worked with. As a result, I have less to say about the bosses than about the state, and perhaps a bit more about the relationship between the two – i.e., the ways state policy opens up an expansive domain of opportunity for exploitation to actors active in and around the sex industry.

Finally, Dasha's reproach resonates on another level. Not knowing the full picture about sex work, especially as it takes place in Omonia, and not being able to understand it, has to do with the simple fact that I do not share the same material circumstances as the workers whose social reproduction and livelihoods rely on the stroll. Rosemary Hennessy has referred to the tension between striving to learn by coming close to the realities of other people, while recognizing the limits inherent in a researcher's subject position, as a "pedagogy of failure" (2013: 80). Alongside the silences and refusals of the people researchers work with, this failure needs to be taken seriously. Considering how policy-makers and academics inhabit distant realities from most workers who hustle in the lowest ends of the sex industry, and seeing how interventions to contain, supervise, or rescue sex workers have devastating effects on their lives and communities, Dasha's remark about saying less and taking a break from the unsolicited offering of solutions, rings particularly important. It speaks to different forms of knowing, that extend from the embodied and material stakes of sex work as known by those who participate in it, to the kinds of knowledge production that occur in sex work research and are subsequently consumed in the university and policy-

making; it also hints at the often disastrous and extractive distance between the two. Accordingly, rather than offering solutions and policy recommendations which implicitly assume sex work itself to be “the problem”, throughout this thesis I try to point to the kinds of violence, exploitation, containment, and dispossession that emerge in my interlocutors’ life trajectories in and out of the sex industry, and are identified as problems by them.

Conclusion: Transformations in the urban landscape

“The power of the spectacle has marginalized analytic connections between brothel-based prostitution and informal economies, in favor of rendering brothels as exceptional sites of harm, and rendering their eradication as commonsense policy. If prostitution is properly understood as one of several livelihood options that poor rural migrants deploy in the city, then the spaces for prostitution will now disperse, rather than disappear, while the land that housed red-light districts is rebranded and resold for far greater profits than it ever generated before” (Shah 2014: 187).

The landscape of Omonia is interwoven with violence, dispossession, despair, ingenuity, and moving instances of support and connection. It bears multiple histories. Some are obvious – we are after all dealing with a central hub of commercial and tourist activity in a capital city – but others are hidden in plain sight. They speak of the survival strategies of the lower segment of the multi-ethnic working class, of severe exploitation, the making of communities, of escaping bad situations and getting caught up in new ones. Omonia is an amalgam of these histories, saturated as they are by state violence and the projects of governance that structure urban space and the ways of living of the labour force.

Despite the historical continuities in Omonia’s position in the politics of labour, sexuality, and migration, the area has undergone many transformations throughout the years. At least since the 1990s, the *piatsa* as a place to look for work became increasingly associated with international migrant labour. This testifies to the connections between labour, class, and migration and the ways they have played out in Greece, without meaning that all the workers looking for day wage labour or other incomes in public spaces are migrants. What is certain is that during the 1990s and

2000s, being a migrant largely translated to being at the bottom of the working class, and navigating exploitation across specific, undesirable sectors. In more recent years, and in the aftermath of more than a decade of capitalist crisis/economic recession, the bottom seems to be rapidly expanding. As I show in the next chapter, this expansion is related to processes of devaluation and illegalization that were palpable in my field and affected most of my interlocutors, including locals, to different degrees.

Besides the changes in its demographic over the course of the last decades, the spaces around Omonia have also changed. This has been both through direct interventions in urban planning, and through more complexly connected processes of policing, economic investment, and policy-making. Throughout the years, there have been many regeneration projects in the square, accompanied by disputes over the usage of public space (cf. Noussia and Lyons 2009). The most recent of these took place during my research. After years of being closed for construction, the new version of Omonia square was inaugurated during the first covid-19 lockdown in 2020. The regeneration of the square took place amidst the municipality's proclaimed mission to attract local and foreign investment and turn the "degraded historic center" into a hub for tourism, commerce, and entertainment, backed by the Athens Association for Commerce under the slogan "Omonia like it used to be".³⁷ This has involved mass renovations of historic buildings and the remodelling of landmark hotels. Overall, the combined effects of sweep operations, police raids, medical surveillance and public health missions, and new real estate investments in sex work areas testify to changing agendas in urban planning, as well as the management of the sex industry and the shifts in its interior (cf. Shah 2014: 179-80). Up until the time my research was completed, these processes remain uneven and contradictory, suggesting a tentative and ongoing negotiation between different kinds of licit and illicit profit-making and the interests that accompany it.

In the first years of my research, in spite of various horrific police missions and "clean-up" operations which temporarily transformed the area and re-ordered the operation of sexual and drug commerce there, Omonia continued to be a "*piatsa*" with

³⁷ For more details, see the press release of the Athens Association for Commerce (Esathena.gr 2019).

its accompanying infrastructure of cafes and restaurants servicing the area's multi-ethnic workers, sex cinemas that provided a space for work or rest for male hustlers and their clients, and budget hotels. It was covid-19 and the related policies that precipitated what was – for me at least – the biggest change in the area. Between 2020 and 2021, a noticeable process took place that stripped the stroll to its bare necessities (the street and a few hotels that remained open clandestinely through the quarantine periods). Although this started with the mandatory closure of restaurants, cafes, bars, and other places of collective socialization during the lockdowns, as the measures were eventually lifted, the area seemed to be amidst a more permanent transformation. A big part of one of the main soliciting streets was put under construction, the sidewalk and corners where women congregated blocked by scaffolding. The street-food restaurant where sex workers from Bangladesh, Syria, Iran and other places hung out and took breaks, closed. All of the local sex cinemas but one also closed down for good. The building that housed one of the sex cinemas is to be remodelled into a conference hall, as part of investors' plans to regenerate the pedestrian street where it was located, together with one of the hotels used by sex workers in the area.³⁸

In his ode to Omonia in the 1980s, and reflecting on how the area was changing back then, gay author Giorgos Ioannou wrote: “the death of Omonia will be upon us from the moment the rest of the cafes close down” (1987: 20). Although he was more concerned with the forms of homosociality that the area had hosted as a long-standing cruising area, his comment is relevant for sex work too. The point here is not to romanticize the role of businesses that directly or indirectly partake in Omonia's sexual commerce. Nevertheless, places of commensality and socialization have been an important aspect of survival in the stroll, offering spaces where women could get together and vent, exchange information, learn about work opportunities, warn each

³⁸ See Ecozen 2019, and Ypodomes.com 2020. Many news reports refer to the Israeli hotel branch Brown Hotels, which has bought several pieces of real estate in the area, and is planning to renovate the old Communist Party offices in that same street, and turn them into a luxury hotel. More recently, journalists have referred to the wave of investments and regeneration as an effort to transform Omonia from the “heterotopia it currently is” to a kind of “urban normalcy” (see News247 2022). Since many of these reports are more or less openly advertising this regeneration policy and are accordingly celebratory in tone, it is difficult to assess the real effects on the area yet, especially when it comes to the proclaimed goals of securitization and “cleaning-up” of perceived social problems and criminality.

other against bad clients or police missions, rest, and joke. Although it is early to tell, the shrinking of such spaces seems to be another aspect of the devaluation faced by street-based sex workers in the area, who now have to survive through their working day with less, and possibly, in more isolation.³⁹

If, as Shah suggests, we refrain from “the prevailing notion that spaces for sexual commerce are spaces where prostitution-as-violence occurs, and that eradicating these spaces means eradicating this violence” (2014: 204), we can turn our attention to the ways the spaces, the actors, and the practices that make up the sex industry disperse and diversify into new arrangements, where sexual labour and the violence and exploitation that can accompany it are far from eradicated but rather, re-territorialized. Ethnographers working in the US and Europe have similarly shown how policy reforms implemented in post-industrial cities from the 1990s onwards led to a profound reshaping of the social geography of sexual commerce (Bernstein 2007, Warner 1999). Bernstein’s comparative study in San Francisco, Amsterdam, and Stockholm, pinpoints the following as the main implications of these processes: “the removal of economically disenfranchised and racially marginalized streetwalkers and their customers from gentrifying city centers; the de facto tolerance of a small tier of predominantly white and relatively privileged indoor clients and workers; and the driving of illegal migrant sex workers further underground” (Bernstein 2007:146). Beyond sex work studies, the findings of labour anthropologists studying diverse work settings around the world put into question “the ideas of space dispersion and deterritorialization [...] widely used in anthropology to describe phenomena related to post-Fordist economic restructuring and to neoliberalism (Saskia Sassen 1991; Low 1996; Ong 2006)” (Kofti 2024: 8-9). Instead, they suggest that “the idea of mobility introduces new global inequalities and that borders are dynamic but still define strong global inequalities that take place locally” (*ibid.*; cf. Rothstein and Blim 1992; Burawoy et al. 2000; Narotzky and Smith 2006; Smart and Smart 2006).

In Athens, the public health and order policies implemented during the pandemic have arguably accelerated such transformations in street and wider sexual

³⁹ For a discussion of how the compression of sex strolls affects workers, cf. Bernstein 2007: 66; Maher and Curtis 1998: 113, 123, cited in Bernstein 2007: 66.

economies, often seeming to work in tandem with real estate and other interests favouring the sanitization of the area. Nevertheless, it is important to refrain from imagining a linear, straightforward process wherein formal investments and gentrification completely replace sexual commerce in Omonia. It is still uncertain whether the changes I observed signal a permanent turning point in the urban sex industry, whereby some sex workers will be pushed to other types of indoors, privatized sexual labour and solicitation (such as working mostly with online ads and platforms), or towards entirely other kinds of “unskilled” labour. The fact remains that after two years of dealing with lockdowns, empty streets, and sporadic but moneyless clients, street-based interlocutors from Omonia and other strolls were weighing their options. Some continued to scrape by on the street, or took on extra jobs; others were filtered back into devalued wage-labour in the service sector, or switched to working with apps and online sex ads from their homes. This is suggestive of the connections between sex work and the wider labour market, and the way regulatory practices affect the reshufflings that take place across sectors, changing the available alternatives and cost-benefit analyses of workers caught up in recurring capitalist crises. The role sex work plays within women’s efforts to make a life for themselves is by no means stable. Instead, workers pass through different kinds of sexual labour, into other sectors entirely, or begin to complement existing incomes by taking on new activities. Accordingly, the chapters that follow move beyond Omonia and accompany them in their trajectories, extending the analysis to other spaces of work, sexual or otherwise.

Chapter 3. Illegalization and regulation: the Greek policy on sex work

Introduction

“‘Once the categories of thought are understood as expressions not of objectified social relations but of the struggle to objectify them, then a whole storm of unpredictability blows through them. Once it is understood that money, capital, the state...’ [and here I would add, emphatically, the law] ‘...are nothing but the struggle to form, to discipline, to structure what Hegel calls ‘the sheer unrest of life,’ then it is clear that their development can be understood only as practice, as *undetermined struggle*” (Holloway 1995: 176, cited in De Genova, 2002: 425).

In this chapter, I provide the contours of my analytical approach on illegalization, particularly in terms of the relationship between sex work and the state. I begin with an overview of relevant theories on migration, crime and the law, and outline the ways they pertain to my field. I argue that the analytical lens of illegalization, as it has been developed by critical migration scholars, applies to the management of sex work by the Greek state in ways that extend beyond migration governance itself, but are nevertheless connected to it in complex ways that ultimately intersect in questions about the subordination of labour. After outlining my analytical point of departure, I move to a historical overview of Greek policies on sex work, from the 19th century to the present. I show how the Greek state displayed an early and consistent preoccupation with regulating and controlling sexual labour, which relied not only on the legislative frameworks on prostitution, but wider policy on public health, public order, migration, and work. Based on this account, I then engage with regional debates about the sex industry in Greece. I argue that it is impossible to understand the politics of sex work by focusing on prostitution legislation in a narrow sense, and without considering these wider forms of management and state practice. Drawing on historical research, as well as the work of scholars working on labour, migration, sexuality and gender in Greece, I provide a critique of some of the authoritative work on prostitution and trafficking in the region. I show that there are important continuities in the state’s management of sexual labour throughout history, and that the regulation of prostitution was never “just” about sex work. Rather, it has been

intricately tied with wider concerns about work, social reproduction, sexuality, and mobility from the start. The situatedness of the system of prostitution regulation within wider projects of the capitalist state is therefore a key element of the arguments presented in this chapter. Finally, contrary to analyses that attribute the widespread exploitation and illegality in the sex industry to a weak state or inadequate law enforcement, I point to connections between regulation, illegalization, labour discipline and the circulation of profit as a consistent *modus operandi* in the management of prostitution. Rather than advancing a strictly juridical analysis of state practice regarding prostitution, I show how seemingly distinct legal approaches to sex work (regulationism and abolitionism) have been combined at different historical junctures to achieve a continuum of illegality that is productive, rather than straightforwardly repressive.

Ultimately, all of this provides a detailed analysis of the policies that give shape to the work realities discussed throughout this dissertation, and which set the terms of sex workers' struggles. It also offers a context-specific, view "from above" into how state practice and law themselves constitute domains of "undetermined struggle" (Holloway 1995: 176), to discipline, structure, and objectify the social relations through which life and labour take place.

3.1 Understanding illegalization

"There is nothing matter-of-fact about the 'illegality' of undocumented migrants. [...] 'Illegality' is the product of immigration laws – not merely in the abstract sense that without the law, nothing could be construed to be outside of the law; nor simply in the generic sense that immigration law constructs, differentiates, and ranks various categories of 'aliens' – but in the more profound sense that the history of deliberate interventions that have revised and reformulated the law has entailed an active process of inclusion through 'illegalization'" (De Genova 2002: 439)

In a landmark review of critical approaches to migration published in 2002, Nicholas De Genova argued we need to go further than studying undocumented migration simply in terms of its effects, and instead, must produce "historically informed accounts of the sociopolitical processes of 'illegalization' themselves, which can be characterized as the legal production of migrant 'illegality'" (2002: 419). He asserted

that categories such as “illegality” and “citizenship” entail specific social relations to the state, and should never be taken as neutral, natural, or matter-of-fact. On the contrary, he argued that “migrant ‘illegality’ is a preeminently political identity” (2002: 422).

The methodological implication of this approach was a “double-emphasis [...] on the productivity of the law as well as its historicity” (2002: 424). Immigration law was thus seen as a set of “intricate and calculated interventions” that were strategic, while not necessarily coherent and unified, and always negotiated and contested by the persistent mobility and resourcefulness of migrants themselves. It is this methodology that shapes my approach to both regulation and illegality when it comes to sex work. In a way, the analysis of the state policy on sex work I propose in this chapter can be seen as a genealogy of such deliberate legal interventions. As will become apparent, sex work policy does not exist in a vacuum, but is one node in a wider constellation of employment policy, public order and public health, family planning, and the management of migration and mobility. Moreover, while migration is a core part of my research, I found that De Genova’s theory of illegalization is relevant not only for migrants but for a host of other workers in my field. Simply put, all my interlocutors, whether they could officially claim a Greek citizenship or not, encountered multiple and overlapping processes of illegalization. This was no least thanks to the regulatory system of sex work itself, which had pervasive effects on the ways people worked, how they relied on and were exploited by others, and the ways they could afford to make their lives liveable.

3.1.1 From migration to class

Indeed, according to De Genova and other scholars, these calculated interventions of immigration law are, when it comes down to it, about labour. As they convincingly argue, the category of the “illegal immigrant” does not aim to simply exclude or expel from the boundaries of the nation-state; rather, its overall effect is to provide a “useful and profitable” way of creating and including under conditions of enforced legal vulnerability, a reserve of labour that hence becomes tractable and cheap (2002: 439-40). In contexts such as Greece, where illegalization has been chosen as a core part of

migration/labour policy, these processes aim at the ever-expanding creation of a labour force that is valued precisely because of its seeming disposability.

Ethnographers working on migration, sex work, and domestic work, confirm the relevance of illegalization in processes of class formation. For example, in her study with self-identified middle-class Latina domestic and sex workers in London, Gutierrez Garza (2019) examines the processes of downward mobility starting from the deteriorating economic and political realities in the migrants' home countries (Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Honduras etc.) and intensifying in the UK upon their eventual lapse into undocumented status. She describes these as "class and racial dislocations", where the women's new position in the labour force is accompanied by the re-elaboration of their assigned racial status based on local hierarchies and understandings (2019: 14). Other scholars have studied how a spectrum of illegalities created by migration policies gives shape to specific spaces, construed as "migrant metropolises" with their own localized relations of exploitation and forms of workers' organization (Gambino 2017). Nevertheless, the deliberate use of illegalization as a politics of labour and its implications for class relations extends beyond migration. In my own research, I found that such processes were extremely relevant for local and migrant sex workers alike. Illegalization extended both beyond and "before" immigration law and policy, and touched on the lives of (sex) workers through various, interconnected, and long-standing projects of state management, that had to do not only with internal and external migration but also with public space, health, and order. Hard-and-fast distinctions between citizen and non-citizen became difficult to sustain the more time I spent on the field and as I read on the histories of regulation: the more I looked into it, the more I started to see the operation of what Mezzadra and Neilsson call "the multiplication of labour" (2013). By this term, the authors address the heterogeneity in contemporary labour, whose potential divisions, intersections, and demarcations are multiplied as an effect of both mobility practices and the operation of borders. The authors use the concept of borders not just in the traditional sense of national borders as this relates to migration, but also in terms of "other lines of social, cultural, political, and economic demarcation" (2013: ix).

In more recent analyses, De Genova explicitly extended this theory beyond the strict confines of migration, and sought to “elucidate how state power has come to increasingly rely on projects of illegalisation, whether the target of such endeavours be migratory movements or the disavowal, disenfranchisement, and effective de-naturalisation or de-nationalisation of distinct categories of minoritised citizens” (De Genova and Roy 2020: 352). While the examples these authors consider involve the literal “migrantization” of citizens who are rendered stateless and illegal, this attention to processes of illegalization that display an affinity to migration policy is close to my own approach, which identifies illegalization as a differentiated yet shared reality among sex workers with different official citizenship statuses.

The issue in my field, then, became finding a way to think about migrants and otherwise criminalized or illegalized populations together without collapsing the differences between them, to understand how illegalization shapes class affinities and productive stratifications across these often overlapping groups of people. The non-migrant populations in question here largely constitute what has historically been called the “dangerous classes”: beggars, sex workers, addicts, the homeless, vagrants, petty criminals, and anyone who did not conform to desirable ethics of work.⁴⁰ Hence it becomes important to consider the connections between migration, sex work, and public order policy, and the various ways in which crime has been used historically – and continues to be – as a way of talking about class and labour.

3.1.2 Political theories of crime

The connection of sex work with crime may be readily evident. For one, sex work and associated activities are directly criminalized in many countries. But even in less obvious scenarios, sex work has borne a historical association with criminality and disorder, targeting women’s presence in public space and “unruly” sexual/economic behavior in more indirect ways. From the 19th century, narratives about “white

⁴⁰ The concept of the dangerous classes (or *classes dangereuses* in French) was popularized in America and Europe from the 19th century onwards, and was closely tied to criminological, sociological, and subsequently historical accounts about the working and the so-called “idle” classes. A landmark text was Charles Loring Brace’s *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872), which included under the term vagrants, vagabonds, prostitutes, and different kinds of criminals.

slavery” and women’s victimization in the sex trade have also accompanied state and international responses to sexual labour, contributing to the expansion of policing and surveillance of working-class communities and the stricter control of women’s sexuality and mobility through criminological paradigms (Kempadoo et al. 2016: xiii-xv). With the turn of the 21st century, discourses on human trafficking have become increasingly recodified in terms of the sex industry’s supposed connection to organized crime (Papanicolaou 2011, Abatzi 2008). Hegemonic feminist paradigms committed to criminal justice approaches have allied with state projects that seek to regulate work and cross-border mobilities; far from curbing the exploitation faced by migrant workers along their trajectories, the effect of anti-trafficking as immigration policy rests more on the “continual regulation of the supply of cheap, flexible wage-labor” (Kempadoo et al. 2016: xx).

These dynamics are part of a wider process wherein migration itself is being reconceptualized in terms of crime and criminality. Besides the latest surge of anti-trafficking policy (discussed in sections below), this occurs most directly through the introduction and tightening of penalties for migration-related practices, such as hiring undocumented workers, assisting in migrants’ mobility or their stay in the country of destination. In addition to immigration law, other kinds of offences have been introduced or re-employed to target migrants, such as general public order ordinances related to loitering (Chacon 2009: 138). In reference to the US, but describing what has increasingly become an international trend, Chacon terms this shift “managing migration through crime” (2009).

Finally, sociologists and social historians have shown how ideologies of crime are closely tied to the politics of work. For example, Kathleen Millar has described how labour reforms in Brazil contributed in the construction of a new kind of unequal citizenship. The recognition of certain types of work and the allocation of rights came with the exclusion of others, producing a worker-criminal dichotomy that translated to differentiated citizenship statuses (Millar 2018: 75, cf. Holston 2008). In the case of India, the Subaltern Studies group have examined the relationships between the modern state and populations whose citizenship status is complicated by the fact that

their “very livelihood or habitation involve violation of the law” (Chatterjee 2004: 40). On a more general level, the political theory of crime developed in Britain by critical social researchers over the crisis of the late seventies, aptly illustrates how crime is discursively set in contrast to disciplined and “honorable” work (Hall et al. 1982: 141-2). In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. embark on a parallel endeavor to De Genova’s, setting out to speak about crime not as a given fact, but rather as a political construct emerging from distinct and historicized processes of “criminalization”. They offer “an alternative view of crime and the law as the product of antagonistic social forces, and of their incidence and operation as one of the principal means by which class domination is secured” (1982: 177). They show that “crime” has often and throughout history operated as a metonymy for class and race, whereby “the poor and propertyless are *always* in some sense on ‘the wrong side of the law’, whether they transgress it or not” (Hall et al. 1982: 190).

This association of the law with class and labour, rather than justice in an abstract or neutral sense, is based on a specific, Marxist critique of the state, wherein exploitation and inequality are not the exception, i.e. the product of policy mishaps, but the rule. Hall et al. write:

“Of course, if crime really could be controlled, and all could be free to go about their business, the ‘freedom’ which this impartial law would provide for working people would be the freedom to go on being poor, and exploited. The law does not have to be ‘bent’ in order to facilitate the reproduction of class relations (though it may be bent on occasions). It achieves this through its normal, routine operation as an ‘impartial’ structure of the state” (1982: 149).

In many European cities, the historical formation and establishment of police forces therefore came to serve as “a means to monitor and control a new urban workforce [...] that was forming in the wake of industrialization” (Shah 2014: 131). The formation of the British police force, which provided the model of operation through direct processes of consultation and knowledge-sharing for the police in countries like India (cf. Shah 2014: 131) and Greece (Fotakis 2016), had an explicit mandate to suppress class warfare, in its stated aims to “curb urban crime and discourage working-

class political activity” (Arnold 1976: 3, cited in Shah 2014: 131). This was achieved by a mix of tactics that attempted to instill order by targeting people’s presence and activities in public space, codified in laws about public morals, vagrancy, loitering, and so on (cf. Fotakis 2016: 46, 66-7, 73). In the context of women’s work, the recodification of ideas about “free” and “unfree” labour during the early 20th century involved enforcing and regulating the separations between sexual and domestic work, attempting to destroy the social relations between working women, and denying the possibility that state-sanctioned work could be exploitative (Laite 2017: 62). As dispossession remained an ongoing reality in capitalist history, each “episode” came with its own reordering of social reproduction, forcing shifts in the forms in which people survived (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 14-5; Linebaugh 2003). In the process, policing has had an active role in violently instilling and guarding the divisions between what is conceived as the “working class” and “the poor”, the waged and the wageless, through ideologies of crime. The reclassifications of the working classes that resulted in each such wave were accompanied by renewed social hierarchies that deepened gender, racial, and ethnic inequalities (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008: 15).

3.2 The Greek context

These approaches to crime, illegality, and the law resonate in my field in multiple ways. From the birth of the Greek state (1832), sex workers have been treated as sources of disorder and contagion, and subjected to a vicious cycle of regulation and illegalization by merged police and medical authorities. The logics of confinement and surveillance that underwrite historical and contemporary forms of regulation suggest that sex workers have consistently occupied an uncertain position between workers, victims and criminals.

The management of sex workers alongside other “dangerous classes” has a long history in Greece, tracing back to the birth of the Greek state (Korasiadou 2002, Hantzaroula 2017). Prostitution has been regulated more-or-less continuously since 1836, first through ad hoc ordinances and then through the first systematic legislative framework in 1922. Despite the supposed legalization of their work since the 19th century, throughout the history of the Greek state sex workers have been consistently

treated as sources of disorder and infection. Accordingly, sex work has been managed as a distinct social problem that has to be contained and controlled, but profitable as it was for a host of state and non-state actors, never eliminated. Sex workers have been targeted in uneven and selective ways, wherein the enforcement of laws has included a wide array of official and unofficial practices, including enforcing the letter of the law, allowing people to work informally, extorting money and sex, violence, or other kinds of sexual and economic exploitation. The laws in question consist not just of direct provisions about the legal sale of sex, but also policies relating to public health and order, migration, and employment.

The situatedness of the system of prostitution regulation within wider projects of the capitalist state is a key element of this chapter, which argues that we cannot examine sex work in isolation from labour and sexuality at large. In fact, regional historical research suggests that the early interest in containing sexual commerce must be understood alongside wider agendas of disciplining the working classes to specific ethics of work, sexuality, and gender, while simultaneously ensuring that those who did not conform would still be subject to other kinds of punitive control (cf. Tzanaki 2016, Fotakis 2016). Korasidou, in her historical analysis of 19th and early 20th century prostitution policy in Greece, characteristically argues that the circulars and ordinances targeting sex work actually operated as “the first official texts of family policy in the 19th century” (2002: 132). Overall, the multiple overlaps and productive ambiguities in the laws allowed for the persecution and surveillance of various groups that were perceived as threatening and “anti-social” during different periods, from people engaging in homosexual practices, to curious girls who did not sit tight, to unruly domestic workers. Far from targeting strictly those who engaged in the sale of sexual practices, state policies about prostitution were directed at a large spectrum of labours and sexualities, particularly those most visible in public space. Although most of the literature focuses on cisgender women, a history of male and queer sex work is also discernible, recorded especially from the 1950s onwards, and running counter to the idea that sex work was strictly a female phenomenon. Most notable here is Yiannakopoulos’s work on homosexual practices, which traces the links between

public space, sex work livelihoods, homosociality and subversive sexualities in post-war Greece.⁴¹

The history of Greek social policy schemes for sex workers' so-called rehabilitation, from early feminist upper-class philanthropy to centralized systems of juvenile custody and reformation,⁴² sharply illustrates the links between the management of labour, sexuality, family relations, and the stakes of maintaining order in public space. Women and girls arrested for or "rescued" from prostitution were disciplined to their appropriate gender roles by being sent to workhouse-type institutions and factories, or on to become housewives in marriage. Those who continued to sell sex would do so under either strict supervision and police/medical control, in the case of those registered as sex workers, or with the constant threat of arrest, confinement, exploitation and brutality by police and middlemen, in the case of those working informally. This resonates with Federici's findings about the history of welfare in 19th century Britain: confronted with the task of disciplining women and girls to the role of the competent housewife and unpaid reproductive work within the family, besides limiting their access to paid work in factories, another strand of state practice consisted of rehabilitating prostitutes, and tightening regulation for those who continued to sell sex, under humiliating and oppressive conditions (Federici 2023: 146). Constructing this separation between good, hardworking, conscientious wives on the one hand, and greedy, unruly prostitutes on the other, was a cornerstone for the nuclear family and the position of women in it. It was also an attempt to isolate sex workers from other working-class women when the boundaries were far from clear (*ibid.*, cf. Laite 2017).

A final important aspect that emerges through historical analysis concerns the complex ways in which sex work is governed together with migration. As will be shown, many of the bills on prostitution and anti-trafficking were introduced in the wake of restructuring, upheaval, and increased migration - both internal and from abroad. The management of migration is of course directly tied to labour; what is further suggested

⁴¹ For example, Yiannakopoulos 2016, cf. Papadogiannis 2022, Leontsini and Papadakou 2017.

⁴² These ideas draw from research conducted on the history of social policy for sex work, for a still unpublished piece on "exiting" and the Greek rescue industry that was co-researched and co-written with Athina Michalakea in May-July 2022.

here is that the policies targeting migrant populations overlap with and complement the policies on prostitution, and vice versa. The tangled web of legislations and on-the-ground practices subject workers to various, cascading forms of state control; these invariably place them in grey areas of illegality that upset easy and uncomplicated binaries between citizen and non-citizen, local and migrant. Furthermore, surges in anti-trafficking campaigns have in different periods further consolidated the links between the management of sex work and the management of migration through criminal justice frameworks, conflating sex work with slavery and directing workers towards other kinds of exploited work or deporting them back to “safety” and “dignity”.⁴³

3.2.1 Early regulation and interwar years: French-style regulationism and the emergence of anti-trafficking

The 1922 law *On measures against the spread of venereal diseases and on immodest women* («Περί των μέτρων προς καταπολέμησιν των αφροδισίων νοσημάτων, ως και περί ασέμνων γυναικών», Law 3032/1922, Government Gazette Issue A 157) set the terms for the first systematic framework for prostitution, called *diakanonistikón* in Greek. Already existing ordinances were collected into a unified, French-inspired system of regulation where police and doctors collaborated as “sanitary police” (Korasidou 2002: 35-6). The function of the sanitary police was to guard public order and to control prostitution: as Korasidou writes, this task was carried out by a single authority, which was medico-policial (2002: 35-6), and decided whether a prostitute could work or move legally, and whether she would undergo obligatory hospitalization, go to prison, or suffer other punishment. Sex working women could work with a permit or unofficially; accordingly, they were subject to confinement and strict supervision by police and doctors if they were declared as prostitutes in state registries, and to illegalization if they worked ad hoc. Registered workers faced regular mandatory testing, and those arrested under suspicions of prostitution were brought by the Vice Squad to hospitals for testing and treatment in special wards, where they were guarded for the duration of their forced hospitalization. In some of these

⁴³ On the issue of “humanitarian deportations” in the context of anti-trafficking, see Plambech 2016, Boukli and Papanicolaou 2019.

hospitals, such as the specialized hospital for venereal diseases Andreas Sygros, which was built in the interwar period, in-patients who were brought for treatment by the police had to work in daily chores, to make up for the cost of their hospitalization, but also to learn more “appropriate work” that they could turn to after their release from medical confinement (Theodorou and Loukos 2020: 44-5).

Overall, the early regulatory system worked through the interconnected spaces of state-sanctioned brothels, including the notorious brothel-prison of Vourla (cf. Fotakis 2016: 64-5), venereal hospitals, and prisons.

This system was soon embellished and new spaces were added, such as reformatories and vocational schools where women could be trained in other professions. The interwar period saw the establishment of an early form of anti-trafficking in Greece, which coincided with the mass migration of refugees from Asia Minor in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War, as well as the mobility of women from rural areas to the cities. As the first feminist organizations were formed by the so-called “Ladies”, who engaged in philanthropy for the poor, children and refugees, private actors allied with the state to carry the tasks of a nascent social policy, and increasingly assumed the role of disciplining and training working class-women. Amidst the popularization of anti-trafficking and simultaneous panics about STIs, the growing collaboration of upper-class feminists with the Vice Squad of the police led to the decision to unofficially abolish the regulatory system in the mid-1920s (Fotakis 2016: 55-6). Rather than a complete abolition, which was considered unachievable at the time, a mixed system was chosen as the way forward (see Michalakea 2024: 87). Consecutive police raids were combined with an emphasis on pushing prostitutes to de-register from state lists, and the alternative strategy of not registering them at all while urging them to find more “respectable” employment or get married. The Vice Squad of the police was even officially tasked with finding other jobs for sex-working women (Fotakis 2016: 56-7). A police report from 1926 points to some of the results: “84 women seem to have been given over to relatives or to their parents, 67 were placed in other jobs, and one was ‘given over to marriage’” (*ibid*). This “de-facto, though partial abolitionism” (Michalakea 2024: 87), relied on mass brothel closures

and raids, for which the Vice Squad joined forces with a prominent feminist organization, the League for the Rights of Women. Their collaboration established “a direct pipeline between the police and feminist philanthropists, who were charged upon agreement to take in and house vagrant working-class and refugee girls in their asylums” (Michalakea 2024: 87, cf. Fotakis 2016: 57). Meanwhile, since prostitution was predictably not eradicated, those who continued to sell sex faced intensified policing and controls.

3.2.2 WWII and the Civil War: prostitution and transactional sex in war-time Greece

Although reliable and detailed sources about prostitution during the 1940s are scarce, assorted information from autobiographies, press, and political texts suggests that transactional sex was rampant, and occurred in different levels of rationalization and constraint. The extreme conditions of famine, poverty, and warfare during the Second World War and the Civil War that ensued in Greece between 1946 and 1949, contributed to unknown numbers of women having to trade sex⁴⁴ for money or subsistence goods to support themselves and their dependents. Meanwhile, the regulatory system that had been implemented in 1922 remained in place, and many women continued to work as registered prostitutes. Gavriella Ushakova, who worked as an officially registered prostitute during and after the Italian and German occupations, documents part of that reality in her autobiography (1981: 213-227). For example, she records her stay and treatment at Sygros Hospital for Venereal Diseases, where she lived “as an inmate, with prison robes” and recorded other working women being taken to the hospital in police vans, and discharged only on Saturdays (Ushakova 1981: 219-20).

Throughout that decade, it appears the widespread exchange of sexual services became understood as a social problem, escalating to the point of being regarded as treason. Women branded as prostitutes during the occupation subsequently faced an extreme backlash and were publicly shamed as unpatriotic traitors, often including by their family members and political comrades. Although it is

⁴⁴ See Michalakea 2024: 60-63 for a more detailed account of this period; cf. Ushakova 1981: 199; Michani tou Chronou 2014.

clear that prostitution (ad hoc or systematic) serviced a wide array of actors that extended far beyond the occupying forces, and involved local exploiters, black market traders, and others, the rhetoric of the time as well as the few subsequent historical accounts mostly frame transactional sex as a practice that took place only between Greek women and foreign men. In her study, Michalakea (2024: 63) notes the example of Dimitris Glinos, a prominent politician who wrote the manifesto for the communist National Liberation Front (EAM). Glinos dedicates some attention to “the prostitution of women, which has assumed such an amazing and unexpected intensity in our land” (1944: 26), and proposes that

“Every woman who gives herself over to the foreigners is an informer and a traitor. [You are advised to] use for them humiliating adjectives and characterizations and make it known that after the war, a large P will be etched onto both their cheeks with indelible letters, which will mean ‘Prostitute’ and ‘Traitor’ [‘P’ stands for ‘porni’ and ‘prodotissa’ in Greek, respectively]” (1944: 60).

3.2.3 Post-war period: reconstruction and the penal-welfare complex

After almost a decade of war, the 1950s were characterized by unrest, extreme poverty, and increased internal migration to the cities. After the communists were defeated, the right-wing state set about centralizing its social policy apparatus, and sex workers found themselves caught between regulationism and social initiatives. The public-private synergy that underwrote social policy at the time has been described as a *penal-welfare complex* (Avdela 2013, Garland 2018). Among other things, this included the policy on prostitution, family planning, children’s protection, medical systems and hospitals, and vocational training. Together, these assorted agendas and institutions contributed to disciplining the working classes according to productive and desirable norms of labor, gender, and sexuality (Avdela 2013, cf. Michalakea 2024: 136), and the point of departure of interventions predictably was found in the regulation of public space.

A new regulatory framework on prostitution was introduced in 1955 (*On the fight against venereal diseases and other related matters*. «Περί καταπολέμησης των

αφροδισίων νόσων και άλλων τινών διατάξεων»),⁴⁵ with some additional changes to come in a new bill in 1960 (*On the protection from venereal diseases and the adjustment of related matters*. «Περί της εξ αφροδισίων νόσων προστασίας και ρυθμίσεως συναφών θεμάτων»).⁴⁶ Like the previous legislation, both bills were about public health and the fight against venereal diseases; the regulation of “immodest women” fell under the “other relevant matters” covered by the bills. While prostitution remained legalized, all public, state-controlled brothels were abolished, leading to the privatization of the sex industry under continuing medical and police supervision. Cooperative working arrangements were also banned, as part of the proclaimed effort to crack down on traffickers. These changes meant that more direct provisions were made for the “re-integration” of women who would decide to “exit” prostitution upon the closure of their workplaces. In practice, this meant that women could be shipped off to their hometowns to be supervised by their families, sent to institutions for “collective work”,⁴⁷ or be put in the custody of “protective associations and organizations that aim at their social rehabilitation” (Michalakea 2024: 141, cf. Law 4095/1960, ar. 8 para.6, cited in Michalakea, *ibid.*). The minister of Social Welfare would decide their luck, after consulting the report of a Medical Commission made out of priests, judges, the mayor, and other such figures (Katsapis 2018: 156).

It seems that the context of post-war reconstruction came with an increased concern about containing prostitution, on the one hand pushing some women towards “honourable” work and marriage, and on the other tightening control on those who continued to sell sex. In his research on the Vice Squad archives from the 1960s, Katsapis documents the applications for registration and de-registration from prostitution registries of the time, which constituted official statements of entry into and exit from the sex industry respectively. The applicants’ files offer some glimpses

⁴⁵ Law 3310/1955, Government Gazette Issue 196.

⁴⁶ Law 4095/1960, Government Gazette Issue 130.

⁴⁷ While the law refers to institutions reminiscent of workhouses, it is uncertain from the historical record to what extent such designated spaces were used. It appears that the project of rehabilitating women through mandatory labour was diffused to a host of spaces, including prisons, reformatories, vocational schools, even hospitals. Overall, the same seems to apply for various types of infrastructure and services predicted in the legislations, where it is uncertain how they translated in the actual implementation of laws. Besides the legislative pieces, in many cases there is little historical record of the application of laws on the ground.

of policing patterns and state agendas of the time, as well as women's strategies in navigating supervision and control. For example, most applications for registration were filed by women who had reportedly worked informally for years, and been arrested many times, with the density of arrests rising prior to the application (Katsapis 2018: 164). At the same time, others applied to be de-registered but reportedly continued to sell sex illegally, their applications rejected after police surveillance or denunciations by neighbors or husbands (Katsapis 2018: 156, 174). Instead of a straightforward reflection of how women secured their livelihoods amidst a shifting landscape, these brushes with the authorities illuminate a vicious cycle of illegalization and regulation, and the suffocating degrees of control and harassment experienced by registered and informal sex workers alike. Sex workers declared themselves "exited" in order to pursue other plans such as marriage and migration, to opt for other work, or to continue selling sex without being subject to such close state scrutiny; vice versa, choosing to register as a sex worker could be part of an effort to minimize police prosecution.

This system did not change substantially in the 1970s and 1980s, although new legislation was introduced in 1981.⁴⁸ The explicit references to reformation were gradually abandoned over the eighties, but the main logic of supervision and containment on medical and/or criminal terms remained stable. Over the eighties and nineties, the sex industry underwent transformations, which largely had to do with the mass arrival of new migrant populations that occupied places in the (mostly informal) sectors of domestic and sex work, agriculture and construction. Partly in response to these shifts, the legal framework was changed again in 1999, accompanied by the implementation of international anti-trafficking policy from 2000 onwards. These laws constitute the ground on which prostitution is regulated today, and are examined in detail in the following section.

⁴⁸ For a more detailed overview cf. Michalakea 2024.

3.2.4 The current Greek law on sex work

Although sex work is currently legalized and regulated in Greece, on the ground this translates to a mostly illegal industry which maintains various connections to endpoints in the legitimate economy (Papanicolaou 2011: 183). Whether they are migrants or locals, most sex workers encounter some form of “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013: 159) to worker-citizenship, and their ways of working remained informal, invisible, and in some cases, directly criminalized (cf. Papanicolaou 2011: 158). As I will show, this is the effect of a combination of policies, starting with the legislative framework on prostitution itself.

From the late nineties and to this day, sex work in Greece has been regulated by *Law 2734/1999 On Prostituted Persons* («Εκδιδόμενα με αμοιβή πρόσωπα και άλλες διατάξεις»)⁴⁹. This law sets the terms for the acquisition of two types of permits, one for the worker and one for the premises where the work will take place. The strict prerequisites for both permits, however, effectively render the legal practice of sex work impossible for the majority of workers. To legally sell sex with a working permit, a person must be over 18 years old, unmarried, not suffer from a sexually transmitted or other infectious disease, not be diagnosed with any form of mental illness, not be a drug user, or have been convicted for specific crimes. Third-country nationals without Greek citizenship must have a residence permit. The worker’s permit is valid for three years and can only be used within the region that has issued the certificate. To maintain the validity of their permit, sex workers must undergo mandatory medical examinations for STIs every two weeks. The law does not recognize basic labour rights such as paid leave, health care coverage, or social security (Michalakea 2020: 135), even for those few who do manage to obtain a permit. For example, workers found suffering from an STI cannot work legally until their treatment is complete, but they do not receive sick pay and are thus officially left without a source of income.

Besides a working permit, sex workers must obtain another permit for the installation and use of their workspace, as commercial sex is legal only in brothels.

⁴⁹ Law 2734 Government Gazette Issue A’ 161/5.8.1999.

Previous legal frameworks also required that a sex worker's installation in a place of work should be approved by municipal authorities and the police. However, the 1999 law introduced more specific juridical obstacles in the installation of brothels, providing grounds for a further domain of illegalization. Specifically, installation requirements prohibit installation in buildings with a distance of 200 meters or less from: temples, schools, daycares and nurseries, medical institutions, youth centers, hotels of three stars and higher, libraries, playgrounds, squares, etc. For installation permits in apartment buildings, the written and informed consent of all other residents is mandatory. Installation in buildings of traditional architecture is prohibited. The result is that currently, almost all brothels in the municipality of Athens operate illegally. Solicitation on the street and work anywhere outside licensed brothels remain unrecognized.

This leads to a situation wherein most sex workers' ways of working are rendered invisible and illegalized. Adding to that, some aspects of the 2734/1999 law *On Prostituted Persons* directly impose criminal penalties to workers who fail to comply to certain measures, especially those relating to STIs and public health. Those few who manage to obtain a legal status, may be punished by having their permit revoked, even with incarceration for up to a year, for failing to undergo testing, complete their treatment, or for having sex for pay while suffering from an STI.

This coexistence of direct criminal penalties with a vast grey area of illegality and invisibility has intensified with the increasing hegemony of anti-trafficking onto the regulation of prostitution, as the former invariably pushes for stricter penalties and heavier law enforcement. For example, anti-trafficking has informed the prohibition on cooperative working arrangements, since 1955. Pimping – or arranging someone else's prostitution for gain- is also a criminal offence.⁵⁰ Technically, the prohibition of cooperative working arrangements together with the criminalization of a wide array of activities codified as pimping, means that if two or more sex workers are found working in a brothel at the same time, they can be accused for pimping each other and

⁵⁰ This was briefly decriminalized in 2019 and then reintroduced in the Penal Code in 2022.

charged accordingly. It can also criminalize a host of other actors, such as drivers, landlords, people who handle and maintain online ads for sex workers, and so on.

3.3 Illegalization beyond sex work law

Besides the issues produced by regulation itself, sex workers are subject to various other laws and norms that render them illegal and vulnerable to exploitation by clients, police, predators, and brokers. These relate to gender and sexual practices, public health and the imposition of order in public space, migration and anti-trafficking. In fact, the more one delves into workers' trajectories and the tangle of policies that shape them, the more obvious it becomes that sex work is not governed by prostitution policies only, nor even primarily. Rather, it is these wider fields of state practice that have the biggest effect.

3.3.1 Gender and sexual norms

In his critical legal work on administrative violence and trans politics, Dean Spade (2011) has shown how the lack of conformity to gender norms relates to criminalization, linking gender normativity to various forms of state violence that subject trans people to exploitation, harm, and even death. In Greece, historians and activists have noted the long-standing association of working-class queerness with criminality (Yiannakopoulos 2019, 2022). Homosexual relations (previously codified in the law as "sodomy") were partly decriminalized since 1951, yet a range of laws and practices continued to impact people with non-conforming genders and sexualities. We already saw in the previous chapter how some of these processes of de facto or more class-targeted criminalization played out in public spaces of work and sociality like Omonia and Syggrou Avenue. Until as late as 2015, Article 347 of the Penal Code criminalized same-sex relationships that brought financial gain between any of the men involved (sex between women was not mentioned).⁵¹ Despite the gender-neutral terminology of the 1999 regulatory framework on prostitution, which was the first to refer to "prostituted persons" rather than "women", male sex work thus remained in a liminal state, prey to the discretion of police authorities who could decide which of

⁵¹ For more details, see Papadogiannis 2022.

the contradictory bills to implement. Although it seems that in the last decades this aspect of the Penal Code fell into disuse, Papadogiannis records that in the late seventies at least, it was widely used by police to target not only male sex workers, but trans women as well, who the authorities treated as men (2022: 342). At present, although being trans or queer is not criminalized under Greek law, it nonetheless complexly relates to processes of illegalization, as working-class and migrant people of non-conforming genders and sexualities find themselves participating in industries, practices, and public spaces that expose them to increased policing, exploitation and violence.

3.3.2 Public order, public health, and migration

Most of the policies that indirectly criminalize sex workers come from the fields of public order and health, and migration. In fact, the consequences of such policies become hard to disentangle on the ground, suggesting that their aims can be seen as overlapping and interconnected. Their effects vary across the vastness of the sex industry, and clearly extra pressure is directed towards those workers whose livelihoods and social reproduction rely on public space. For example, between 2018 and 2020, ordinances related to public morals were often used to arrest and fine street-based workers in my field when solicitation could not be proven, under the charge of “gross indecency.” The police would fine women arbitrarily, on certain occasions more than once in the same day. When fines remained unpaid, they resulted in mounting debts to the state and ensuing credit problems that locked people into undesirable work conditions and limited their alternative options or their capacity to work legally elsewhere (for, if they managed to secure a formal job, their earnings would be automatically confiscated by the tax authority to cover outstanding debt). Furthermore, measures relating to public health, such as the bans on “unnecessary movement” and the curfews imposed during the covid-19 pandemic, criminalized workers’ mere presence in public space, and by extension, many of their survival tactics. Those who could not diversify continued to work on the street, bearing the brunt of more fines and constant policing, the closure of infrastructures, and the criminalization of their clients, who now also faced fines for going outside. Finally, frameworks for migration and asylum with their vast grey areas of waiting,

indebtedness, and the constant threat of detention, deportation or lapse in one's fragile legal status, also have an immense effect on the ways people work, move around, and how they rely on or are exploited by others. All other requirements notwithstanding, workers without a residence permit cannot sell sex or work anywhere legally, and grapple with their deportability on a daily basis. Illegal entry and all kinds of activities related to the facilitation of irregular migrants' mobility are subject to criminal law and involve harsh penalties. The criminalization of assistance in the mobility of undocumented migrants covers both for-profit facilitation, as well as instances where this is done without economic interest, for example receiving people upon arrival or hosting them. The latter means that many of the community strategies that migrant networks develop to keep each other alive and safe, such as those discussed at length in Chapter 6, are also potentially criminalized.

3.3.3 Anti-trafficking

Several studies about trafficking in Greece have noted how hegemonic discourses consistently and dangerously conflate irregular migration, sex work, and human trafficking (Bouklis 2016, Papanicolaou and Bouklis 2019, Papanicolaou 2011). Although human trafficking in its contemporary form is supposed to refer broadly to conditions of coerced mobility and labour in different sectors, the specter of spectacularized sexual slavery has tended to overshadow concerns about working conditions, often resulting in an emphasis on the sex industry as an exceptional site of harm and victimization. Even within the context of the sex industry, while researchers and civil society actors have criticized the sustained focus on fighting organized crime rather than protecting workers (Boukli and Papanicolaou 2019), the extent to which anti-trafficking has succeeded in doing even the former is doubtful. Instead, one effect that this idea of all-powerful international mafias coercing women into sexual slavery *has* had is to obscure a much more complex reality of smaller-scale local actors, streams of profit that traverse legitimate and illegitimate businesses, and forms of exploitation and constraint that do not easily fit with binaries of free choice vs. coercion (Papanicolaou 2011, Abatzi 2008). What is more, anti-trafficking policy has offered a fertile ground for managing both migration and sex work at large by expanding the capacities and jurisdiction of authorities, reconceptualizing certain acts

relating to the facilitation of sex work and mobility as criminal offences, and rendering illegal various ways of working and cooperating - all in the name of “protection”. For example, the argument that sex workers must always be locatable by the authorities in order to “weed out” potentially exploitative situations, is consistently used to illegalize independent, mobile work in people’s homes, hotels, and bars. Taking into account the analyses that line this chapter, the role of the state here – whether in its directly punitive or more “social policy” face – is far from benign, and is instead central in the organization of workers’ exploitation within and beyond the sex industry.

Overall, in its long history dating back to the interwar years, anti-trafficking in Greece has peaked in different waves of unofficial prostitution abolitionism, where regulation was complemented by increased raids, surveillance, confinement, and the “rescue” and delivery of sex workers into other devalued work under terrible conditions (see Chapter 5, cf. Hantzaroula 2017). In terms of the more contemporary wave of policy and “modern slavery” discourse, Papanicolaou offers some insight into the impact of the anti-trafficking bills adopted in Greece from the 2000s onwards, during the international shift towards securitization and carceral feminism (cf. Bernstein 2018). He shows how “the advent of the anti-trafficking regime in Greece, in combination with the entire nexus of policies aiming to address organised crime and illegal migration, has led to a significant upgrading of the capacities of the police apparatus in Greece” (Papanicolaou 2011: 193). This expansion of police jurisdiction did not, however, land any substantial blow to the exploitation faced by migrant sex workers. Rather, the increased prohibitions established by the state have if anything led to a further reliance on illicit actors to arrange mobility and work (cf. Papanicolaou 2011: 195), and the maintenance of an exploitable labour force. Meanwhile, those identified as “victims” deal with the constant possibility of their demotion to the status of “illegal immigrant”. Their ability to remain in Greece hinges on their cooperation with the authorities, and “dignified and safe repatriation”, i.e. deportation, remains a plausible scenario.⁵² As numerous scholars have shown elsewhere, it is a thin line

⁵² See *Combating human trafficking, crimes against sexual freedom, child pornography and, more generally, the economic exploitation of sexual life and providing assistance to the victims of these acts*. («Καταπολέμηση της εμπορίας ανθρώπων, των εγκλημάτων κατά της γενετήσιας ελευθερίας, της πορνογραφίας ανηλίκων και γενικότερα της οικονομικής εκμετάλλευσης της γενετήσιας ζωής και

between “victim” and “criminal” in anti-trafficking frameworks (Plambech 2016, Kempadoo et al. 2016). The establishment and development of the contemporary anti-trafficking agenda since the 2000s in Greece should be understood not only as a response to international shifts in policy norms in the wider EU-US context, but also as an opportunity to address priorities and agendas in Greece’s interior. The most obvious objective relates to the expansion of the police’s capacities in the domains of migration and sex work, and the continuous management of the different migrant workforces that Greece has been receiving since the 1990s. Furthermore, as I show in Chapter 5, a slower but significant process has also been underway that rests on the social arm of the state for a more systematic organization of the connections between anti-trafficking, sex-workers’ “re-integration”, and active labour market policies.

The most recent episode of these processes involves the re-examination of law 2734/1999 *On prostituted persons* («Εκδιδόμενα με αμοιβή πρόσωπα και άλλες διατάξεις»),⁵³ which started with the formation of a working group that met in 2020 to re-examine the current system of regulation and address its pervasive “inadequacies”. The draft proposal that ensued cited the fight against human trafficking as a central argument against allowing freelance work, thereby illegalizing a wide array of independent workers; it also proposed some more thorough invocations of “client responsibility”. Aiming to minimize demand and drawing from classic abolitionist sensibilities, the latter disregarded the impact of the loss of work on sex workers should this policy be successful. Tellingly, another report published by the Ministry of Civil Protection, outlining its “Strategy for Fighting Trafficking in Persons” for 2021-2025, explicitly discusses the re-examination of Law 2734/1999 as part of the state’s new anti-trafficking strategy. Specifically, the report promises the “preparation of a modern legal framework which will consider the high risk of sex workers’ potential victimization”, and the “introduction of specialized processes and clauses to protect from potential exploitation and trafficking in persons” (Ministry of Civil Protection, 2021: 28).

αρωγή στα θύματα των πράξεων αυτών»). Law 3064/2002, Article 13, Government Gazette Issue 248/A/15-10-2002.

⁵³ Law 2734 Government Gazette Issue A’ 161/5.8.1999.

Clearly, and as I have hopefully shown so far, to say that the current law is failing to serve the interests of sex workers would be a major understatement. Nevertheless, its reassessment based on a further alignment with anti-trafficking goals sounds rather bleak. For one, as Kempadoo (2016), Bernstein (2018), and others have shown, hegemonic narratives on trafficking have invariably served the interests of increased criminalization and border control across the spectrum of sex work and migration, with devastating consequences for workers experiencing different levels of coercion. Considering how the trafficking apparatus rests on slippery definitions of exploitation, consent, and vulnerability, and the systematic conflation of sex work and irregular migration with organized crime and trafficking, the backlash of such policies is felt by local and migrant sex workers alike, who encounter another wave of “anti-crime” activity that involves crackdowns on their survival strategies, and places and ways of work.

3.3.4 Illegalization or criminalization?

This whole section has outlined how a complex web of legislations and practices produces a vast area of illegality, wherein workers are made precarious, illegible to state apparatuses, and even directly criminalized. My use of illegalization as a key term, borrowed from migration studies, slightly departs from the terminology usually preferred in sex work literature. Policy-makers and policy-oriented researchers usually differentiate between systems of full criminalization, partial criminalization (i.e. the criminalization of clients and/or third parties, without the direct prosecution of workers), legalization, and decriminalization (cf. Network for Sex Work Projects 2016). Instead, I show how the regulatory system provided by law 2734/1999, while officially legalizing prostitution under specific conditions, produces illegality as well as directly criminalizes some practices.

The need to shed light on these complexities between *regulation* and *illegalization* is in line with findings by other sex work scholars. Shah’s work on migration, sex work, and urban space in Mumbai convincingly discusses the limits of juridical frameworks in sex work research (2021, 2014: 129). Shah argues “against utilizing an exclusively legal focus in thinking through the vagaries of sexual

commerce”, and paying more detailed attention to “spaces of dissonance and congruity between juridical discourses on prostitution [...] and its governance in everyday life” (2014: 129). Bernstein’s comparative study of the effects of the legalization and criminalization of prostitution in the Netherlands and Sweden also concludes that policies are always in dialogue with wider transformations and agendas, to such an extent that even seemingly opposing legislative motions can achieve similar effects on the ground. In particular, she notes “the salience of gentrification, globalization, and the exclusion [or contingent inclusion under more exploitative terms] of illegal migrants in both instances” (2007: 146). Her research assesses the combined impact of these processes in rendering specific sex worker groups illegal and more marginalized, and reshaping the spaces of profit-making and extraction, e.g. through the centralization of power to big sex businesses in the legalized Dutch sex industry (2007: 162), and the rise of new forms of control and mediation in the criminalized Swedish market, e.g. in the proliferation of internet pimps and self-identified traffickers (2007: 154-5).

Taking all these issues into account, and despite the real slippages and overlaps between *illegalization* and *criminalization*, I find the former better emphasizes how a *continuum of illegality*⁵⁴ is produced by these processes, one that does not rest simply on imposing direct criminal sanctions, and is more productive than straightforwardly repressive. As I show in the course of my research, this continuum 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 mutual aid practices, and the establishment of entire industries around rescue, facilitation, and detainment.

3.4 Engaging with regional debates on sex work

In the following section, I engage with regional debates on sex work and trafficking. I offer an overview and critique of the definitive study of sex work and trafficking in Greece, wherein criminologist Grigoris Lazos identified an unprecedented rupture in

⁵⁴ Here I draw from De Genova 2002: 419 and Shah 2021.

the organization of prostitution during the 1990s, precipitated through the establishment of migrant sex work under conditions he calls “transnational trafficking”. My own approach draws from regional ethnography on migration, labour, sexuality, and gender in Greece, to situate sex work vis-à-vis wider transformations in labour relations during that decade, and showing how these can be situated within the longue durée genealogies of regulation and illegalization. I therefore advance a thesis that draws from a historicized and contextualized perspective, which pays attention to geopolitical dislocations as well as persisting continuities in state practice.

3.4.1 The thesis on trafficking and historical rupture

The two-volume work entitled *Prostitution and Transnational Trafficking in Contemporary Greece* (2002), by Grigoris Lazos, constitutes perhaps the single most famous and authoritative study of sexual labour published in Greece. It has had an undeniable impact on both the way of thinking about prostitution and trafficking, as well as the policy responses developed about them.

Conducting research through police networks in the late 1990s, the criminologist posited that the influx of severely devalued 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 primarily legal, “demographically-motivated prostitution” that had prevailed until then (Lazos 2002: 12). He describes the latter as having operated like something akin to a safety valve, whose main purpose was to “cleanse society, to decompress it from excess male libidinal impulses” (2002: 176). As he characteristically says, “to save the many women from male rape and to restore peace and order in society, it was necessary – a necessary evil – that some women be sacrificed; on their own volition, but sacrificed nonetheless” (*ibid.*). The “demographic” characteristic of this old type of prostitution is identified by Lazos as its stable expansion according to general demographic growth.

In contrast, the new prostitution that Lazos argues established itself in the 1990s, had an economic motive, and was “a prostitution of illegal traffic and

establishment of foreign women with the purpose of sexual-economic exploitation” (2002: 177). Its only aim and boundary was profit, and Lazos almost exclusively equates with the forced prostitution of migrant women through transnational trafficking. He claims the terms for this paradigm began to be set, in a more ad hoc manner, as the first waves of Filipina and Polish migrant women started to occupy positions in the newly diversifying sex industry during the 1980s. By the 1990s, the organized crime networks that he identifies as trafficking women for prostitution, had apparently gained better know-how, and meanwhile, the client-base at the receiving end had developed new habits and consumption patterns, which he specifies as an “increased readiness to accommodate forced prostitution” (Lazos 2002: 201-3). The decisive break came with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the mass migrations of people from Eastern Europe and the Balkans: “the phenomenon of primitive accumulation that afflicted young women in these countries, offered a vitality beyond any measure and prediction to forced prostitution in Greece during the decade of 1990” (2002: 203). Lazos concludes that over a period of a few years, migrant sex work, which he defines as trafficking and forced prostitution across the board, completely overtook the previous structures that prevailed in the sex industry and instituted “another reality, a fundamentally different prostitution, integrated in a society that has also changed” (2002: 213).

3.4.2 Beyond the trafficking thesis

As the authoritative expert study on prostitution and trafficking in Greece, Lazos’ work did not come at any old historical juncture. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, different nation-states in Europe and the US were aligning their policies on prostitution, cross-border migration, and sexual exploitation in accordance to then emerging criminal justice and securitization frameworks. When it came to prostitution and trafficking specifically, these were crystallized in the UN *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons*, developed in 2000 and also known as the

Palermo Protocol.⁵⁵ Lazos's study, therefore, was conducted and published in the midst of an increased national and international preoccupation with sex trafficking, and took up the arguments and tools of anti-trafficking discourse to designate both the problems and the solutions when it came to migrant sex work in the Greek context. In the years after its initial publication, his thesis has been criticized by other scholars working on trafficking, migration, and sex work, who have pointed out the vagueness of Lazos' methodology and statistics (Papanicolaou 2011: 172-3), as well as the fundamental problem of using definitions and numbers that are subject to differing interpretations (cf. Kempadoo et al. 2016). As a result, much of the data on which Lazos bases his arguments rests on inflated numbers that factor sexual crimes such as rape alongside statistics on trafficking, and a definition of trafficking itself based on the extremely vague terms set by the *Palermo Protocol* (Papanicolaou 2011: 172-3). The latter has been repeatedly criticized by scholars internationally, not least because it identifies basically any kind of irregular migration that results in sexual labour as human trafficking (Kempadoo et al. 2016).

Furthermore, a more pertinent issue for my purposes here has to do with the core analytical premises of Lazos' argument. Although he refers to processes of dispossession and primitive accumulation that seem to provide a structural, political economic basis to his study, the crux of his point posits demand and power-hungry organized crime networks as the main perpetrators and driving forces in the forced labour and exploitation of women. The role of the state, migration policy, and the ways newly arrived migrants fulfilled a role as the cheap labour force that shouldered the generalized economic boom that Greece saw in the 1990s, are left unaddressed. At the same time, in advancing what is essentially an anti-migrant and anti-prostitution argument, his perspective remains ultimately indifferent to the ways increased policing and migration control feeds into workers' exploitation and conditions of bonded labour.

⁵⁵ For the full details see: *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*. Adopted on 15 November 2000 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 55/25.

To be more precise, the pervasive exploitation faced by impoverished, illegalized migrant women subject to various forms of bounded mobility, and the effects of the introduction of a vast pool of exploitable labour in any industry, are undeniable and clearly game-changing. Yet, the changes precipitated in the Greek sex industry cannot and should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, they constitute “an integral part of a wider trend in migratory movements towards Greece after the socio-political changes in Eastern Europe” (Papanicolaou 2011: 160). Indeed, it has been amply demonstrated how the arrival of migrants from the former Eastern bloc transformed multiple sectors of the Greek labour market. As Greece transformed from a predominantly sending to a mainly receiving country for migrants, Eastern European and Balkan workers came to occupy a variety of low-status, badly paid and undesirable jobs, in most cases under regimes of illegalization (Papanicolaou 2011: 160-2, Lazaridis 1999). To understand this process, and rather than focusing solely on organized crime, other scholars have highlighted the choices made by the state in the management of migrant workers at different stages (Lazaridis 1999), the manner in which their exclusion was produced spatially and translated in extreme exploitability and marginalization (Psimmenos 2000), and the ways in which “the exploitation of illegal migrant labour opened up new possibilities in certain branches of the economy” (Papanicolaou 2011: 161). For example, historians and anthropologists studying women’s work and the transformations in domestic labour have aptly noted how the introduction of feminized migrant labour in Greek society contributed to the reconfiguration of care work and middle-class Greek women’s participation in the formal economy (Angelidou 2013, Lyberaki 2011, Lazaridis 1999, Papataxiarchis et al. 2009, Rozakou and Bellas 2012, Topali 2009).

Keeping a focus that extends beyond a policial approach to organized crime and transnational mafias allows one to examine the entanglement of legitimate and illicit business, the embeddedness of the sex industry within the rest of the economy and the circulation of value across Greek exploiters and establishments (cf. Papanicolaou 2011: 183). In turn, this offers a different perspective on the role of the state. Considering how illegalized sex work was profitable not only for foreign criminals but extended through various streams to the base of the Greek economy,

Papanicolaou argues that the selective (under)enforcement or seemingly unsystematic character of policing regarding illegal migration during the 1990s is not indicative of racial prejudice or organizational unpreparedness, but an expression of the ways state power corresponded to the capitalist interests of the time (2011: 196). Bearing in mind the histories of state policy examined above, and as I discussed in the previous chapter about the processes of territorialization of labour relations, it was upon this turning point and the migrant populations of the 1990s that the Greek state perfected the policy of illegalization on a large scale.

Finally, the steadfast distinction Lazos proposes between “demographically-motivated” and “economically-oriented” prostitution seems dubious at best. For one, as we have seen, people resorted to selling sex in large numbers at different historical junctures, in response to structural constraints such as unemployment, poverty, or the exploitation they faced in other work. Even the “exceptional” context of the wartime Greece suggests that sex work was a (severely exploited) livelihood and survival strategy amidst extreme dispossession and hunger. Clearly, all strategies for livelihood and survival are economically oriented, and do not simply respond to demand for a specific service, but also to the circumstances of the worker herself and to state practice amidst wider political economic transformations. On a second level, the argument about old prostitution quenching the sexual hunger of men who would otherwise rape everyone indiscriminately runs counter to any helpful understanding of the gender and class relations underwriting prostitution or rape (see Davis 1981). Thirdly, as I have hopefully shown throughout this chapter, and as other scholars have pointed out, sex workers before the 1990s hardly enjoyed legality and freedom from exploitation and harassment, a situation caused no less by the regulatory system itself. At best, they faced a life plagued “by the lack of social insurance, exorbitant medical fees for treatment by private doctors and trouble with the Vice Squad” (Papanicolaou 2011: 159-60). A more constructive approach on the profound transformations that were precipitated in the 1990s in the sex industry and Greek labour relations at large would do better to focus on the concrete changes in working patterns, the organization of businesses, the stratification of workers, and so on.

Conclusion

Throughout the histories discussed in this chapter, the productive – rather than simply prohibitive – force of the law is a red thread. Juridical frameworks that fit into neat labels – criminalization, legalization, decriminalization and so on – do not translate into clean separations on the ground. In Greece, we saw that throughout history, the forms of state management, and more specifically policies on public health, public order, and migration, have consistently operated as a basis for the creation of an illegalized (or precariously legal), exploitable labour force. Illegalization has constituted a key and consistent part of the policy on sex work, always entangled with state projects relating to the management of so-called dangerous classes, family policy, and the effort to discipline people to desirable forms of work, mobility, gender and sexuality. Therefore, whereas the persistent “failure” of existing frameworks to curb exploitation and illicit mobilities are commonly attributed to a disorganized state and police apparatus which require more comprehensive law and order approaches, what is decipherable by this more expansive historical approach is that the state is neither unprepared nor haphazard, but has, at different periods, advanced illegalization and a selective mix between regulationism and abolitionism as a labour *policy* with profound disciplinary effects.

It is clear that the post-1991 geopolitical landscape introduced a re-organization of mobilities and labour relations that had a huge impact in the Greek labour market through the influx of a cheap, illegalized workforce. Having said that, the *process* wherein different populations were assigned this status through a coordination of state policies was not new. Instead, it rested on decades of know-how, that had previously been applied to the lower strata of the local working class, including internal migrants in the 1950s and refugees from Asia Minor in the 1920s, and was subsequently re-elaborated on a more massive scale in the 1990s. To name some examples, the trafficking agenda as well as the real-life circumstances of impoverishment, exploitation and sex work of the 1990s echo similar mobilizations around the real or presumed sexual subjugation of rural and refugee women in Athens during the interwar years (Avdela & Psarra 1985: 163). Continuities are also traceable in Yiannakopoulos’ research on male homosexual practices and public space, which

explicitly mentions how working-class locals, many of whom were internal migrants who had relocated from rural areas to Athens in the post-war years, were replaced by Albanian and other Balkan migrants who also engaged in cruising and occasional sex work in the strolls of Omonia (2016: 181).

Consequently, a historical approach sheds light on the circulation of value within regulatory systems for prostitution, whereby migration policy constitutes another terrain of illegalization and primitive accumulation, in a long line of many. Since the transformations Lazos identified in the 1990s, various “crises” relating to national debt, migrants and refugees, and public health, have reshaped the landscape of the sex industry and the labour market, accompanied by state policies that continuously stretch the meanings of devaluation and multiply the conceivable positions across the spectrum between legality and illegality, in many ways that were palpable in my field. These processes, both in terms of the top-down attempts of the state to objectify, differentiate, and open up new terrains of value extraction from a diverse labour force, and in terms of the workers’ own struggles to move, survive, and live their lives in these shifting contexts, are imprinted in the stories discussed throughout this study.

Chapter 4. “All the work we do as women”:⁵⁶ making value in the informal economy

Introduction: sex work, sexuality, and other work

Researchers studying work and sexuality have often advanced arguments for destabilizing the label of “the sex worker” as a homogeneous, stable, and discrete identity. By extension, this has meant that sex work is not necessarily seen as a unique kind of labour but as one that displays continuities with a variety of other practices. In most of these cases, critical approaches have considered sex work in connection to other kinds of transactional, “tactical” sex as well as marriage (Cabezas 2009: 23, 117, Piscitelli 2019, Gutierrez-Garza 2019, Constable 2003; 2009, Brennan 2004, Padilla 2007, Plambeck 2008), or linked it to other paid, devalued, and feminized work in the service economy, such as domestic and care work (Parreñas 2015, Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2013, Laite 2017, Gutierrez Garza 2019). In this chapter, by following my interlocutors’ movements across different jobs and sexual/intimate relations, I aim to do both. By delving into workers’ trajectories, I further advance the point I made in Chapter 2 about undoing the exceptionalism of prostitution. In doing so, I am not arguing that selling sex is just like any other job, nor am I trying to erase the *sex* by focusing on the *labour* (cf. Smith and Mac 2018). Rather, the move to de-exceptionalize rests more on examining the stakes and processes of valuation and devaluation identified in marriage, sex work, and “straight” but low-paying jobs; in other words, on placing paid sexual labour within the women’s own struggles.

The choice to examine sex work within women’s struggles – what some of them call *la lucha* – and to understand these struggles in relation to capitalism and the state means making an argument about value but also about the discipline that underwrites gendered forms of work. Labour and value are approached not simply as economic issues, but rather as political. My approach to women’s struggles is indebted to

⁵⁶ The phrase is taken from the feminist manifestos discussed in the chapter. Cf. LIES Journal 2012: 233-4.

feminist and Global South perspectives, that since the 1970s have sought to expand understandings of labour and value beyond the formal wage relation, as well as recent analyses that explicitly bring feminist and postcolonial arguments together with a historicized and geographically grounded understanding of informality and informalization (Bernstein 2023, Cabezas 2009, Cowan et al. 2023, Mezzadri 2019). Bringing such analytical perspectives together with field material, I explore my interlocutors' labour processes, focusing on their movements in the so-called informal economy, from sex work to other service work to marriage.

By considering marriage, sex work, and other intimate labours in the same analysis, and by arguing that they all entail *work* that is valued in different ways, I am not suggesting that they are the same. On the contrary, women consciously negotiate between and across these labours, balancing questions of value and income, mobility, legibility, stigma, safety, and the kinds of companionship they desire. Far from occurring in a vacuum, these negotiations must not be understood simply as individual "choices", but as shaped by state projects that seek to organize work, mobility, and social reproduction. They therefore testify to a continuum of coercion that does not fall within liberal ideas of empowerment, trafficking, freedom and slavery. As other scholars have noted, if "sexuality as a form of social capital is both embodied and enacted" (Plambech et al. 2022: 135), domains spanning from commercial sex to marriage testify to global dynamics of migration, divisions of labour, and citizenship (ibid: 136). Indeed, sexuality and women's capacity for reproductive labour may constitute the only economic means available to migrants and working-class people caught in vicious cycles of dispossession and indebtedness. And while a discussion of labour conditions, social security and debt may seem less sensational than narratives about sex slaves and evil smugglers, Plambech has convincingly showed that "migration and migrant sex work very often are long-distance debt restructuring" (Plambech 2017b), a strategy for migrant women's eventual retirement, and a health and unemployment insurance for those back home (Plambech 2017a).

Finally, besides questions of survival, both paid sexual labour and marriage have been analyzed in connection to workers' projects for upward mobility. Especially rich ethnographies have emerged examining such dynamics in the context of sex

tourism and international marriage migration (Brennan 2004, Padilla 2007, Plambeck 2008). Yet, in the cases discussed in this chapter, although upward mobility may be a hope, it rarely materializes in any safe or predictable way. Confronted with a deepening crisis that made accumulation and savings almost impossible for them, the women in my field dealt with overwork, constant diversification, and a need to cultivate and maintain various “helping relationships”, to stay afloat and feel a semblance of security. While marriage could offer an opportunity to regularize one’s status and to have someone with whom to share expenses and plan for the future, maintaining (visa) marriages was a lot of work, and not without its costs.

4.1 Commodification of sexuality, or sexuality as labour? Approaches to sex and political economy

4.1.1 Intimacy and the economy

Since the 1980s, a lot of literature on intimacy and sex has devoted considerable attention to the question of commodification. As shifts in the organization of capital and welfare were accompanied by a deepening of capitalist extraction from social reproductive domains, anxieties surfaced about the blurred boundaries between work and mutuality, “productive” and “non-productive” spheres, economic self-interest and forms of togetherness. Researchers debated the seemingly growing co-mixing between the intimate and the economic that came with the expansion of the service sector, either advancing moral arguments about the capitalist corruption of what they saw as non-economic, mutual domains like the family, marriage, sexual relations, childcare, and so on, or trying to deconstruct the “hostile worlds” view that saw these as separate realms to begin with (Zelizer 2005). Several feminist scholars started analyzing the political economy of love, desire, and care, setting the ground for more to follow (Constable 2003, Parreñas 2015, Cabezas 2009: 24, Stout 2014: 6-7, Padilla et al. 2007). Scholars critical to liberal understandings of “love” as disinterested and pure from material considerations, put forth studies of marriage and sexuality that highlighted how desire, economics, hopes of mobility, and ideas about companionship had already co-existed in partnerships. Feminist anthropologists like Nicole Constable were among the first to provide nuanced studies of international marriage migration

that detailed migrant women's motivations and aspirations beyond reductive depictions of gendered victimization or sheer economic calculation (2003). She suggested that examining "the pairing of commodification and intimacy" (Constable 2009: 58) would allow us to consider together the - usually separated - topics of "marriage, household work, sex work, nursing, adoption, etc." (ibid). In a more recent elaboration of the topic, based on post-Soviet transition in Cuba, Stout has shown how "intimacy and desire were not private, innate feelings" (2014: 4), but rather deeply shaped by the introduction of capitalism on the island, as well as influencing the meanings and moral connotations through which the latter was socially understood.

Although many of the analyses that emerged from these debates involved a similar move to what I am trying to do here, the lens I propose is also different in an important way. Commodification describes a more delimited preoccupation with the moment of an activity's entry into the market through monetary (or otherwise impersonal) *exchange*. While such processes of commodification undoubtedly have implications for those involved and for social relationships at large, my own endeavor is not concerned so much with whether an activity is done directly for money, or with the moral judgements attached to different pairings of intimacy and economics. Rather, I am interested in the more diffuse ways in which *labour* and *value* constitute common elements across sex, care, marriage, kinship and prostitution. In that, I am drawing from a long history of materialist feminist approaches to paid and unpaid reproductive labour.

4.1.2 Social reproduction, labour, and value

Some of the most groundbreaking political analyses of reproductive work and its contribution to capitalism emerged in the 1970s in the US and Italy, amidst budding movements of autonomist feminism. Feminists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1975), Silvia Federici (2004), and Leopoldina Fortunati (1995) put forth the concept of the "social factory", to argue that capitalism extracted value from domains extending way beyond the factory, to the whole of society and particularly the household. Social reproduction was seen as the bedrock of capitalism: it encapsulated all the activities that made it possible for workers to get up and go to work each day – the work of "producing the producers". The Wages for Housework movements that

were created were therefore very concerned with making care, sexuality, and housework visible as *work*, and suggested that women, even if they did not engage in wage labour, were part of the working class. Furthermore, Federici (2004) argued that this seemingly “natural” division of labour that rendered women’s work invisible and devalued was historically produced through a violent process of primitive accumulation, similar to the one Marx described with enclosures in Britain. She pointed out that primitive accumulation was not a one-time event but rather a continual process of dispossession, wherein capitalism extended its field of extraction further and further into domains of life (*ibid.*).

Although the main focus of these analyses was housework, childcare, and the family, viewing sexuality as work meant that a foundation for a political theory of sex work was also laid.⁵⁷ During the late 1970s, and following a crackdown on sex workers’ communities in New York and San Francisco, different chapters of the international Wages for Housework movement published a series of manifestoes on prostitution and the state. These manifestoes sought to situate prostitution as a feminist issue that straddled production and social reproduction, that produced value for capitalism, and that was, when it came down to it, labour. In their own text, Black Women for Wages for Housework wrote the following:

“The struggle of prostitutes is the same struggle Black women are making. It is the struggle to have the money – which is the power to be independent:

To determine all the conditions of our lives;

To determine whom we want to sleep with;

To determine whether we have children or not and to be able to keep our children;

To satisfy our own needs and to build a life for ourselves.

It is the struggle to be paid for all the work we do as women, including sexual work.”

(italics mine, LIES Journal 2012: 233-4)

⁵⁷ Leopoldina Fortunati was perhaps the one to advance more thorough arguments on sex work and reproductive labour, in *The Arcane of Reproduction* (1995).

Several decades later, this excerpt provides a good starting point for understanding what women in my field called *la lucha* (the struggle) as another expression for “all the work we do as women”. Perhaps it even suggests that part of the struggle is to break away from some of this work, to determine the conditions under which one will do it or refuse it. At the same time, the underlying ideas of Wages for Housework point us towards a larger analytical/political project: expanding our notions of what constitutes a worker beyond a “homogeneous proletarian condition”, as Harry Bernstein put it (2007: 5). In that sense, these feminist arguments resonate with labour perspectives from the Global South, because they seek to expand commonly held understandings of class, value, and of what constitutes work beyond the archetype of the white, male, industrial worker (Mezzadri 2019). Notably, some of these latter perspectives were being developed at the same time, for example with Keith Hart’s famous conceptualization of “the informal economy” (1973) based on his work in Ghana, and the birth of Subaltern Studies groups in South Asia. These analyses all tried to decenter hegemonic views of how people work; nevertheless, they did not involve homogeneous understandings of value generation.⁵⁸ On the contrary, the articulation of informal income-generating activities to capitalism has since been the subject of ongoing debate. For example, in contrast to more Marxist and feminist understandings, some scholars have tended to depict informality as the chaotic, creative “outside” of capital and the state (e.g. Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020).

It is not within my purview to go into the latter perspectives at length; in Chapter 3 I already discussed how I view illegalization and the resulting informality of certain activities as state policy. The question of how so-called formal and informal spheres articulate to one another and to the production of capitalist value is advanced in the next chapter, which engages material from sex workers’ activities in formal economic sectors. I now move to concrete illustrations of how women negotiated their work in the field.

⁵⁸ In the last decades, value has been a topic of interest in Anthropology, beyond the more strictly Marxist, feminist and post-colonial approaches to political economy discussed here. For some examples that explore the topic of value from a cross-cultural perspective, see Graeber 2001 and Harris 2007.

4.2 The work and the struggle

4.2.1 “No job is worth advertising”: sex work and other jobs

As I already pointed out in Chapter 2, most women in my field had done, or continued to do, a variety of jobs. Talking about her working life, Lilyana, a 69-year-old cisgender woman from Bulgaria who had worked in Omonia for years, made explicit comparisons between sex work and industrial labour she had done in her country. On the one hand, she pointed out how sex work gave her more flexible hours and better money, and was “not as hard” as intensive factory work. On the other, she talked about how difficult it was to grow old in Greece and have to keep working, and the toll this was taking on her body. In her more mature age, she was trying to secure a regularized (albeit also informal) job as a brothel service employee where she would have a stable income of 30 euros a day. Although she had a lot to say about how sex work was different from other jobs she had done, she also made it very clear that factory work, street-based sex work, and being a full-time brothel cleaning lady with regular shifts and salaries, were all *“just work. It’s not good or bad. In Bulgaria we say that no job is worth advertising”* (in the sense of recommending it as agreeable).

Similarly, Theodora, who I mentioned in Chapter 2, also made specific references that positioned sex work within a realm of options that involved different and changing levels of intensiveness, discipline, and income. To offer a recap of her story, Theodora is a 48-year-old sex worker from Romania, who has worked in Omonia for more than 10 years, consistently frequenting the same square and hotel. She came to Athens to look for work in her thirties, spending a lot of time in Omonia as she visited employment agencies. Although she eventually landed a job as a waitress working nights, while she was in Omonia she met someone who propositioned her to go to a hotel with him. She said the 50 euros he gave her for less than an hour of work stood in glaring contrast to the 25 they paid her for an 8-hour shift at her waitressing job. *“I worked at that place for a week, but in the meantime, I had gotten a taste and started to learn how things worked on the stroll. So, I told them I found a better job and left. The gap between the pay was too big, and in these service jobs you have to go and be all ironed-up and obey to everything they tell you”*.

Theodora's words remind us that work discipline, sexualization, and emotional labour feature across women's working experiences, from waitressing to customer service to sex work (cf. Boris and Parreñas 2010). In the service sector, attitudes themselves become productive (Weeks 2011: 77), and traits naturalized as inherently feminine are mobilized by bosses to extract more value from already exploited workers. In the meantime, all the work of staying agreeable, pleasant, sexually attractive, and accommodating is rendered invisible and devalued. That being said, the fact that in sex work people are paid directly for social reproductive labour does not mean that their work is not devalued, or that there is not constant work and discipline necessary in order to attract clients and maintain one's incomes in the long-term. While Theodora's "origin story" emphasizes the contrast between the devaluation and discipline experienced in waitressing to the relative freedom and more lucrative incomes she encountered upon entering street-based sex work, this juxtaposition is contingent and became much more complicated once people actually started to rely on sex work for a living.

Even as they emphasized the differences in incomes and the relative advantages of sex work, hardly any women experienced the sale of sex as "easy money", or as an unequivocal path towards liberation from wage labour. In fact, most women I met complemented sex work with other, lower-paid jobs. Anya, a Russian migrant in her forties who had been in Greece for around a year when I met her, sold sex at a brothel five days a week and took care of an elderly woman on weekends. She alternated between the brothel and "the grandma", buying her groceries, cooking for her, and taking her to church each Sunday. Maria, a cis Roma woman in her twenties, worked part-time at a supermarket and sold sex in Omonia the rest of the time. Teresa, a local trans woman in her fifties, had done a bunch of jobs, like bartending, performing in video clips or other artistic projects, municipal gardening and other manual work obtained through short-term labour market integration programs. In her own words, she didn't like sex work, but the money was incomparable to everything else she had done: *"I hate the job, the exposure to every asshole on the street, who throw stuff at us because we are trans or selling sex... But that feeling of coming home afterwards, with a lot of money and saying fuck you all, I like that"*. Her other jobs paid

significantly less, but they helped her get a welcome break from the stroll, a way to get experience in other sectors and a potential retirement or exit plan for the future. At the same time, she also used them “as a smokescreen” to more realistically keep her involvement in the sex industry from her relatives. *“Being trans already makes me the black sheep in the family, imagine if I was open about being a whore... They like borrowing money from me but they don’t like to know where it comes from”*, she said.

The point with all these examples is that the jobs were combinable, varied, often temporary and part-time, and not linear. Some sex workers took on ad hoc caring duties for disabled or elderly people through acquaintances they had on the stroll. Many had been waitresses, barwomen, or hostesses in nightlife joints that mixed recreation with the potential of women’s paid company. Others had worked as cleaners or in childcare. All these jobs were used together with sex work to provide a complement, a break from it, a more legible and less stigmatized job to present to outsiders or in a few cases, to claim social security with.⁵⁹ Most of the time the work the women did was informal, even when it took place in registered establishments like bars and clubs. This meant that they usually had no labour rights, pensions, or visible labour relations to show. Their reproductive labour was placed on a continuum of invisibility, from the semi-informality of bar work to the acute stigma of sex work.

4.2.2 Informality, legibility, and worker-citizenship

Having established that sex work co-existed with other jobs in complex ways, it is important to consider how the specific economic affordances of sex work (i.e. the money and, in some cases, free time) were counterbalanced by problems and obstacles. As I discussed in the previous chapter, illegalization constitutes labour policy, in that it does not straightforwardly seek to wipe out specific practices and forms of surviving, but to render them exploitable, precarious, and devalued - as well as dangerous, in the case of sex work. While not all informal activities are criminalized, the informality of their work was something all my interlocutors had to contend with, particularly because of the ways work is tied up with citizenship. Overall, sex workers navigated the economic precarity of illegalized work in various ways. If possible, they

⁵⁹ A similar picture is echoed in Lazaridis’ research in the late 1990s, where some of her interlocutors described complementing domestic work with sex work on their days off (Lazaridis 2001: 82).

tried to gather savings for when they were older and with a lifetime of invisible, uninsured work behind them. Some also devised strategies to get social security through state-recognized work. In order to understand their practices, it is helpful to briefly describe how formal labour rights operate in the Greek labour market.

In Greece, when a worker is registered in an official relationship of dependent wage labour, they gather “*ensima*”, a kind of daily pension contribution stamps that document the number of days they have officially worked. Gathering enough *ensima* makes workers eligible to receive social security, health insurance, unemployment benefits, pensions, and other such rights. They are also important in migrants’ applications for regularization and residency because they are the way to prove someone has worked legally in the country and is therefore “integrating”. Having *ensima* is therefore a key way in which someone can become legible as a worker/citizen and can access basic rights from the state. Yet, the widespread informalization that prevails in the Greek labour market means that workers often receive *ensima* on an ad hoc basis (for example, working full-time but being insured for half-days, or as working once a week), or, in other cases they do not get any at all, even if they work in formally registered businesses. Therefore, besides various professions that are illegalized, take place in private domains, and are de facto situated within the informal economy, even work in certain parts of the formal sector in Greece can have semi-informal characteristics.

Although sex workers could theoretically claim some labour rights if they had a worker’s permit, this is rarely, if ever, the case, and sex work remains firmly rooted in the illicit economy. The same often happens with domestic work and cleaning as well, although to a slightly lesser extent. The service and entertainment sectors are other domains where informal or semi-informal conditions thrive. Overall, the various jobs that I have pinpointed so far as the realm of options for my interlocutors all fall on different parts of this continuum of devalued and invisible work, with sex work situated at the bottom as the most illicit, stigmatized, and dangerous work. The precarity that comes with such labour conditions meant that for one, women had to work constantly to try and plan for their future and for possible crises, and privately cover costs that are otherwise covered by employers. At the same time, some tried to

gather *ensima* in different ways. Consider the following exchanges between Eleni, Lilyana, and Adelina, three Omonia-based sex workers:

Lilyana and Eleni are talking about a young sex worker from the area, who has found a client willing to register her as a nominal worker in his business, so she can benefit from worker insurance and get a pension in the future. He is also paying her rent and the women are commenting how lucky she is to have been able to sort things out like that while being only 30. They move on to compare tactics about landing nominal worker status, usually accomplished by finding someone willing to register them and paying that person back the tax contributions for their insurance. Neither Eleni nor Lilyana have enough "*ensima*", i.e. working hours declared, to be able to qualify for a pension, and they are lacking so many that it is very difficult to catch up at their age. Lilyana knows she will have to keep working, on the street or as a cleaning lady, or perhaps both. Eleni has some *ensima* from her previous job, and is considering whether she can look for a job and get a pension, or if that fails, if she can still retire from sex work in the coming years. (fieldnotes excerpt)

A cis local woman of 60 years, Eleni entered sex work after getting divorced with her ex-husband. She had worked as a clerk at a travel agency and had two children, one of whom required special care and schooling on account of a serious mental health issue. Being left alone to raise them, her 10-hour-shifts and minimum wage salary was not sustainable; when she starting selling sex in 2005, she said she could make 2000 euros per month. She told people she cleaned houses for a living, and her mother watched her kids while she was at work. Although her incomes declined considerably over the years, she had worked in Omonia for more than 15 years by the time I met her. She had bought her apartment and remarried. Her (by now estranged) husband was an old client, who contributed his own pension to the household. One of her sons had a job, and the other lived off disability benefits and Eleni's economic support. When the issue of retirement resurfaced in Eleni's interview, she was clear that, whatever happened, she would stop working in the coming years. Thinking back to our group discussion, she pointed out that things were different for Lilyana, who "*is an immigrant woman that pays rent*" while she herself was a local and owned her apartment.

Adelina, another sex worker sitting next to them, chips in and starts talking about how she hopes she will start getting *ensima* soon, through her additional cleaning work. A cis Albanian woman in her late forties, she has been in Greece many years and has full legal documents. For her, the main concern at the moment is not retirement but having a “legitimate” occupation to show the state authorities. She is a single mother, and her teenage son lives in an institution for children after he was removed from her care some years ago. In the past year, she has been granted the right to have him stay with her on weekends. While the conversation about *ensima* is taking place, Adelina is in the process of petitioning to regain his full custody. This is a difficult procedure which, among other things, involves the professional consultation of a social worker and psychologist, and full economic declaration that proves she has a good enough income to care for the child. She has been a full-time sex worker for years, working mostly on the street and other parts of the informal sex industry like nightclubs, and therefore does not fulfill the notoriously strict requirements that describe legal sex work in Greece. This means that the income she makes from sex work cannot be used for her custody declaration, and in any case, it is highly unlikely that it would be wise for her to declare her status as a sex worker in such a context.⁶⁰ As she is very committed to have her son return home, she later explains to me that she has managed to secure two additional jobs as a cleaner, that she can cite for her assessment. This means she is currently working three jobs. Interestingly, the jobs available to her remain in Omonia: she works as a cleaner in the stroll’s hotels, with which she is already familiar after having used them as a sex worker for years. While we have this discussion, she is still uninsured at her cleaning jobs, but it appears she expects that to change. (continuation from previous fieldnotes excerpt)

⁶⁰ In many countries and on various occasions, sex work has been construed as a pathological, criminal, or self-harming behavior that can provide grounds to remove custody from mothers. In Greece, discourses about “children at risk” have had a long-standing concern with sex work, both in terms of sex-working minors, and in terms of custody. For example, Avdela’s work on the formation of Child Protective Services in post-war Greece suggests how the state apparatus together with philanthropists intervened in sex workers’ families. Small children whose mothers were prostitutes or whose fathers were in prison, “or other cases where the parents were not capable” (Avdela 2013: 394), were sent by probation officers to “children’s towns”. Children’s towns were an initiative of the Royal Welfare Service that began during the Greek Civil War. Conditions in these institutions, where children were confined and put to work in vocational schooling, were horrific. Although officially targeting children who were orphaned or left without a “suitable caretaker”, this policy operated as a tactic against communists and other internal enemies of the nation-state, aimed to discipline parents and children alike, and hoped to raise children within camps that would cultivate their patriotic sentiment and work ethic. Cf.: Vervenioti 2021: 442.

Adelina's story suggests that diversification, or the mixing of various kinds of work, can combine economic motives with the need for legibility to the state apparatus. Freelance cleaning work was badly paid and exhausting; sex work could in no way be used to meet state demands towards her as a parent. Once under the state scrutiny that accompanies custody hearings and child protective services, and facing the stigma and the illegality of her work in the sex industry, Adelina was caught in a vicious cycle of devalued work. There is a bitter irony to this. For one, work in the low-wage "legitimate" economy comes with long hours away from home, for little money. This is often a reason why many women with care responsibilities resort to illegalized sex work in the first place (cf. Feminist Fightback Collective 2011). However, mothers cannot really get it "right" with either option. In the eyes of the state, sex work is not just illegible but it is equated to unfit parenting, seen as an indication of self-harm or a criminal activity. On the other hand, leaving one's children alone for long intervals (i.e. during working hours) is increasingly being codified as "parental neglect" and used to remove custody from working-class parents, and even further criminalize them.⁶¹

As work realities became increasingly worse during and after the pandemic, the level of social and state scrutiny intensified, with constant scandals and campaigns about parental neglect and abuse, that consistently targeted working-class parents and particularly mothers as unfit. The challenge of bridging the work of being a "good mother" and being a labourer, while sharper for women whose work is as stigmatized as selling sex, therefore points to a larger weight borne by working-class and migrant parents, who must carry out the seemingly incommensurable task of working the hardest jobs and raising children while the state is watching. The majority of cisgender women in my field were mothers; some had left their children at the care of relatives back home, others navigated parenting responsibilities together with their work in Athens. Anya, who I briefly mentioned earlier, had fled her home country with her

⁶¹ Some of the many news-pieces that appeared covering a vast continuum of parental behaviors are available here: Kalafatis Alexandros, "Third incident in one week: parents lock small children in the house and take off", March 2023; Dikastiko.gr Newsroom, "Handcuffs to the couple who left their 3 and 6-year old children locked in the balcony", March 2023.

teenage son, who had gotten into some kind of trouble there. She had quit her job as a pharmacist in Russia and come to Greece, where she sold sex in a brothel and provided care for an elderly woman, while her son attended school in Athens. Even though conventionally the mother/carer and the prostitute are positioned on opposite ends of a sexist dichotomy of women's roles, in reality most women carried out a continuum of reproductive labour that spanned from caring for their children and loved ones to servicing the desires of clients on the stroll.⁶²

4.2.3 "Helping relationships": regulars, patrons, and boyfriends

Going back to Eleni and Lilyana's story about the young sex worker who had been insured as a nominal worker by one of her regular clients, we can begin to unpack another thread of the work women did. Besides the direct exchanges of sex for money, and the other jobs they occasionally engaged in, women were involved in more blurred exchanges with clients and partners, where the terms were not exact, and which ranged from gifts to "help", and even companionship as in a romantic relationship. Similarly to the practices observed by Adrianna Piscitelli in Spain and Brazil, the exchanges falling under "help" are usually part of a set of diverse income-generating strategies, which can include state benefits, wages from a more conventional job, and incomes from sex work (2019). Understood as local practices that Brazilian migrants also brought with them and adjusted in Spain, Piscitelli understands "help" as coming with an inherent asymmetry, and as involving parties that were unequal

"in terms of class or at least of access to economic resources, and often also of age, skin color, and nationality. In exchange for 'help,' older subjects, mostly men, receive sex, company, and at times domestic care. In the migratory contexts in Spain, [those] who provided 'help' were not necessarily older, nor did they have higher monthly incomes. But they could provide resources needed by [the women] to establish

⁶² Within the politics of suspicion and surveillance prevailing in state apparatuses, the figure of the single mother has held a special place, in Greece and in other national contexts. A very famous example is the concept of the "welfare queen" in the US which targets single mothers of colour making use of state benefits. In the economy of Latin American terms, it is telling that the more celebrated female figure of the fighter (*luchadora*), is accompanied by the denigrated figure of the *luchona*. In Argentina, the term *luchona* is the negative flipside of women's struggle, and is a derogatory term used for single mothers trying to make ends meet (personal communication with colleague Maria Soledad Cutuli).

themselves in these contexts. And it could involve marriages that allowed the regularization of their migratory status” (2019: 287).

In my own field, such practices were common but also quite variable in the power dynamics they displayed. The expansiveness of these relationships and the shifting boundaries between client-tactical boyfriend-friend-partner can only be appreciated through concrete examples. Take the following: when we had her interview, Eleni had to take a break to answer a call. It was a long-time client of hers who wanted to let her know he was in Omonia and had brought her a gift, some fresh salmon he got from his work that she could cook at her home after work. *“He is one of the few good clients I have left”*, she said and I asked if she finds she can communicate a bit more with those few. She said, *“yes, but I can’t tell any of them much about me. For example, I can’t say I’m married, I have to lie and say I’m divorced. No woman here tells her clients she is married, because then they will look at us and say ‘married, and your husband sends you here to work?’ Even if they are married themselves, they don’t want to hear that we are, because they assume that we make money and then we give it to our husbands”*. Besides the assumption that every married sex worker gives her earnings to her husband, the way Eleni talked about her “good clients” highlights the constant work women have to put in setting boundaries, carefully managing what they say about themselves, and reading other people’s assumptions about their relationships; to be “authentic” and open up but not so much that they endanger their appeal and lose the client (cf. Bernstein 2007, on the concept of “bounded authenticity”). It also suggests that through their paid work women inhabit a variety of relationships that mix the intimate and the economic beyond direct market transactions.

Mary, a local trans woman of 51 years, was another example who had maintained “helping relationships” with regulars throughout the years, some of whom would loan or give her money when she was going through a rough patch. She booked very few dates as an escort during my fieldwork, partly because of her age and partly because the pandemic had drastically slowed down her work. She relied on state benefits (specifically KEA, the Social Solidarity Income), sporadic sex work, and the support of friends and trans organizations. Besides the occasional dates she arranged

with people interested in her ad, she had maintained a relationship with a long-time client that she saw once a week, to have lunch that he had prepared together. Over the years, this exchange had shifted from sex to company, highlighting how sex work is part of social reproductive work in ways that extend beyond sex. If marriage is an indefinite contract for social reproductive labour, and sex work is a very time-specific and delimited one, the work women did in the field covered many things in that continuum. Mary's dates with her old client were a case in point, having transitioned from sex work to weekly practices of companionship that were not paid directly but codified as help and company.

Finally, Dolores, a Brazilian cis woman in her sixties, brought her own complex perspective to the balance of different income streams and relationships of intimacy and material support. Dolores had been making her living in Athens in a state of legal limbo for three or four years by the time I met her. Upon her arrival from Latin America, she was apprehended at the Greek airport for a drug offence that had been – unbeknownst to her – the condition for her trip, which she could not have afforded to pay for on her own. She spent her first years in Greece in prison, and was released early due to health reasons. She remained in Athens with an outstanding order of deportation but unable to leave, due to ongoing investigations into drug commerce and her presumed vulnerability if she was to return home. She stayed in this condition for years, reporting her presence to the police once a month, and towards the end of my fieldwork had put an asylum application in motion. In the meantime, she was delegated to surviving in the lowest end of the informal economy. At first, she occasionally had sex for pay with people she met in Omonia, but she did not think of herself as a sex worker and it had never been her main income source. Throughout the years, as she met other migrants and was able to get jobs through acquaintances and for which she did not have to speak fluent Greek, she worked as a babysitter, a cleaner, and in elderly care. Throughout the pandemic and a bit before it, she babysat the kids of a migrant mother who worked long hours away from home. This woman was her friend, but paid her very low wages because, as Dolores said, being a migrant herself that was all she could afford. Dolores compensated for the low pay by relying on “help” from her boyfriend, who was also a migrant and at the time had a more

stable job as a car mechanic. Eventually, her friend migrated to France with her kids and Dolores moved on to elderly care. There, she could make better money, but it usually involved live-in care work with only one day off, as well as spending periods away from Athens when elderly people went on holiday to their villages. In such an arrangement it became difficult to sustain her own relationships, which extended beyond the economic help she got from her partner. She said elderly care was difficult because she had a boyfriend that she loves and who loves her, but *“If I am never at home, he will love someone else who will be there”*. Over the years, the material aspect of this relationship proved to be quite mutual, the two of them supporting one another when needs and crises inevitably emerged. When her boyfriend acquired papers and could finally visit the family he had left in Bangladesh, Dolores helped him buy the tickets and presents for his kids; when Dolores spent all of her savings to get her closest friend out of jail, her boyfriend lent her money; and so on.

Overall, women maintained many relationships and open-ended exchanges that engaged their reproductive labour in different ways. Material concerns about incomes, security, and the future sometimes intersected with pleasure and the desire for companionship (cf. Cabezas 2009: 118; Gutierrez Garza 2019: 122-7), which also meant putting in the work, “being there” as Dolores put it. In certain cases, these relationships were clearly a matter of necessity, or at best a strategic entry into an exploitative exchange: consider Beatriz’s “boyfriend” in her first months in Omonia, a local pimp she got with in order to get access to work on the stroll without harassment from other workers. Beyond pimping, however, women’s struggles included varying relations involving sex and companionship in return for some level of security. While in Piscitelli’s research helping relationships took place in a grey area “between economics, intimacy and affection [where] one member of the couple is in a dependent and thus unequal situation.” (Piscitelli 2019: 288), in my own field I observed a broader continuum of power dynamics. Clearly, steady relationships with clients or other men were often invested with hopes for economic stability, whether that was contrasted to the uncertainty of the sex industry or the other precarious and underpaid jobs available to the women (see also Plambech et al. 2022: 137). Nonetheless, there were sex workers who preferred straightforwardly selling sex to

the blurred boundaries and economic dependency that accompanied “help”. The implicitness of the material base of a relationship could mean that women had to toe the line of how much to ask for and how, make sure that their boyfriends did not feel exploited, as well as invest in their “continued sexual seduction” (Piscitelli 2019: 288). For many, maintaining some level of independence remained as big a concern as their economic security. Paid and unpaid labour were constantly in a dialogue, as Angelidou has also noted in the case of Bulgarian migrant women in Greece. Situating their decision-making within larger transitions in women’s position in the post-socialist context, Angelidou shows how migrants balanced economic concerns and weighed in their ability to negotiate social reproductive roles within their families through their paid work in care and cleaning. Many women noted that they preferred to do such reproductive work for pay rather than be “integrated” into Greek society through marriage with a native husband – or at least, combine the two in order to maintain some independence (2013: 226). Finally, while these relationships were often marked by hard inequalities, they could also involve more complicated subject positions and occasionally were renegotiated over time. As Dolores’ example suggests, women also built long-lasting bonds with particular partners and shared the burdens of daily life with them. “Help” could therefore be used to describe very different ways of mixing material support with intimacy: in my field, these ranged from short-term, asymmetrical exchanges with people more closely resembling clients, to partnerships mediated by necessity and unequal access to resources, to long-term relationships of companionship that involved more mutual kinds of support.

4.2.4 Marriage as “*negocio*”

We had been running around all morning trying to get the last papers for her residence permit application, scheduled for that same day. Finally, Beatriz and I could sit for a coffee and wait until it was time to go to the Immigration Service together. While we drank our coffees, we managed to catch up a bit. Suddenly Manolis, her husband, called her. The couple communicated in a mix of Greek and English, but Beatriz spoke little Greek and he spoke little English and no Spanish. She handed her phone to me so I could speak to him in Greek, which would be faster. He was trying to figure out what time we were going to the Immigration Service so he could meet us there. Beatriz made silent signals saying “*don’t let him come, get rid of him*”. I told him there was no

sense in him coming, they probably wouldn't allow all of us to go in due to covid-19 measures, but if he wanted and if we had time, we could meet him afterwards and tell him how it went. He said, *"yes let's do that in the evening, because by the time you are finished in the afternoon I will be sleeping, so don't call me then"*. I was surprised he wasn't willing to disturb his afternoon nap to find out how Beatriz's residence application had gone, especially after having participated in most of the steps to get to this point. When we hung up, Beatriz said it was his week to work from home so he was bored and wanted company, hence the interest in coming to the meeting. *"They rotate them in the company and they take turns working from home as a measure against covid, you see. The weeks when he's at home are always the hard ones"*. (Field notes, autumn 2020)

«Σε αγαπώ δε με νοιάζει να πουλήσω μια ζωή

Για μια στιγμή που θα σε ζω μια στιγμή».

("I love you, I don't care, I will sell off a whole life

For a moment to live with you, a moment".)

Marinella, *Tolmo*.

That morning, knowing that the residency process would soon be underway, Beatriz relaxed a bit, and we spoke a lot about her marriage. She still felt a certain triumph and relief that she had achieved to get so many things sorted out in her life. She had kept her apartment, her job and her friends, she went out and flirted with an array of keen boyfriends on her days off, and she usually stayed with her husband at his place once or twice a week. When she was short on rent, he would sometime help her economically, and they shared some expenses. Partly because Manolis was accustomed to spending time alone, and partly due to her own artful boundary-making and negotiation skills, she had maintained some balance in married life. Overall, most of her friends were jealous of her relative security, Manolis' nice house, and the way Beatriz had kept her own daily routine and independence. As she spoke, I remembered their wedding celebration at Beatriz's apartment. Beatriz was triumphant, Manolis seemed to be in a happy daze. As the predominantly Latina and Arab guests danced to reggaetón, Manolis had one request for his dance with Beatriz: Marinella's *"Tolmo"* (I dare), a melodramatic Greek *laiko* song that talks about daring

to fulfill your desires, taking a risk and following your loved one on an adventure, even if it ruins you. After the dance, Manolis sat down and chatted with me in Greek. Two of Beatriz's Latina friends sat with us and flirted with him, playfully telling him "*After Beatriz it's my turn, you will marry me next*". I translated between them. Somewhat baffled by the attention and the compliments, Manolis dutifully responded "*Of course*".

Months later, the sense of triumph and potential that prevailed in the wedding celebrations had dissipated to a level-headed disillusionment. Beatriz was annoyed and hurt that Manolis didn't seem to really care for her and that "*all he cares about is sex, and how to steal away more of my time by manipulating me*". She attributed the phone call and his wanting to join us at the Immigration Service to such an underlying motive. "*He wanted to come because he was bored, and so that afterwards he could find an excuse to come to my apartment and have sex. He is so inconsiderate and selfish. If I have a headache, he won't even ask me how I feel or offer me paracetamol, he will just tell me to leave if I want to*". Her mounting frustration exposed how, even though she had consciously entered into this marriage with her own practical goal in mind, Beatriz still hoped it could be a relationship of support at least on a basic level. Weeks later, she would continue to recount incidents that hurt her, where Manolis failed to rise to her minimum standards. "*If he's going to be like that*", she concluded, "*then I won't care either. I will see him once a week on his day, as we agreed, and won't bother myself further. En fin, eso es un negocio* [After all, this is a business deal]".

Colored by her disappointment that her husband repeatedly failed to offer much more than papers in exchange for sex, Beatriz's characterization of her marriage as *negocio* got me thinking. *Negocio* means business, economic agreement or exchange; it is also tied to the idea of negotiation. Bringing the two together summons continuities between sex work, marriage for papers, and romantic companionship, and defamiliarizes the exclusive separations of intimacy and self-interest in them. Beatriz's relationship with Manolis may have been a practical deal about a mutual exchange, but like all marriages, it set in motion a constant negotiation about time, sex, care, support, and resources between the couple.

Indeed, such negotiations have been highlighted by many feminist authors working on intimacy, from sex work to romantic relationships, and have even been theorized as a form of “relational work”. This term is usually attached to critical analyses about commodification, such as Zelizer’s landmark study (2005), and specifically describes the management of the fluid dividing lines between commercial and non-commercial domains, intimate and strategic relationships. In other words, it involves all the work of setting boundaries, resolving tensions, managing emotions, and distinguishing between types of relationships and their accompanying obligations and expectations. Approached from the perspective of social reproduction, this can be understood as a negotiation about the ways intimate labour is organized and allocated, what work we will do for whom, what we expect from them, and possibly, how and where there can be space for refusal. Whether this means drawing boundaries in commercial sexual relations, or navigating mutual obligations within families and partnerships, this work is implicitly assigned to women as part of their reproductive role; at the same time, it opens up a terrain of contestation wherein they can negotiate what they will end up doing.

Besides interpersonal negotiations between a couple, marriage itself is part of a set of labours across which women must navigate. The answer to how to combine marriage, sex work, and other work, and which of these “jobs” is preferable at each moment, may shift and realign as women grow older or their circumstances change. This balancing act between reproductive work was very conscious on Beatriz’s part. Trying to explain her own decisions, she shared many stories of Cuban migrant friends who had also married men for papers and eventually divorced. According to Beatriz, they continued to have precarious documentation and living conditions in Europe, *“having to bounce from one boyfriend to the other and hoping he will buy them a gift or give them some money to help them out, but without any certainty...and having to party constantly even when they don’t feel like it”*. Looking into the future, Beatriz found such a prospect exhausting and full of uncertainty, and in that sense her less than exciting marriage offered an alternative. Although her disillusionment and frustration with Manolis was palpable, she said she didn’t want to stop being with him - it is what it is, *“a business deal”*, and *“at some point I want to be able to stop being a*

whore" (*quiero dejar ser puta*). Her plan to stop selling sex at a later point was attached to an idea of acquiring some stability, toning down the constant hustling, and, as she told me on our taxi ride to the Immigration Service, maybe adopting kids. This was another sore spot with Manolis, who apparently did not like children at all and did not want to have any. Beatriz, on the other hand, told me she "*adores kids but cannot go through with this now, nobody is going to give kids for adoption to a whore, I need to have my life sorted and some things first*".

In Beatriz's reasoning, then, marriage clearly appears as work. However, even if she explicitly summons the economic into the intimate by calling marriage a business deal, it would be misguided to conclude that material considerations are somehow unique to visa marriages or sex work. Neither do they constitute what distinguishes between "legitimate" erotic relations of pure and untainted intimacy and a separate, more suspect domain that operates solely on rationality and self-interest. Even the briefest historical detour into the genealogy of marriage – including its contemporary forms and usages – points to important economic and political motivations that inform unions, from attaining financial security and getting spousal benefits to building alliances. The same goes for the vast diversity of sexual experiences and people's equally variable motives for having sex, which may include "love", attraction, desire, power negotiations, necessity, and tactical exchanges that are not strictly economic (Cabezas 2009: 218). Since the 1970s, feminists have highlighted the materiality of marriage and the family, as institutions that organize the gender division of labour under capitalism. Arlie Hochschild theorized all the work that women do in the home, from sexual labour to washing the dishes, as the "second shift" that awaited women after they got off their paid work (1989). Overall, the first wave of social reproduction analyses convincingly argued that unpaid reproductive work produces value for capitalism, because it produces and sustains the most valuable commodity, i.e. labour power. In that sense, to point out that a marriage for papers between a migrant woman and a local man involves work, negotiation, and strategic exchanges does not mean that migrant and working-class women exclusively engage in calculated intimacies, or that they deploy their sexuality in a manner that is essentially different or more "commodified" than marriage in general. If anything, it allows us to see how

all such negotiations over work rest on relations of power and variable levels of capitalist coercion, at the same time as these relationships engage the emotions of those involved in complex and contradictory ways. A perspective that focuses on labour illuminates the concrete connections between unpaid reproductive work done within households, sex work, wage labour, and casual relationships that involve intimacy and material help. Furthermore, as scholars working across domains of intimacy and sexuality have noted, “social relationships – including those involving sexual intimacy – are always filtered through different social and economic incentives, and migrants’ concerns for economic and migratory stability are a part, but not the only part, of their relational needs” (Plambech et al. 2022: 143-4).

Finally, these relationships are not taking place in a vacuum, nor is their scale exhausted to the level of negotiations between spouses or across different types of feminized work. Policies about residency and marriage, together with migration and asylum, are part of contemporary border control. And if border control and the constant pitfalls of migration policy are part and parcel of the organization of labour relations, marriage is no exception. Although marrying a local and attaining a legal status are undoubtedly tied to hopes of upward mobility and longer-term security for many women, these hopes are not easily fulfilled. Applicant couples may go through a long, costly, and highly supervised process until they receive a decision, only to find their application rejected, often on arbitrary grounds.⁶³ If not prohibitive, the lengthy process and the uncertain outcome of spousal residency applications are productive: for one, they can capture applicants into asymmetrical relations of dependency with their partners, tipping the negotiating balance at the expense of the migrants. Secondly, they ensnare them into further logics of state surveillance, debt and intensive work rhythms that go towards covering the mounting official and unofficial costs of legal processes, while maintaining them as precariously documented workers with unpredictable futures. Beatriz’s case is indicative here, as her application involved constant obstacles, wherein new problems, delays, and costs arose, extending the processing period to more than three years from the submission of her application.

⁶³ The widespread occurrence of this practice was confirmed to me in private consultations with migration lawyers.

Besides having to maintain a rapport and a sexual relationship with a partner she was becoming increasingly estranged with, the costs included high public fees as well as various semi-institutionalized bribes. The latter became necessary in order to mitigate delays, which were already so extensive that she experienced periods of being technically undocumented. When her application was eventually rejected because the marriage was not deemed genuine, she had to pay around 1300 euros in public judicial fees (*paravola*) and legal services in order to appeal. In the seven months that elapsed between the rejection letter and the bureaucratic processing of her appeal, she found herself undocumented, for the first time after six years of living and working legally in Greece with temporary papers. This not only exposed her to policing and detention throughout these months, but it also meant that she was afterwards ineligible to claim an array of civil rights, since she had no way of proving a legal status for the entirety of her residence in Greece. In the end, we realized the whole judicial process she was undergoing after the original rejection letter to her application had no chance of succeeding, and was solely a very expensive way of buying time. During the processing period, and as the three judicial hearings were to consecutively take place, she would at least have temporary legality. With a bit of luck and considering the delays of Greek bureaucracy, by the time she got the final decision – almost certain to be a rejection – we thought she would be eligible to apply for a different kind of residency, on account of having by then completed seven years in Greece. The final hearing was getting postponed again and again, affording her more time but extending her uncertainty towards a seemingly never-ending horizon. In a meeting with her lawyer, which we thought would be about preparing for the final hearing the next day but turned out to bear the news of another postponement, he told us the law had changed and the seven-year regularization plan was no longer on the table. He gave Beatriz another option that would be more difficult, but was her only alternative. In his office, she kept calm, but she cried all the way home.

Beatriz's troubles with spousal residency and her migration status in general are nowhere near unique. On the contrary, they provide yet another illustration of the revolving door that migrants are caught in, whether as wage labourers or as unpaid reproductive workers. They also highlight how state policy about labour and migration

is intimately connected to the organization of social reproduction, the family, and unpaid work within households.

4.3 Putting it all together: women's work without teleology or end

me: *¿Y tu, como estas? ¿Como va la vida en España?*

Yvelisse: *Aquí, lucha, lucha, lucha... tu sabes, empezar a zero.*

(me: *What about you, how are you? How is life in Spain?*

Yvelisse: *Here, work, work, work...you know how it is, starting from zero.)*

[WhatsApp conversation with Yvelisse, after her migration from Greece to Spain, 2021.]

In Cuba and in Greece, vernacular ideas of the “struggle” are contested, re-appropriated, used to make claims of belonging in a wider body politic, or to question its foundational principles. Beatriz, Yvelisse and other Cuban migrants I met frequently used the notion of *la lucha* or *luchando* to refer to their activities as sex workers, bringing a complex concept from home to bear on their ensuing trajectories as migrant workers in Europe. The vignette above, taken from a WhatsApp discussion I had with Yvelisse, a trans Cuban migrant who spent a year or so in Greece before deciding to leave for Spain, offers a starting point to understand the dislocations and historical transformations encapsulated in this “keyword” (Williams 1976). Connecting Cuba to its diaspora, framing sex work as labour that simultaneously means struggle is a dense statement that exists in dialogue with multiple political projects and meanings that remain highly contradictory.

When it comes to Cuba, historically, this idea of *la lucha* has been used to refer to the continuous fight for revolutionary society. In the nineties, following the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc and the partial dollarization of the Cuban economy, *la lucha* (the struggle) and *luchando* (struggling/hustling) took on a different meaning that reflected the daily challenges of the Cuban people to survive, resolve daily problems, and access consumer goods. As the expansion of the tourist industry and the opportunities afforded by interactions with foreigners contributed to a proliferation of economic exchanges involving sex and intimacy, in some contexts

luchando also came to denote transactional sex specifically, positioning “sex work within broader struggles to make ends meet during the crisis” (Stout 2008: 738-9). Since then, many scholars have offered analyses about the ways changing social meanings of labour, sexuality, intimacy, and class struggle coalesce in this concept and its different usages. When it came to sex work, Stout has argued that while identifying as a fighter (*luchadora*) was an explicit way for sex workers to refuse the identity of the prostitute-as-victim (2008: 740), this also incorporated a counter-argument to sexist and homophobic state policies that portrayed hustlers as lazy, materialistic, and unwilling to work hard. Since the 1959 revolution, hard labour had been used in Cuba to reform homosexuals, who were considered to be lazy and immoral (Stout 2014: 15). In the late 1990s, the Cuban state instituted a system that supposedly aimed to rehabilitate women who deviated from the norms of socialist morality (primarily sex workers) through forced labour and incarceration (Cabezas 2009: 147-151). Explicit projects for reform through hard labour were eventually abandoned, but Stout argues that the disavowal of sex work – at least partly- remains. She identifies the more recent instantiation of this mentality in what she calls gay respectability politics, and their usage of similar language to pass moral judgments on those who work in the sex trade, accusing them of taking the “easy way out” (Stout 2014: 15). Through all of this, sex workers have responded by framing their activities as struggle, a fight for independence and freedom like that described by socialist leaders before (*ibid.*).

Yet, the different ethnographic accounts on sex work and sex tourism in Cuba, as well as my own impressions upon visiting the island, suggest that the political connotations of the usage of “*la lucha*” to describe sex work and the social reception of these kinds of hustling activities remain far more contradictory than simple disavowal or acceptance. On the one hand, transactional sex on the island is so pervasive and situated within such a diffuse continuum of intimate relations with foreigners (including various non-sexual interactions), that it seems to operate on a plane of social acceptance or at least understanding (Kummels 2005: 8), different than, say, in Greece. On the other hand, just as often as people spoke of “*la lucha*” to justify different kinds of strategies and economic activities, equally so others bemoaned that “*some people just aren’t willing to work*”. To me at least, it was not always clear what

each person meant and in which kinds of informal activities they drew the line. It sometimes seemed like the fluid boundaries between acceptable and more frowned-upon ways of being in “the struggle” had at least as much to do with race and class as with the activities themselves. The strategies of working-class blacks *pa’ resolver* (to resolve, i.e. make ends meet) bore heavier scrutiny, their various business pursuits and intimate exchanges often regarded as the more suspect forms of hustling.⁶⁴ Overall, like other topics in Cuba that have been analyzed by different researchers to reach competing conclusions,⁶⁵ the questions of whether sex work is socially legitimate or disavowed, whether framing sex work as *la lucha* is a claim of belonging in accordance to national narratives or a critique to their very notions by opening up the terms of what constitutes labour, whether it erases class or it amplifies it, have been debated without any seeming consensus. While this polarization of opinions may be partly understood as a by-product of US-Cuban antagonisms and each analyst’s position in that, I find Allen’s approach apt here. For him, posing such questions in a strictly dichotomous manner “is part of a hegemonic way of thinking that insists on approaching problems of society as ‘either/or’ while people continue to live their lives as ‘and/both/but’” (Allen 2011: 130).

Keeping Allen’s suggestion in mind, it must have become apparent through the stories of my interlocutors that the complex ways in which sex work is connected to hard labour and ideologies about what that involves extend far beyond Cuba. Taking the Cuban example as a point of departure clearly shows how ideas of work are embedded in changing cultural, social, and political circumstances, and are nowhere near resolved in the process. In Greece, perhaps reflecting the persistence of informalized labour relations and their historical development alongside the capitalist state, various phrases also combine work with struggle, resourcefulness and makeshift solutions among “the common people”. Examples include «κάπως να τη βγάλουμε» (to scrape by somehow), «στον αγώνα» (in the struggle), and the morally loaded «στη

⁶⁴ Luisa Steur, personal communication.

⁶⁵ For example, consider the polemical debate on Cuban policies for HIV prevention and containment. Cf. Allen 2011: 142-148.

βιοπάλη» (in the struggle for life). The latter especially is politically charged, understood as describing the daily conditions of the proletariat.

Without collapsing workers' framings of their work into each other, some continuities relating to the complexities of class that underwrite them, as well as the mixed legacies of socialism among Cuban and Eastern European workers, can be deciphered here. These terms seem to be at once class-informed *and* unifying in their connotations of daily struggle among "ordinary" people. On the one hand, it feels like any kind of activity could be conceivably construed as part of these practices of scraping by and making ends meet. In such a process, specific class relations may become abstracted or obscured under the focus on the "every(wo)man's struggle", a critique that has already been made regarding the concept of *la lucha* in Cuba (Salas 2021, Steur 2022). On the other hand, the seeming inclusivity of such ways of thinking about (class) struggle mean that different kinds of stigmatized workers can attempt to appropriate them to give meaning to their experiences, in the process reworking accepted wisdom on what constitutes labour, value, or a worker. In my own field, while all these concepts resonated with Soviet and communist ideologies of hard work and the fight for survival, mobilizing them in the specific context introduced the important twist that they identify sex work and other reproductive work as such kinds of labour. Whether consciously formulated as political statements or not, women's framings of their work fly in the face of productivist Marxist understandings, and their tendency to fetishize the wage as the value, rather than the cost, of labour (see Mezzadri 2019: 36). Perhaps this is not groundbreaking, but it should be taken seriously as an empirical critique, that resonates with the feminist and postcolonial approaches I opened this chapter with.

In the accounts of women's work of the preceding sections, the impossibility of framing sex work in terms of freedom or coercion is palpable. I understand its framing as struggle, and specifically struggle that is constant - *lucha, lucha, lucha*, as Yvelisse often said – as a way to bypass this binary, and to speak of the never-ending work together with the unfinished project of refusing some of it. Of course, one could interpret these discourses linking sex work with the fight for survival as a bid to respectability that says "I work hard like the rest of you", or "sex work is a job like any

other”. Although the limitations of respectability politics in sex work have been discussed by researchers and sex workers alike (Carlisle 2021, Sumaq 2015: 17, Berg 2021: 489), on certain occasions women did in fact allude to the “normalcy” of sex work rhetorically to make a point against its stigma, and understandably so. But it should be clear by now that this was neither the only way they spoke about their work, nor was it the primary way in which they understood it. These more normalizing claims coexisted – uncomfortably but undoubtedly so - with the more grueling, class-specific reality underscored by Yvelisse’s repetitive statement. Unlike the liberal/progressive teleologies favoured by integrationist, “respectability” politics, her perspective belies an ongoing, unresolved fight for some semblance of freedom, without a clear horizon in sight.

The reproductive work my interlocutors did, whether it was sex work, marriage, or relationships that involved “help”, addressed material and emotional needs that were not always easy to disentangle. These included emotional security, comfort, and companionship, as well as hopes for upward mobility, regularization, and working less. Women in my field also made comparisons between sex work and other work and spoke of earlier refusals to submit to low-paid, standardized, and time-consuming work when they could make much more money selling sex. Nevertheless, following people’s trajectories in the long-term, and seeing how sex work is mixed with other paid and unpaid work, how its affordances change through time, how it is also disciplined and devalued in specific ways, illustrates that there is no linear path to liberation, upward mobility, or escape from the discipline of work. Sex work can pose a problem as much as it can offer a solution. Although some sex worker activists and researchers have attempted to position sex work within “anti-work” political imaginaries and workers’ actual practices of refusing other exploitative work (e.g. Colosi 2010, Carlisle 2021, Horton-Stallings 2017), in the stories from my field, the reality of sex work as an “anti-work” practice was contingent and fragile at best.

If, following Holloway (1995) and Williams (1976), we employ struggle as a “keyword” that takes seriously and is in itself a commentary on the force of historical change, we can begin to address the dynamic and often contradictory ways in which social relations and forms of work are given meaning and weight in daily life (cf. Kofti

2023: 13). Seen as such, one key insight that emerges from a long-term study of the mixing of sex work, other jobs, help, and conjugal partnerships, is that these relationships are not static but transform alongside capitalist dislocations. In her aforementioned research in Spain, Piscitelli (2019) highlighted the shifting importance of “help” versus sex work during the crisis. She showed that, as clients became scarce, “help” was reconfigured as a primary source of income and many women’s main work (2019: 287). The multiplication of sexual/economic relationships involved different tactics, such as “moving on to old clients, transforming them into ‘friends’, and seeking love-based relationships” (Piscitelli 2019: 290; cf. Martinez 2016). In my own field, the spaces between sex work, wage labour, transactional sex, intimate partnerships and marriage also seemed to expand. In order to respond to devaluation, changes in public space, diminishing work, and the shifting profitability of different sectors, women had to diversify or adapt to new conditions. For many of my interlocutors, the effects of the crisis were combined with ageing processes, and meant they had to reconsider the role of sex work in their income strategies. Teresa, who was used to making her own money, experienced her lack of work during the covid-19 lockdowns very heavily; *“penniless, without any work for two months...I’m sinking into debt and I’m at the mercy of my mother and my boyfriend”*.

Accelerated by the pandemic but not reducible to it, these transformations extended to the interior of the sex industry itself. The interlocutors who continued relying on sex work as their main job also re-adjusted how and where they worked in order to remain afloat. After years of working primarily in the same brothel, and after her workplace was closed for months during the lockdowns, Beatriz returned to that job to find fewer and poorer clients, but the same commission taken by the owner off her work. Seeing that the time she spent there was now worth less, she moved on to a more high-end agency where the fees for services were higher. She did not have to spend time waiting at the studio but was on call for many hours and had to rush there whenever an appointment was booked. This flexible arrangement and the facilitation of the agency was not all it promised to be, and after working there for some months she left. Eventually, she settled for mobile work in the city, and kept her online ad up for the occasional date. She had saved up some money to buy a used car off a friend,

and she used that for her work. She cruised in her car in her neighborhood and in Omonia, and solicited at a highway in the western outskirts of Athens. To secure a spot there she paid a more senior sex worker who had already been on the stroll 30 euros each night she worked, but showed up whenever she wanted and paid less on slow days. This more mobile kind of work reflected a general strategy used by women who could take time to travel to smaller cities and tourist destinations in Greece, as it renewed the pool of potential clients and their own profile in a market with high turnover.

Finally, taking an approach that is rooted in daily life and foregrounds the agency and resourcefulness of people living amidst recurring waves of dispossession is vital, but it is not enough on its own. As different researchers have pointed out, all these practices, from sex work to marriage migration and “help” relationships, are not simply tactics that migrants and working-class people creatively conjure out of nowhere (Plambech et. al 2022: 147). To understand them fully, it is necessary to examine how they are shaped by state policies and border regimes. Intimate exchanges, informalized work, and workers’ struggles exist in an open-ended dialectic with the ways the state structures mobility, labour, social reproduction and the family. Looking at the state through the co-constituted processes of regulation and illegalization takes us back to the issue of value, to which I now turn.

4.4 Who profits? The circulation of value

Earlier, I suggested that although sex work was often portrayed as the most lucrative of the activities that women partook in, it was consistently devalued in a variety of ways, as well as made dangerous through direct or indirect policies that produced sex workers as exploitable, isolated, and expendable workers. Different scholars working on sex work have highlighted the ways surplus is extracted from women’s work in the sex industry, as well as the fact that entire industries are built around migrant women’s (sex) work. Cabezas has shown how the state structures a world of procurement, networking and facilitation, wherein hotel clerks, taxi drivers, tourist guides, and expats in Cuba can claim a cut from the sex tourist industry, and how this is achieved by attempting to control working-class women’s sexuality through different forms of

regulation (2009: 161-2).⁶⁶ In her research with strippers in the UK, Hardy has pointed out how devaluation is built into the organizational structure of strip clubs. She attributes the proliferation of such venues during the economic crisis to punitive labour arrangements that allow employers to make a secure investment in clubs by dumping all the economic risk onto the strippers. Addressing a larger scale, Plambech has shown how both the trope and the reality of migrant sex work sustain entire economies of facilitation, remittances, deportation, and rescue, which traverse the licit and the illicit, state and organized crime, nation and community (2016).

These observations resonate in my field. While sex workers are forced to take on the dangers and costs of their labour, their own devaluation is linked to streams of profit that flow towards multiple directions, from the Greek state to sex industry middlemen and other actors and institutions. This takes the form of fines and bribes paid to the police, fees for using specific spaces to work, earnings given to bosses, gatekeepers, and pimps. At the same time, illegalized work in the sex industry is connected to a host of other licit and illicit economies, from NGOs to platforms for temporary accommodation to private insurance packages for migrants that address specific “gaps” in migration policy. On a wider scale, the money made from sex work feeds into transnational flows, wherein the capital migrants send home becomes part of local economies.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to produce an exhaustive account. Without attempting to do that, the following section considers some key ways in which the work women do in my field produces value even as it is constantly devalued. It also suggests that the generation of profit off of women’s backs is inextricably tied to disciplinary mechanisms that target reproductive labour and sexuality in a wider sense.

⁶⁶ Cabezas’s ethnography of transactional sex in Cuba and the Dominican Republic is interesting here, because it traverses the capitalist/communist divide in significant ways. The example of Cuba and the proliferation of various forms of transactional sex and intimacy on the island from the Special Period onwards suggest that the state organization of sexual markets as co-constituted with tourism can also occur in contexts that may have otherwise been understood as “outside” capitalism. While this would merit an ethnography of its own, it further illustrates Steur’s argument on doing ethnography across the capitalist/communist binaries, and engaging in a global anthropology (2022) that can address such complexities. The ways remittances forge transnational connections across these binaries is another case in point.

4.4.1 Policing, violence, and devaluation

Policing is one of the most obvious ways in which sex work gets devalued; police both directly extract money and labour from sex workers, and mediate the ways in which others may do so too. Sexual violence emerges as a form of discipline that is tied to women's devaluation, and is in that sense linked to other, more "economic" forms of exploitation mediated by the regulatory system - officially or unofficially (cf. Cabezas 2009: 140-1).

Consider the story of Eleni's early experiences on the job, discussed further in Chapter 6. In her first year selling sex in Omonia, Eleni was blackmailed into providing free sexual services by a man posing as a policeman. While not a case of police abuse in itself, her story illustrates how illegality produces opportunities for exploitation for a wide array of actors; this man recognized and appropriated for his benefit a structural relationship between sex workers and police that prevailed in Athens and elsewhere,⁶⁷ wherein the former were prey to tactics ranging from arbitrary arrests and rapes to fines and bribes. This generalized condition of state violence has to do with the entire system of sex work regulation, and the ways this creates and perpetuates the conditions for workers' exploitation by diffuse social groups, from clients looking to get something for nothing to mafias and lower-level middlemen who mediate workers' access and protection in specific workplaces. It is this expansive field, where policing materializes alternately as fines, bribes, turning a blind eye "this time", temporary workplace closures, arrests, and rapes, that constitutes the state regulation of prostitution.

The stories were many. Mary remembered how during raids in the brothel where she had worked some years ago, policemen would pick and choose women to have sex with, and if the latter did not comply everyone was taken to the police station and their workplace was closed. Workers would then be detained, deported, or left without jobs for an unforeseeable period, until the cycle started again. Teresa, another local trans woman, confirmed this practice from her brief experience as a brothel worker who moved on to street-based work. Referring to the glory years when the

⁶⁷ For example, see Blanchette et al. 2017, Dziuban and Stevenson 2019: 411, and Bernstein 2007: 57-60.

police's Vice Squad constantly raided the trans stroll of Sygrou Avenue where she works, she added: *"One of the many times I had been arrested for soliciting, as they were driving towards the police station, the cops suddenly changed direction. They took me to [a hill in central Athens], and they fucked me, one of them once and the other twice. Then they left me stranded there, and as they left one of them said laughingly: 'it's your lucky day, you skipped jail this time'".*

By all this, I am not conflating the police with some direct, unmediated expression of the state. I do, however, think with analyses that connect sexual violence to mechanisms for disciplining working-class and racialized women, or for breaking their political identity⁶⁸ – what Antonia Castañeda has otherwise described as a form of socio-political terrorism (1993: 29). Whether strategic, planned, or arbitrary, these brutal experiences are neither irrational nor isolated; as Stierl argues in reference to the European border regime, the sheer structural exposure to rape, death, exploitation, illness, and humiliation, "animate[s] a productive economy of violence, an endurance test with continuously disciplining and precaritising effects" (2017: 228).⁶⁹ For migrants as well as working-class locals, the implicit message is that women cannot do what they want with their sexuality, that they cannot sell services others give for "free" without punishment and without someone claiming a piece of the pie. As the state attempts to contain women's sexual labour, it becomes apparent how "physical violence and structural violence converge on the bodies of working-class, racialised women" (Cabezas 2009: 140).

That being said, it is important to not limit the analysis to sexual violence and remember that the police operate as a disciplinary mechanism in more ways than one. Indeed, policing has a direct role in the ways women's sexual labour gets devalued. For example, sex workers in Shah's Mumbai ethnography saw the police as "supporting" the sex trade by profiting from it, and "listed the regular payments made to the police along with other monthly bills" (Shah 2014: 178). Cabezas's work in Cuba also indicated that sex workers had to factor in bribes paid to policemen to get out of

⁶⁸ For a more detailed discussion, cf. Davis 1981, and Aretxaga 2001.

constant arrests as part of their expenses (2009: 144). Policing not only served to regulate the number of women on the street, but opened the door for bribes and “sexual favours” to the officers, generated income for the state, and trapped sex workers in a vicious cycle of having to work more in the tourist sex economy to earn the money to make up for all the lost income spent on the above (Cabezas 2009: 143-6). Understood in context, “sexual favours” or rapes do not constitute an exception, but part of this violent expropriation. In my own field, the realities were similar: brothels paid monthly fees to the police to remain in operation; street workers dealt with policemen at the latter’s discretion, and many had amassed high debt to the state because of unpaid fines, to an extent that they were effectively shut out of the formal economy and official credit relations. The police, in ways not entirely distinguishable from the mafia, constituted a key player in the sex industry, as regulator, organizer, and pimp. Not very different to commonly held ideas about sex industry bosses, policemen consistently extracted money and work from sex workers, through fines, bribes, and “freebies”. They also participated in organizing the terms of workers’ exploitation by others.

4.4.2 Mobile labour and the proliferation of checkpoints

Besides these more direct forms of devaluation, policing and regulation produce devaluation by amplifying the need for middlemen, gatekeepers, etc., diffusing the value made from women’s work to a wide array of actors and institutions. For sex work that relies on the usage of public space, we saw how spaces come to constitute means of production as well as important meeting points where communities can be built (Chapter 2, 6). In that sense, the regulation of public space and the associated forms of policing are closely connected with the management of labour and mobility, through migration and public order policy. Besides actual border zones, entire city areas are subjected to a proliferation of checkpoints, wherein daily life constantly holds “the possibility of some sort of inspection and potential detection, interdiction, and arrest” (De Genova 2020: 361).

Clearly, the center of Athens and areas associated with street or brothel sex work can be understood as such spaces. But the ways labour travels and becomes

territorialized are also subject to temporal patterns, such as seasonal work. This points our attention to practices of bordering and policing outside the metropolis. Consider Mykonos, the famous high-end party island of Greece where celebrities organize their holidays, followed by paparazzi and tourists who spend a year's savings for a few days' stay in the tourist destination. Mykonos's status as a luxury tourist bubble has a flipside, and that is a huge, extremely labour-intensive tourist industry, coupled with an equally intensive construction industry during the off-season winter months. In the summer, workers flock to Mykonos to provide services in hospitality, care, cleaning, entertainment, and sex. Migrant workers form an important part of this workforce, whether they be employed as construction workers, drivers, cleaners, baby-sitters, cooks, or sex workers. When it comes to sex work specifically, as many authors working on sex tourism in different contexts have noted, the sale of sexual services in tourist destinations is not a side-effect of corruption or a simple byproduct of seasonal economic opportunities there, but rather, a core element of the tourist industry itself (see Alexander 2006).

In accordance to this pattern, some of my younger Latina informants who worked primarily with online ads, frequently travelled to Mykonos and other such islands in the summer. They scheduled 2-3 day stays in rented accommodation that they shared with each other to split the exorbitant costs, and announced on their ads that they would be available in such-and-such island for the specific dates. In one such scenario, a group of Cuban women were caught and detained by the police at Mykonos's airport because they did not have papers. The initial call from our mutual friend, asking me for assistance with translations between Spanish and Greek so we could figure out a way to help them, was followed by a few days' silence. When I asked her what was going on, she said that after detaining them for three days without telling them what would happen, the police had set the women free in the island, where they were now working. Although the details of what exactly transpired there are unclear, one thing at least can be deduced: the point is not so much to stop illegalized workers from selling sex on the island, but to let them work under the most devalued terms possible, after making their deportability felt.

This management of labour through migration policy resonates with Mezzadra and Neilsson's point about "just-in-time and to-the-point migration" (2013: 138), wherein borders are not only spatial but temporal, and discretionary policing lends itself to the shifting demands of different industries for disposable workers. Temporal bordering practices are apparent in official policy like seasonal working permits and points systems, but also in irregular migration, wherein the mobility of workers is regulated by the police depending on seasonal production needs. In that sense, categories such as "overstayer," "immigration offender," "deportee," "asylum seeker" are produced in a contingent dialogue with "cross-border seasonal workers" and mobile workers within the country; while officially the first are illegalized and the second are regulated, on the ground the boundaries are slightly more blurred – the flow of workers for the high tourist season in Mykonos being a case in point.

As different historians have shown, mobile labour has a long history that reflects the cycles of capitalist production, during which certain workers are rendered as "surplus" in the here and now and must move elsewhere, or move continually, in order to make ends meet (Hobsbawm, cited in Papastefanaki 2009: 79). Referring to contemporary settings, researchers have linked the working patterns of sex workers and migrants to the ways "global labor regimes and seasonal changes in neoliberal markets can produce ebbs and flows of informal labor demands" (Plambech et al. 2022: 139). In my field, mobility and internal travel within Greece constituted another form of diversification, that workers resorted to in order to manage their expendability in a high-turnover economy such as the sex industry. At the same time, as we saw, workers did not just move places but also sectors, industries, types of sexual commerce. This combination of different kinds of work and the almost mandatory mobility of workers across places, sectors and parts of the sex industry is further analyzed in the next chapter, as a structural characteristic of labour relations in crisis which relates to the role of women as a flexible labour force.

4.4.3 *La lucha* continues back home: remittances, megabytes, and transnational hustles

Researchers studying migrant sex work and women's migration more generally have often emphasized how the work women do in countries of arrival is tied to transnational flows that link back to national economies and communities of origin. As migrant women often leave family and loved ones behind, at least part of the money they make usually becomes remittances that are key for the survival and mobility of those who stay at home, and which also come to constitute a notable figure of the sending country's GDP (cf. World Bank). Based on her research with Thai and Nigerian migrant women, Plambech (2016) has described the "remittance economy" as one of the economies linked to sex workers' mobility and work, alongside facilitation, deportation, and rescue. Transnational flows have become so widespread that they have had an impact on the price of land in areas where out-migration is prevalent. In countries spanning Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa, people refer to the houses built using the remittances migrants sent back as "dollar houses" (Plambech 2008: 40, cf. Glick Schiller et al. 1995: 54). The same dynamics have been noted with marriage migration; researchers have argued that "marriages at the macro level can be analyzed in the light of wider global processes, in which care is an export commodity that is exchanged by means of a visa and monthly economic payments to the family back at home" (Plambech 2008: 36-7. Cf. Ehrenreich and Hochchild 2003, Sassen 2002). Value transforms across these flows: the money made through the underpaid labour of women abroad may go a long way back home, and is used to sustain and build new livelihoods, housing, cover expenses for healthcare, upgrade people's status, and so on.

As sending countries come to rely on migrant women and their remittances for an influx of foreign currency into local economies, it becomes clearer how women's migration for paid or unpaid reproductive work can in fact constitute state policy, or "a macro-level development strategy" (Plambech 2008: 38). For instance, over the last decades in the Philippines, the state has offered several preparatory programs that directly target women as prospective migrants. These include classes where Filipinas

are trained to be domestic workers abroad (e.g. see Fair Employment Agency Limited 2024), and information campaigns for international marriage migration in Japan (Plambech 2008: 38). Meanwhile, as sending states profit from migrant women's work abroad, so we saw that receiving countries tap on a new pool of devalued workers who come to perform different types of feminized work under varying levels of constraint. This completes the picture of how migration and women's work feature in state projects about the organization of family life and social reproduction, and how they are intricately connected to changing gender dynamics and divisions of labour in both sending and receiving countries. It is in this sense that Kojima has suggested that Korean marriage migrants in Japan be understood as reproductive workers who perform the domestic and reproductive labour that Japanese women may no longer be willing to do (Kojima 2001: 205, cited in Plambech 2008: 36-7).

The sex-working women I knew supported families and loved ones in Athens and abroad. I already referred to the ways sex work is tied to motherhood, and Teresa's allusions to how she supported her relatives financially whilst hiding her involvement in the sex industry. I discuss the ways sex work is linked to kinship obligations and community survival further in Chapter 6, and for now I focus on the way remittances contribute to transnational flows of value. Sending money home was a ubiquitous practice among migrant women, and I often accompanied Beatriz to Western Union to send money to her father and other relatives and friends in Cuba and the rest of the diaspora. Remittances figured as one of the financial obligations that women had to calculate next to rent, utilities, costs for work materials, fees paid to gatekeepers and middlemen in their work, legal costs for residence and asylum applications, etc. They did not always send the same amounts, depending on their other expenses and their fluctuating incomes.

Besides these more classic money transfers to support loved ones back home, women's migration and sex work seemed to facilitate another transnational economy. After Yvelisse, one of the Cuban women I had met through Beatriz, had left Greece to live and work in Spain, we had kept in sporadic contact. One day, while we chatted on WhatsApp, she was extremely frustrated. She told me she had barely gotten any sleep the last few nights, because acquaintances from Cuba kept harassing her with texts,

showing no regard for the time zone difference and her hard work realities in Europe. Invariably, the aim of these texts was to get her to send them phone and internet credit through international deals. Yvelisse explained:

“You know the stuff guys say...’*Mami, mi amor, mi tesoro, por favor ayudame*’ [mami, my love, my darling, please help me out] ...They say this to all of us women who are abroad. They don’t even ask how are you, how are you feeling, no, that no. It’s only ‘I don’t have megabytes, give me a credit recharge, a new offer just came out’. They become annoying, they keep insisting...They think that here we get money for free, they don’t understand how hard we work”.

She went on to explain that internet data is much more expensive in Cuba, so these international deals costing 20 euros each and bought by migrants for Cubans back home go a long way. But with six-seven people texting her endlessly each day, some of them not even close friends or family, the costs build up. “*And then, once they get the credit, they go to a park, they connect five or more people to one single phone through a WIFI hotspot, and they get one euro per person for each hour. In that way they do business with your money.*” Although Yvelisse said she often sent credit to people in Cuba, she was exhausted with the constant requests and especially the ones that bordered on harassment. Failing to comply to some requests could mean that people spread rumors, speculating about the trouble she was getting into abroad; she was charged with doing drugs, partying too much, not caring, having failed (for narratives about “failed” migration cf. Plambech 2014, Paasche et al. 2018: 48-9, Surtees 2018). Balancing between the constant demands for redistribution by those left behind and her own effort to put forward a status of having “made it” in Europe was no easy task, particularly considering the harsh work realities she was facing living without papers in Greece. Caught between the obligation to help loved ones, her recognition that the credit she sent sustained a series of hustles and survival strategies in Havana, and her need to make people understand that “*money doesn’t grow on trees here*”, the pressure was getting to her. At the same time, her obligations as a migrant met with her desire to maintain contact with people she was close with in Cuba, especially her family. Yvelisse put the matter – and our conversation – to rest by

saying decidedly: “*The only phone credit you can never neglect to pay for is your mother’s*”.

Conclusion

From sex-working mothers to sex workers’ own moms, from marriage to helping relationships to street-based hustling, sex work sits within a world of reproductive labour. Women’s work, whether paid or unpaid, is consistently devalued by virtue of being naturalized, assumed to reside within the domain of mutuality and to rest on intrinsically “feminine” faculties such as the capacity to care, to be available for sex, to be pleasant and accommodating at the service of others. In an effort to go against this erasure, sex workers’ movements have proclaimed for decades that “sex work is work”. In some ways, this chapter has taken that statement further by situating commercial sex within a larger universe of paid and unpaid reproductive labour, and emphasizing women’s specific struggles with all this work. However, for all its political merits, the labour perspective often comes with its own elisions. For one, it is important to remember that there are hierarchies of “women’s work”, or, for that matter, “struggle”: for all they have in common, being a wife, a care worker, and a prostitute involve different concrete realities, regulatory interventions, social responses and stakes. From all the activities that rest on women’s bodies and their capacity for sexual/reproductive work, old-fashioned sexual commerce remains the most dangerous and stigmatized, the lowest of the low in conventional, sexist moralities and divisions of labour. Exactly because sex work *is* sex, it encapsulates not just the capitalist devaluation of women’s work at large, but also all the discipline, containment, and channeling of their sexuality *in direct terms*. As sex workers Molly Smith and Juno Mac put it, talking about sex work as labour cannot and should not mean that sex is incidental (2018: 37).

Taking seriously the stigma, the danger, and the exploitation that accompany sex for pay, the fact remains that at certain instances and in different contexts, women leverage their sexuality to find solutions, to survive, to get out of situations they are already trapped in. Women’s stories about the multiple reproductive roles they must perform suggest exactly that there can be no comfortable and definitive assessment of sex work, because it is not one thing and because it changes with time. This is where

dramatic portrayals of sex work as “rock bottom” and off-hand dismissals of prostitution as “the easy way out” both equally miss the point, and perpetuate sexist understandings of women’s work and sexuality. The words of Latina sex worker Pluma Sumaq offer as clear and beautiful a rebuttal as any:

“For many women of color in my position, prostitution is not what you do when you hit rock bottom. Prostitution is what you do to stay afloat, to swim rather than sink, to defy rather than disappear. For me, this was ‘financial strategy’ and not ‘easy money’. Please believe that there is nothing easy about being a young woman attempting to figure out how I will ever earn the right to a stable, liveable, non-exploitative income. Prostitution is not an easy task” (2015: 13-4).

Chapter 5. Going straight, and back again: inclusion and disposability

Introduction

This chapter builds on materialist feminist and queer analyses of political economy to provide a structural argument about how certain bodies and groups are marked as exploitable in ever-expanding capitalist categorizations. At least since the 1980s, feminist labour scholars have conducted research that unfolds the apparent paradox of how the value of some workers lies in their devaluation. These first ethnographies focused primarily on industrial settings such as Mexican maquiladoras, but their findings resonate, indeed often point to explicit interconnections, with illegalized, informal work such as sex work. In the previous chapters, I examined such processes of valuation across informalized sectors, and the ways state agendas on prostitution, migration, public space, and social reproduction intersect there. Here I complete the picture by looking at formal employment as another instance where these same workers are disciplined and devalued, albeit amidst a rhetoric of inclusion into legitimate work. I show that the ways workers are differentially integrated into the labour market on account of inhabiting labels such as woman, trans, migrant, etc., traverse binary distinctions between “inclusion” and “exclusion”. I place an emphasis on the state, to suggest that illegalization can just as well operate in tandem with so-called re-integration. In other words, criminalized sex work and the legitimate economy of wage labour or social policy programmes do not stand on opposite sides of “hustling” and “having made it”. This upsets the teleology of arguments about “exiting” the sex industry specifically, and “inclusion” in the labour market generally. I use the concept of the revolving door (De Genova 2002: 437) to signify the cyclical, rather than linear, movements of workers between formal and informal, licit and illicit economies, and the ways these are shaped by labour policy and different reshufflings of the working class in times of crisis. And if crises make sense as a norm produced by capitalist organization itself, the maintenance of a pool of reserve, disposable, flexible labour power must be understood as a response to the fluctuating rhythms of this system.

Theoretically, my argument draws from feminist political economic analyses of disposability and value. This is accompanied by an overview of several strands of employment and social policy that developed from the 1980s onwards. Ethnographically, I rely particularly on the labour trajectory of Teresa, a local trans woman from Athens; while telling, her ventures into formal wage labour should not be construed as somehow representative, nor do they mean that all sex workers in my field had the same relationship with state institutions, NGOs, and formal work. Besides the specific insights that she herself offers on her work, I use her story to tease out the dynamics that underwrite (sex) workers' longer-term movements across sectors, mediated by employment policies that pinpoint their value as "the permanent labor force of the temporarily employed" (Wright 2006: 88). In doing so, part of the contribution of the chapter is to intervene in some of the contemporary theories on "surplus" populations.⁷⁰ Although people hustling at the lower ends of the sex/informal economy are often construed as paradigmatic for the processes wherein the capitalist system renders certain groups superfluous and excludes them from the production of value, my experience in the field suggested a more complicated set of connections between different economic spaces and types of work that, in this case at least, seem to work in tandem. Looking at the many kinds of labour carried out by the women I worked with sheds light on the operation of value and disposability that the arguments on "superfluity" and "waste" end up obscuring when they are taken literally.

The first part of the chapter consists of ethnographic and bibliographical insights that bring together discussions on labour market participation, anti-trafficking, and sex workers' "re-integration". In the second part, I put these findings in a dialogue with Marxist theories of disposability and surplus labour. I end by

⁷⁰ These theories draw on different interpretations and applications of Marx, and there are considerable differences in how and where they apply the notions of "surplus population" and the accompanying ideas about superfluity. Many analyses centring the presence of "surplus populations" discuss conditions that are pervasive in the Global South and postcolonial capitalism, and involve scales and histories that are different to those of urban marginality in European contexts. For an overview of these debates in Marxism and some of the different ways of understanding the articulations of informal labour and "surplus populations" with capitalist accumulation, see Bernstein 2023.

considering how they resonate in the sex industry and in my interlocutors' experiences with other kinds of work.

5.1 Unemployment, integration, and flexible labour reserves

In a report about Greek policies for women's participation in the labour market, an economist and former Unemployment Agency (OAED⁷¹) president described women as a pool of flexible reserve labour, to be put to use in sync with the fluctuating demands of the labour market (Karamesini 2017: 4). The report in question assessed the effects of gender equality policies through national statistics of women's participation in (formal) labour during the years of the economic crisis, concluding that the levels of participation remain low in comparison to other E.U. countries.⁷² Assuming the tasks of raising children, keeping homes, and other caretaking in the family, women in Greece are described as preferring part-time work, and as conscious that they have to balance different waged and unwaged responsibilities. The low numbers of women working full-time in official employment are presented as a persisting problem that must be overcome by better social policy. At the same time, an apparent contradiction emerges between the description of women as an adjustable pool of labour power whose formal, paid work is not constantly needed, and the idea that women must be lightened from some of their unpaid responsibilities, particularly through state provision of child and elderly care,⁷³ so they can enter the labour market, presumably as regularized workers.

Arguments about gender discrimination or the "glass ceiling" in the labour market have long been points of advocacy in mainstream feminism. In the state apparatus, this has found its expression in policies about gender equality, and the creation of a formalized arm, the General Secretariat for Gender Equality in the early 1980s. Since then, the Greek state has advanced various plans and strategic goals about the so-called full integration of women into paid, formal work. By the 1990s, these were followed by the designation of several "vulnerable social groups" that also

⁷¹ OAED stands for Organization for Workforce Employment, and was renamed to DYPA, which stands for Public Employment Service, in 2022.

⁷² For example, in 2009 Greece was the country with the third lowest percentage of women's labour market participation in the European Union. See further: Karamesini 2021: 56.

⁷³ For an example of this argument about lightening the burden of care, see Karamesini 2021: 52.

encountered widespread unemployment. More recently, this designation has been extended to trans people, in another wave of policies addressing gender-based exclusion from employment relations. The labour integration of cis women on the one hand, and trans people on the other, have been articulated alongside different state projects and demands within institutionally-oriented feminist and trans politics. Nevertheless, all differences considered, for the purposes of this chapter they can be analysed together; both as state practices that exhibit marked continuities in reasoning (cf. Parthan, forthcoming), and because the narratives they advance have similar effects of obscuring actual work realities.

Clearly, the meaning of “unemployment” as well as “integration” require some unpacking here. For one, women’s work – at least in Greece – cannot reasonably be measured through statistics about participation in the formal labour market.⁷⁴ Considering the largely informalized or semi-informalized character of sectors and activities in which many people and particularly women in Greece work, assuming that anyone who does not have an official work relation is unemployed is a misunderstanding at best. At the same time, the very category of “women” as a homogeneous group with shared interests and issues of access to work is also misleading. If indeed the duty of reproductive labour at home has been a decisive factor in whether women can work for a salary outside the family, besides public policy on childcare and “gender equality”, the mass entry of Greek women into employment from the 1980s onwards, must also be understood alongside the simultaneous arrival of migrant women who took on the tasks of domestic labour in highly intensive, devalued, and mostly informal conditions (Angelidou 2013: 226, Lyberaki 2011). Around the same time as gender equality policies were being drafted and implemented, the Greek state “welcomed” growing numbers of migrants who entered Greece through bilateral agreements or through illegalized paths, the female counterparts of which came to staff the expanding sex and domestic work industries.

The obvious point to make here, is that women’s position cannot be generally conceived outside of class, race, and migration. It follows that integration does not

⁷⁴ For a more international overview of critiques to the narratives of women’s progressive and liberatory entry into remunerated employment, cf. Fernandez Kelly 1983: 8.

mean the same thing for everyone. The labour market is stratified in ways that complexly entangle gender, migration status, sexual and gender non-conformity, race, ability, etc. As with women, so with the more recent preoccupation with “vulnerable groups”, this is not a matter of identity or discrimination: rather, it has to do with how “the skins we inhabit” give shape to the ways in which we are devalued (Hennessy 2013). Nonetheless, as Shilpa Parthan’s (forthcoming) examination of gender welfare politics in Kerala also suggests, the recent inclusion of trans people into such agendas testifies to how pervasive the technocratic logic of “gender empowerment” has become. As trans persons, and “trans women in particular are folded into state intervention by replicating mechanisms and initiatives for cis women in the state” (Parthan forthcoming, n.p.), we are reminded of the deep contradictions and fissures underwriting these institutional practices, and the feminist and trans legacies of critique to gender politics that rest on abstract, unmarked identities (whether it be “woman” or “transgender”). Going back to the Greek context, if the linear vision of labour market integration that underwrites the aforementioned policies marks a seeming disconnect with their simultaneous understanding of women and “vulnerable groups” as pools of reserve workers, the growing scholarship on disposability, value, and feminization, helps understand the workings of this mechanism. But before doing that, an overview of the policies is necessary.

5.1.1 Greek employment policies

Usually understood in the context of neoliberal shifts away from welfare,⁷⁵ the employment policies for women’s and trans people’s integration, are most readily

⁷⁵ It should be noted here that there are many continuities across the welfarism-neoliberalism divide, which in turn should not be taken for granted. For one, an overt romanticism of the welfare state can obscure the disciplinary character of welfare policies, particularly towards women and racialized communities, as it has been documented in many geographical and historical settings (See Garland 2018, Stack 1974: 127-8). More specifically to the arguments of this chapter, the social policy drive to supervise and temporarily “integrate” problematic populations into norms of disciplined labour did not emerge in the 1980s but has a much older history in Greece, in various instantiations and episodes. For example, Avdela’s (2013) research on the formation of the custodial apparatus within Child Protection Services in the 1950s, clearly traces the designations of “problematic youth” and the relevant state interventions, as a matter of labour discipline. She describes its operation as a “penal-welfare complex”. On the one hand, the behaviours that qualified youths as being “at risk” were wide-ranging but telling: “disobedience, stubbornness, hubris and blasphemy, stealing [...], missing school or work, spending nights away from the family roof, begging, vagrancy, prostitution” (2013: 171). The social policy

traceable to the 1980s. Indeed, the 1980s saw international shifts in the management of unemployment, and E.U. strategies largely shifted towards “active labour market policies” (Tsiolis 2013: 154). With Greece’s entry into the EU in 1981, the country’s employment policy began to align with such trends.

The new tendencies involved an emphasis on “activating” the unemployed, by training and matching them with sectors where there was labour demand. Lowering the costs of labour for some groups of workers as a way of including them in the labour market was also part of these policies (Tsiolis 2013: 153-4), which encouraged – if not demanded – flexibility and for workers to be available for any work, and to move around if need be. The three main types of interventions were: subsidizing employers and companies to hire people, training and counseling for unemployed persons, and better matching between demand and supply in labour (2013: 155). The subsidized job placements involved a finite period of employment via OAED, which could last for a period of a few months up to two years, depending on the program. As these were officially conceived as routes towards regular employment, wherein “beneficiaries” would be able to get work experience and enhance their skillset, there were limitations in how often a worker could apply for such a post.

Already in the eighties, but even more so in the nineties, active employment policies began to target specific populations that seemed to face more obstacles in getting work or “integrating”. As I already noted, one such key group was women, who became the object of policy through discourses on gender equality and the concerted efforts of institutional feminists and other actors. These spanned a continuum of private and public entities, state services and non-governmental organizations. At the same time, the designation of special programs for so-called “vulnerable groups” targeted migrants, people with histories of drug addiction, former prisoners, single

responses, ranging from supervision and assignment to factory work to being sent to a reformatory, had as their stated aim the youths’ “addiction to disciplined livelihood” (2013: 363). For more details see: Avdela 2013. Another example is Papastefanaki’s work, which describes the use of mandatory labour and training as a “social”, reformatory measure in the penal system of 19th century Greece (2009: 83-4). Alongside these attempts towards the containment of the workforce and its “normalization” through labour, she also highlights the periodic nature of factory employment, where mobility and temporariness were part of industrial development and economics (2009: 85). See: Papastefanaki 2009.

mothers, Roma people, etc. Here, activation was closely related to a rhetoric of inclusion or re-integration.

In his research on these shifts in employment policy, based on fieldwork in the counseling and training stations of OAED, Tsiolis emphasizes the individualistic conceptualization of unemployment and employability that underwrites them. Questioning the role of active labour market policies, he suggests that “when the emphasis is on locating and covering individual ‘shortcomings’ with the goal of adapting to the dictates of the market, then [these policies] risk transforming into a latent mechanism of informal control and discipline of the unemployed, according to these needs” (2013: 177-8). Considering the former OAED president’s description of women as a pool of reserve labour, combined with my ethnographic material, we can begin to understand how these programs can constitute one state strategy for managing such a flexible labour force. As I show in the following sections, the way in which my interlocutors have to flexibly combine jobs and activities across the formal and informal sector to scrape, resembles more a revolving door than a linear trajectory towards “decent” work.

Decades later, these social policies have included ever-expanding categories of workers: trans people, victims of trafficking, refugees, and people with disabilities have been added to this list, among others.⁷⁶ Social economic initiatives like cooperatives have been used, sometimes in conjunction with labour market activation programs, as avenues for “job creation” that minimize the costs borne by businesses and bosses. In 2022, a new law announced the further restructuring of OAED, which has been renamed DYPA. Conceived as a “job creation” bill, this predicts the tighter matching of the workforce to the demands of the labour market, and introduces added tools for the monitoring and discipline of unemployed people.⁷⁷ As a public entity, OAED/DYPA

⁷⁶ Ministerial Decision 42632/2021, modification to previous document of 2017, Government Gazette Issue 2711. <https://www.kodiko.gr/nomothesia/document/729556/yp.-apofasi-42632-2021>.

⁷⁷ These include sanctions for failing to show up at an appointment with the service, refusing job and training offers from DYPA, or leaving one’s placement early. See Law entitled *Jobs Again: Restructuring of the Public Employment Service and digitization of its services, upgrading the skills of the workforce and diagnosing labour demand and other matters* («Δουλειές Ξανά: Αναδιοργάνωση Δημόσιας Υπηρεσίας Απασχόλησης και ψηφιοποίηση των υπηρεσιών της, αναβάθμιση δεξιοτήτων εργατικού

has taken on the task of matching workers with employers in industries that require labour power. For those who do not have papers and a regular status in order to qualify for OAED programs, private employment agencies continue to do this work. As noted in Chapter 2, for migrants who cannot yet rely on their networks and acquaintances to get jobs, these private agencies are the first stop for finding (often informal) work in feminized sectors such as domestic care, entertainment, or service industries. Indeed, the “inclusion” of migrant women with irregular status partly falls on these agencies, which have had their own part in perpetuating racism and ethnic stereotypes, classifying workers according to their national origin and establishing norms regarding which workers are fit for each sector (see Zisi et al. 2012: 103-4, 107).

5.1.2 Anti-trafficking, rehabilitation and cheap labour

For the most part, in Greece the connections between such social policy and regulatory frameworks for sex work are not made very systematically. Schemes that specifically assist sex workers to “exit” the sex industry and “re-integrate” into the regular labour market have not visibly constituted a major part of targeted policy-making. Tracing the linkages between these fields of work and state activity therefore requires some digging. For one, as my ethnographic material suggests, sex workers may empirically interact with “integration” and “job creation” policies through various entry points and labels, including generalized unemployment status, transness, one’s identity as a migrant, official trafficking victim status, and so on. Furthermore, as I discuss further below, at least since the 2000s, an industry is being built around anti-trafficking and the “rescue” of women from prostitution. Since in other national contexts, the intersections of sex work regulation, anti-trafficking, and social policy are more visible, devoting some attention to how these dynamics have unfolded elsewhere can provide insight on their less explicit operation in Greece.

Many international scholars have studied “exiting” and “rehabilitation” schemes ethnographically, and criticized the complicity of abolitionist⁷⁸ feminist

δυναμικού και διάγνωσης των αναγκών εργασιών και άλλες διατάξεις», Law 4921/2022, Government Gazette Issue A 75/18.4.2022).

⁷⁸ By “abolitionist” here I am referring to groups lobbying for the abolition of prostitution through further criminalization; this should not be confused with the rich legacy of prison abolitionist

politics with the exploitation of women in the anti-trafficking industries constructed around their so-called rescue. The contemporary rescue industry includes “local, state, and transnational governing institutions, secular feminist and faith-based activist campaigns, and a bevy of non-profit as well as for-profit ventures that have recently emerged to ‘end sex trafficking’ and to help victims” (Bernstein 2018: 17). Based on fieldwork with such initiatives in the US, Bernstein and Shih have shown how Evangelical Christian and secular feminist NGOs coalesce around anti-trafficking, with the self-proclaimed goal to get women “out of slavery and into the free market” (see Bernstein 2018, Shih 2015).⁷⁹ In practical terms, this usually means that “formerly trafficked women” are set to work sewing, making handbags, or producing other goods that are subsequently marketed as high-end, “slavery-free” items. In these rehabilitation programs, they make wages that rarely match what they made in sex work, while being subject to intense surveillance and micromanagement of their movements, including prohibitions to visit former friends and hangouts (Bernstein 2018: 13). In studying the development of this industry, anthropologists have shown how “exiting schemes” become a veritable pipeline from the criminalized sex industry to unskilled, minimum-wage jobs.

In a more historical overview of the emergence and establishment of “anti-trafficking” in British state policy, Julia Laite has noted its importance in advancing specific ideas about labour. These extended far beyond the denial that prostitution was real work, to a new outlook on work relations at large. In fact,

“...they were as much about constructing a discourse that denied the possibility, widely recognized in earlier periods, that state-approved work could be exploitative. Ideas about ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour were recodified in the twentieth century through the discourse of trafficking and – in the twenty-first century – ‘modern slavery’. As Julia O’Connell Davidson notes, the figure of the ‘slave’ was used by the

movements and their ties with Black feminism. Ironically, and very much in contrast to prison abolitionists, prostitution abolitionists have advocated for an expansion of carceral and criminal justice paradigms to address violence and exploitation in commercial sex.

⁷⁹ In the first wave of anti-trafficking policy in the interwar years, a similar proclamation was made where women’s rescue revolved around getting them “out of the brothels and into the kitchen” (a phrase by historian April Haynes, cited in Laite 2020).

post-abolition era to ‘celebrate the rights and freedoms bestowed on the abstract, juridical subjects of capitalist democracies’ [O’Connell Davidson 2010: 256]. Trafficking in this context enabled a discussion of exploitation that did not extend to ordinary, supposedly licit, work. Because discourses of trafficking were heavily gendered, they functioned as doubly obfuscating, in that they concealed not only the exploitative nature of women’s work, but also denied the very existence of women’s work as a fundamental part of global labour systems” (Laite 2017: 62).

The arbitrary demarcation between “normal” and “criminal” forms of exploitation provides a useful link across discussions of trafficking, exiting the sex industry, and integration in the labour market. Some of the arguments advanced by critical anti-trafficking scholars like those mentioned above resonate with critiques to active labour market policies and the rhetoric of “job creation” (Tsiolis 2013, Barchiesi 2012, Millar 2018, Wacquant 2009).

In a contemporary ethnographic example that brings these concerns together, Maria Soledad Cutuli (2015) has shown how the very emergence of demands around “dignified work” in the context of Argentinian prostitution and LGBT politics was aligned with state policies of “job creation” and “integration”. Based on ethnographic research with *travesti* cooperatives, she traces the unfolding of trans politicization from anti-repression mobilizations to subsequent demands for “dignified work”. Cutuli situates the emergence of such demands alongside abolitionist feminist narratives depicting prostitution as an inevitable form of suffering, and shifts in employment and welfare policy that occurred in Argentina after 2003, following the collapse of the economy in 2001. She specifically highlights the process under which cooperatives became linked to the productivist turn away from unemployment benefits and other state support. Cutuli shows that the use of cooperatives in employment policy was not limited to the better-known example of recuperated factories and workers who had lost their jobs in the recession, but extended to projects of “job creation” for populations perceived as vulnerable or chronically lacking access to state-recognized work. She argues that demands for so-called “dignified work” and an exit from prostitution on behalf of *travestis* cannot be understood without taking into account both the state language and practice concerning employment at the time, and the

travestis' own ways of combining, appropriating, and parodizing cooperative work and the very ideas of dignity and integration through "legitimate" work. Following the trajectories of specific cooperatives and workers, she shows that although technically having access to extra income and job alternatives through the coops was a way of bettering their conditions (having to work less in sex work, investing in equipment or spaces to upgrade one's way of working in the sex industry), this did not constitute an "exit" or some kind of rehabilitation. What is more, she argues that even if trans women use them to their own ends, these cooperatives also operate as disciplinary projects that seek to construct them as specific kinds of citizens, through tropes of dignified (if inadequate) work that simultaneously produce selling sex as undignified (Cutuli 2015).

In Greece, various anti-trafficking initiatives have converged on a more or less abolitionist stance on prostitution.⁸⁰ This involves an expansion of both policing and social policy for re-integration, the latter being based on the familiar idea that manual work can operate as a restorative, rehabilitative experience for people 'rescued' from the sex industry. The modern Greek "rescue industry" can be traced to the early 2000s.⁸¹ After the ratification of the Palermo Protocol against Trafficking in Persons, several state and private organizations converged to occupy themselves with the extrication of women from the sex industry and their so-called rehabilitation thereafter. They included an array of organizations that ranged from Christian Evangelicals to feminists working under the umbrella of gender equality, but the details and extent of their activity and links to one another remain understudied and difficult to decipher. Nonetheless, it is evident the apparatus operates in such a way that all relevant parties take part in complicated synergies, where policing and securitization agendas can hardly be disentangled from the proclaimed concern about victims' protection (cf. Boukli 2016: 18). Some examples of actors working more closely with the aspect of re-integration are: The General Secretariat for Gender Equality,

⁸⁰ Some of the following arguments and research on the Greek rescue industry and "exiting" were developed for a co-authored, unpublished work with Athina Michalakea, and can also be found in her PhD thesis (Michalakea 2024).

⁸¹ See Boukli 2016, for an overview of the contemporary anti-trafficking and rescue apparatus. For a study of the relevant institutions and policies during the historical emergence of anti-trafficking rhetoric in Greece during the interwar years, see Hantzaroula 2017.

NGOs working with refugees and unaccompanied minors, Christian groups like Caritas and Nea Zoi (New Life), and A21 Campaign.

More recently, anti-trafficking policy has been linked with the various “social economy” initiatives that were perpetuated since the beginning of the debt crisis.⁸² Discourses of social responsibility in production and consumption are combined with the hype on innovation and job creation, pitching double solutions to both trafficking *and* the pervasive crisis in which the Greek economy has found itself. Indeed, anti-trafficking agendas, active labour market policies, and different economic sectors’ need for cheap labour intersect in the National Rapporteur Against Trafficking in Persons’s proclamation of new, “out of the box solutions” (Boukli 2016: 10), designed in close collaboration with the Unemployment Agency and private agencies.

A direct example of this is a “social factory” operating in Athens since 2017. Founded at the peak of the “refugee crisis”, its manual workforce consists primarily, if not solely, of refugees and former trafficking victims, who are given “a second chance” to re-integrate via OAED-subsidized programs for vulnerable groups. *SOFFA* (Social Fashion Factory) produces clothing and shoes, and its whole marketing philosophy is based on discourses of ethical fashion and sustainability. Specifically, it claims to offer a social workplace that seeks to transform the wasteful fashion industry, which also ranks as “the second highest in terms of incidences of human trafficking after the sex industry” (Wear Your Origins 2022, About – SOFFA 2020) For Dr Fiori Zafeiropoulou, the company’s CEO and founder, working with social enterprise has offered her a way “to revive without a budget” (Wear Your Origins 2022) her family’s shoemaking business, which seems to have followed the sweeping wave of closures amongst Greek textile and clothing manufacturers in previous decades. Although Greece used to have a developed industry for clothing and textiles, from the late 1990s many companies moved their production activities to nearby countries in the Balkans to lower the costs of production. These new forms of “elite mobility” that followed the collapse of the

⁸² For example, see law 4430/2016, entitled *Social and Solidarity Economy, Development of its constituents, and other clauses* («Κοινωνική και Αλληλέγγυα Οικονομία και ανάπτυξη των φορέων της και άλλες διατάξεις», Government Gazette Issue A 205/31.10.2016). This law, revised several times over the next years, sets the terms for the operation of cooperatives and other social economy initiatives, and includes clauses on the labour market integration of different populations under OAED.

socialist bloc involved the expansion of Greek capital into post-socialist markets, such as Bulgaria (see Angelidou and Kofti 2013). Other companies closed completely. At least since the onset of the economic crisis, different commentators have bemoaned the collapse of Greek small industry, and offered different alternatives for its potential comeback.⁸³ In that backdrop, the “out of the box” solutions that emerge at the intersection of anti-trafficking and active labour market policies, complement the outsourcing strategy of the remaining companies by attempting to offer a fresh supply of cheap labour right here within Greece. Overall, emerging initiatives like SOFFA testify to the mix of state, non-governmental, and cooperative institutions, and to the ways contemporary forms of exiting mobilize middle-class fantasies and capitalist myths about slavery, free choice, and recovering dignity through entry-level work.⁸⁴ They also suggest how the trajectories of workers are shaped by centralized state policies to match labour supply and demand where it is needed.

5.2 The myth of integration

5.2.1 Going “straight” with the Unemployment Agency

“I had heard about the OAED’s subsidized programmes [for labour market integration]. They paid you to undertake trainings and you then joined short-term job positions through the unemployment agency in the municipalities or the private sector. My friend told me how to apply and encouraged me to go through with the process, although I was hesitant. The first meeting was to take place in Psyrri early in the morning, and we were supposed to go there and sign up in person so we could start participating in the trainings. I had been working all night [in Sygrou, the trans stroll] and there was no time to sleep in between. I only went home quickly to change my

⁸³ Various articles in the press comment on the collapse of small industry, while more recently there are references to companies that continue to produce clothing after having partly outsourced their production to the Balkans, Egypt, or China. Cf.: Athens Chamber of Tradesmen 2014; Morfidis 2019.

⁸⁴ In press and promotional material, SOFFA’s characterization as a social factory is at times attributed to both cooperative elements (all workers have a stake in the company) and the employment of *vulnerable groups* who are given a second chance through OAED’s reintegration programs, but the terms of employment are unclear. Different types of social economic projects that have become popularized during the crisis are conflated in the aforementioned press coverage, from cooperatives to subsidized placements to the funding of micro-enterprises for refugees and trafficking victims. For social scientific literature on “social and solidarity economies” during the Greek crisis, see: Petropoulou 2018, Adam and Kavoulakos 2020, Rakopoulos 2014.

clothes and to remove some of my makeup, you know, to tone it down a bit. I thought that day all I would have to do was present myself, sign up on the sheet, and leave. I arrived ten minutes late, in a trench coat, high-heeled boots, and what I thought was more discrete makeup. I opened the door to a huge amphitheatre full of people staring at me. I automatically turned around to leave but the guard wouldn't let me. As I walked down the steps to find a seat, the sound of my heels echoed in the whole room, *click, clack, click, clack.*" (Teresa, interview segment)

Among her various jobs and income-generating activities throughout the years, Teresa also had a steady, though intermittent, relationship with the unemployment agency (OAED) and the different subsidized programmes it offered. Although she was not technically unemployed, her status as an illegalized, street-based sex worker positioned her as yet another number in unemployment statistics. As a local trans woman who could access social policy programmes, Teresa worked in multiple such posts offered to the "chronically unemployed", years before the special designation of trans people as a "vulnerable group" meriting positive discrimination policies. She saw her involvement with OAED simultaneously as a potential opening to other kinds of work for the future, a way to add to her income in the here and now, complementing sex work or allowing her a break from it, and also a way to maintain some legibility as a worker in the eyes of the state, and secure some *ensima*.⁸⁵ Later on, she shed light on another dimension of her diversification strategies. In speaking about her relationship with her family, she was adamant about them not knowing that she sold sex. *"Being trans is already a thing to come to terms with, but if they knew what I do, they wouldn't talk to me. So, I try to disorient them, by saying I make money from different jobs, performances, bartending, NGOs, the unemployment programmes..."*. Stigma, exploitation, and differences in income generated, all played a role in the cost-benefit analyses women made when weighing their livelihood options.

Though Teresa disliked sex work, she positioned it alongside the other income-generating activities, as one that had its pros and its cons. *"You think I would withstand this humiliation if it didn't pay better than other jobs? I wouldn't play the whore (κάτω*

⁸⁵ As discussed in Chapter 4, *ensima* is a type of working-hour/pension contribution stamp that workers collect in order to be able to claim health insurance and a host of other rights.

την ντάνα) for 10 euros”. Throughout our talks, she frequently made some reference to this, to the explicit decision she had made based on specific terms she had set for herself. When I asked her what she meant by “this humiliation” she readily alluded to the exposure street solicitation involves, how you are prey to violence and derision from passers-by and police, including ongoing transphobic harassment. In her words, the humiliation had to do with the stigma and the exposure of the street, not the content of the work itself.

Other jobs she did entailed humiliations too. Upon entering the first subsidized jobs, she was hyperconscious that she had to prove herself twice as hard to bosses, OAED officers, and instructors, on account of her being trans and all the assumptions people made based on that. *“They were afraid I would be crazy, dramatic, and a whore, and that I would require special management on their part”*, she said. On top of the pervasive transphobia, entering a workplace through OAED meant she worked under a different status and with fewer rights, and of course, that her stay there was temporary. She explicitly pointed out that in much of the work she got through OAED, she had the same job description as workers who were employed directly by the workplace, yet on account of being “chronically unemployed” she earned a much lower salary and had limited labour rights.

The more we spoke about her involvement in subsidized programmes, her critique and awareness of the exploitative role of “re-integration” projects became more acute, even as her economic situation became so dire that she found herself scrambling to qualify for more work through OAED. After some years in that game, she was coming face to face with the fact that the purpose of labour market “re-integration” was to maintain a pool of precaritized workers who would remain cheap through intermittent, short-term contracts mediated by OAED. It was literally impossible for her to continue working through OAED as there were two-year restrictions in how often she could apply for such subsidized posts; it was equally difficult for her to find formal work elsewhere, because nobody would hire her as a regular worker with full employee costs and insurance. Much like the “revolving door” scheme theorized in relation to migration, Teresa found herself in a cycle of engagement and disengagement with the formal labour market. The system would

absorb her temporarily, set her to work for substandard conditions, and spit her out unceremoniously when it was done. Seeing the devaluation of her labour consolidated in this manner was another form of humiliation, different from the ones experienced in sex work. Nevertheless, Teresa had connections to draw between the two: *“the irony... to work so many years in sex work without a pimp only to find one in the State”*.

5.2.2 Integration into what?

If in the common imaginary about sex work, surplus extraction is personified in the figure of the pimp, Teresa’s comment illustrates that exploitation and devaluation are perpetuated structurally, not least through state programs that pitch badly paid, dead-end work as the ticket out of poverty.⁸⁶ For sex worker interlocutors who were already balancing a variety of precarious livelihoods, taking on another shitty job was not so much a solution that would substitute what they were previously doing, but an extra thing to add in order to scrape by, or at best, a way to get a needed break from the sex industry.

Years passed since her first experience with OAED, and Teresa went on to work in various other formal and semi-formal jobs. Eventually, she became a part-time employee at a sex workers’ rights organization. Under the wider umbrella of HIV prevention and sex work outreach, this NGO benefited from different cycles of funding, that included health, refugee issues and unaccompanied minors, and trans empowerment. As many researchers have noted, NGO work often constitutes a job alternative for trans and sex-working people, who can be incorporated into the NGO workforce as “peers” or representatives of different kinds of communities (see O’Brien 2021: 56-7). In some cases, participation in NGO/social work is construed as a practical

⁸⁶ In the context of Kerala, India, Parthan documents similar critiques of such state policies for trans inclusion on the part of trans people, including practices of public complaint and non-compliance. She cites a triumphantly publicized case when the state announced it would hire a number of trans women for a newly inaugurated metro station, only to let them know they would be working under a subcontractor. Shortly after this move was celebrated as pathbreaking, trans workers started quitting *en masse*, citing the sub-contracting as one reason and the high costs of living in that area on their meagre salary as another. According to them, sex work was more financially viable than poorly paid government jobs. Drawing from a long legacy of political protest, trans activists also complicated official narratives of inclusion by using this as an opportunity to raise what they saw as a more pressing issue of housing, and the problems many workers were facing living in short-term accommodation (Parthan forthcoming, n.p.)

retirement strategy (Shah 2014: 158), or at least as a complement that becomes increasingly important as sex workers grow older. Teresa's own participation as a paid worker came after years of free labour ("volunteering"), and with many subsequent unpaid periods as funding froze or ended. Her salary came from a finite project on trans inclusion, and amounted to a stipend of around 200 euros.

As this was far from enough to sustain her, even combined with whatever sex work she did, Teresa continued to look for other work and apply for subsidized jobs through the unemployment agency. Sometime in the midst of the pandemic, she got a short-term, fixed-contract job in catering at a public hospital in Athens. Her new job was exhausting, temporary, and badly paid. Talking about it, Teresa said she had adapted to the times. *"And don't forget that I was one of the spoilt ones, I used to make a lot of money with sex work. But the times changed and I had to adjust"*. Temporality is important here: having now reached her fifties, she would never had settled for a job like this when she was younger, and indeed, many women in my field, even ones who worked under very tough conditions in Omonia, referred to this weighing of options and the refusal to work in devalued wage labour as long as they were making good money from sex work. As we saw, the relative merits of selling sex faded as women grew older and sex work offered less money; so, women like Teresa, Lilyana, and others changed strategies and were filtered back into other low-paid sectors, such as working in brothels as maids, cleaning, NGO work with short-term project-based funding, OAED programmes, and "unskilled" wage labour.

The catering work was the first time Teresa had gotten a "straight" full-time job outside the entertainment industry and without the mediation of an unemployment program. Rather than a triumph, or proof that OAED's active labour market policies did in fact pave the way towards regular employment, this could also be read as a sign of the times. Teresa was hired in the context of ongoing cuts and intense conflicts between the state and workers in the health sector. As getting vaccinated against covid-19 had become obligatory for workers in hospitals around the time she was hired, those who had not been vaccinated were put on compulsory unpaid suspension for four months, to be released from their contract if they had not complied by then. Some temporary positions with expedited hiring processes opened up to make up for

their absence.⁸⁷ According to Teresa, many of the previous employees did not return to work, and the hospital did not proceed to cover all of the gaps, opting instead to intensify the workload of those who were already there. After one month of working normally according to her job description, Teresa found herself covering three posts, working as a server in catering, hospital cleaner, and disinfecting surgery rooms and equipment.

This intensive work took a toll on her body, leaving her with severe back pain, lumbago, and recurring health problems. When her contract was extended for a few more months, she was uncertain whether she could take such debilitating work for much longer, but had no choice; things on the stroll in Sygrou were very slow, and the NGO money she earned was more like extra cash than a salary. Not to mention, she had no guarantee that the funding that paid her would be renewed and that she wouldn't have to go back to "volunteering" for a while. For a year or so, she opted to maintain both the NGO work and the hospital catering. She went to the NGO day center on her only day off, and worked 7 days a week.

During her post at the hospital, Teresa worked very hard. She was a swift, accomplished worker who was adept at learning new tasks and taking on responsibilities. After her second contract ended and was not renewed, she spent some time combining part-time NGO work and the occasional sex date, while looking for what to do next. A few months later, her manager from the hospital called her to offer her to return to work. Whereas before she had been directly hired in the public sector, now she was invited to work through a private sub-contracting agency.⁸⁸ As we spoke, Teresa kept this idea as the last resort, extremely angry at the suggestion that she return to do the same work for much lower pay, as workers through sub-contractors did. In retrospect, she said she had been stupid to work so hard and "*show the managers how fast I could work*", because the only effect this had was that they

⁸⁷ According to anti-pandemic measures passed in 2021, hospitals and other public care institutions were allowed to hire employees *under expedited processes, for limited-duration contracts*, to replace employees who had failed to comply with obligatory vaccination (see Covid19.gov.gr 2021).

⁸⁸ Sub-contracting agencies were widely used in hospitals to cover positions in catering, cleaning, and security, creating a mixed system of private and public-sector employees in the same posts. For some debate about it see: The Press Project 2023, latronet.gr 2023.

piled more work on her, stretching the contents of her working day to an extreme. *“I should have done what some of my co-workers did, take my time with each task I was given. Now it’s too late, if I go back to the same hospital I will have to work as fast as before, for even less money.”*

5.2.3 Working as “peers” in NGOs

Considering that NGO work has become a retirement or complementary strategy for many sex workers, the third sector merits a closer look. The veritable explosion of the NGO sector in Greece in the last decade has been well-documented, particularly in connection with the “refugee crisis”.⁸⁹ The work models of NGOs and project-based funding are important to consider on a wide scale, for example in terms of the proliferation of short-term contracts, the coexistence of different employment statuses in the same workplace, the heavy reliance on volunteers and interns, and the whole humanitarian economy that is being established.⁹⁰ For the purposes of this research, however, I am focusing specifically on the role of NGOs as a retirement strategy or at least a means of complementing income for sex workers.

In Athens, the majority of relevant NGOs and associations working with peers revolve around trans issues and harm reduction, with a couple of organizations focusing on sex work specifically, and addressing workers regardless of gender identity. Nevertheless, at the time of my research, it was primarily trans women who worked or had worked in the sex industry, that became more involved in NGO work in my field. This might be related to the targeting of specific organizations (such as the Transgender Association/ Σ.Υ.Δ.), the fact that NGO and other social work is one of the few sectors where trans people may find work, and issues of visibility and exposure. There is a much longer history of trans women speaking out openly about sex work in

⁸⁹ For some examples, see: Cabot 2013, Rozakou 2017, and Rozakou 2012.

⁹⁰ For an overview of the political economy of NGOs in the European Union (focusing on women’s organizations), and some of the complexities of funding, see Lang 2014: 274-6. For an ethnographic analysis of working conditions and precarity in refugee-related NGOs in Italy, see Guidici 2021.

Greece,⁹¹ which does not extend to cis women almost at all, and has recently started to be taken up, albeit anonymously, by cis male escorts too.

For some interlocutors, who are already overworked and have been engaging in more grassroots forms of mutual aid in their communities their whole life, NGO work is not so much a question of activism, but of economic strategy. In the face of fluctuations in the availability of work on the stroll, covid-19 restrictions, and growing older, Teresa put it quite succinctly: *“this pays my rent”*. However, the security offered by NGO work is pretty relative. Differentiations sometimes emerge between “professionals” with degrees such as psychologists, managers, and social workers, and “community” workers who are perceived as unskilled but well-versed and networked on account of being part of the target populations. Particularly for peer workers who are not high-ranking staff, NGOs can offer yet another form of flexible, exploitative attachment to the labour market: consider the requirement of volunteer work in order to potentially be paid in the future, the symbolic capitalization on personal experience and networks, the reliance on emotions and commitments to justify exploitation and overwork, and the precarity of labour because you rely on funding, which, in organizations like the ones I am describing, at times has meant that many workers have worked for free in-between funding stints. In these times, workers who belong to the “community” in question are interpellated in strikingly similar ways across projects dealing with gender equality, sex workers’ empowerment, and so on. In the context of institutionalized trans politics in Kerala, Parthan quotes a state representative who puts it quite clearly: “funds...may or may not come, and this is up to the government, but the trans members of the club must rely solely on their determination and enthusiasm to undertake activities” (Parthan forthcoming, n.p.).

Working for free while waiting for the next funding cycle points to the simultaneous promise that “the funding will come any time now and it will be good”, and despair that one’s other income streams are so uncertain that there is little choice but to wait and hope for the best, even if things end up being worse than expected.

⁹¹ There is a long history of trans women writing and publishing their memoirs in Greece, many of which also detail their experiences with sex work. For an overview of these trans autobiographies see Leontsini and Papadakou 2017.

Especially during the covid-19 lockdowns, when a lot of sex workers lost a big part of their income, some of the funding processes froze, and many NGO services temporarily stopped operating on account of the pandemic measures, this mantra of waiting became more and more frequent and exasperated in my phone calls and meetings with interlocutors. Considering the complex hiring policies and mixed employment statuses (university researchers, NGO employees, directors' board, external collaborators like interpreters, volunteers, etc.), it is not entirely clear whether everyone was told to wait or if some people continued being paid in these "dead" periods. In addition, for peer workers doing outreach activities or counselling, a part-time NGO salary is often negligible, and if it is paid through the proper channels, it means the worker is no longer entitled to state benefits such as unemployment discount on public transport, Social Solidarity Income (KEA), and so on. Getting one *ensimo* a week also hardly means that they can get enough registered working hours to qualify for labour rights such as health insurance, pension, etc., so workers find themselves having to weigh whether it makes more sense for them to work invisibly. When and if the next funding cycle comes, then, they are still in a position where it is almost impossible to save up, and they usually still need to complement their income with sex work or other work.

5.2.4 The state waves the trans flag: social policy at the intersection of identity politics and labour regulation

In June 2021, the Greek government announced that trans people would be included in the unemployment agency's (OAED) list of "vulnerable social groups", and could thus apply for subsidized job positions for two-year stints. Employers were encouraged to diversify their hiring practices by taking on trans employees, whose labour costs would be almost entirely covered by state subsidies. After lockdowns that had made the lives of informal workers almost unlivable, this announcement, along with the first public case of a trans woman who had benefited from this policy, was hailed a success. "*Today I put my high heels to rest*", read the articles about Rafaella,⁹²

⁹² In my references to Rafaella's story, I use her real name as I am relying on publicized interviews she has given as a trans rights advocate.

a local woman who had been a sex worker in Sygrou Avenue and active in trans advocacy for years. Her life story and her passage from street-based sex work to a saleswoman position in an electronics store were used to line an official narrative of progressive trans acceptance, as well as exiting the sex industry.

Looking further than this proclaimed moment of triumph, we can discern a few things. For one, working for two years at a minimum-wage subsidized job could be a pragmatic option for a sex worker in the wake of two lockdowns that had rendered her street-based work almost obsolete. As Teresa said in reference to her own straight job, many women had had to adapt to the times and reconsider their options. In the interviews about her new position, Rafaella herself used level-headed words that stood in discrete contrast with the news titles that unabashedly celebrated a “new life for trans people” (In.gr 2021). Citing her growing fatigue with sex work as she reached her sixties, she described the new job as “helpful, albeit temporary” (Adonopoulos 2022), as it grants her the relief of “knowing I won’t have to go out for [sex] work at night for two years” (Dima 2021).

Proclamations of a new era of “trans inclusion” and pathways leading out of the sex industry aside, it is clear that workers are not naïve enough to think that such jobs pave a linear path to economic security.⁹³ Much like Rafaella’s own words, my interlocutors’ experiences with formal work (through unemployment programs or not) were a string of temporary, often dead-end jobs that were alternated with sex work and other invisible work, to the extent that this was available. Months after this new policy was implemented, Teresa conveyed a bleak reality from the field. Besides Rafaella, she did not know anyone else who had applied for a job through the new programme; at the same time, she recounted the deaths and prison sentences of old friends and co-workers that had occurred during and after the lockdown periods.

⁹³ The mismatch and the strategic slippage between the complexity of marginalization and exploitation as it appears in workers’ perspectives on the one hand, and the language of policy-making and recommendations on the other, were pervasive in different spaces of advocacy, whether for sex work or trans issues. Depending on their political affiliation, position, and the audience they were addressing in each case, different actors managed these contradictions in different ways that made sense to them. A recent publication of the Transgender Association’s recommendations for trans sex work, accompanied by empirical research with trans individuals regarding their labour trajectories, testifies to some of these tensions. For more details, see Galanou 2022.

Many trans women in her community had been struggling with issues ranging from homelessness to mounting debt, and those arrested were doing time for survival-related crimes such as petty theft. It seemed that state-sponsored integration into low-paid, short-term work was not mutually exclusive with illegalization, imprisonment, or simply being left to die.

While narratives of “exiting” usually assume that sex work entails a specific, uniquely violent kind of humiliation, and discourses of “re-integration” posit that any other kind of work would be better, sex workers’ own perspectives and realities painted a different picture. For Teresa, who had combined years of street-based sex work with participation in subsidized programmes for the chronically unemployed, occasional wage-labour in the service economy, paid performances and shows, and her recent post at the hospital, clearly the “straight” jobs she did were not unproblematic, or necessarily a way out. Besides Teresa, who had the most systematic relationship with wage labour, other interlocutors had also balanced a mix of formal and informal work that hardly displayed a straightforward differentiation between “decent” wage labour and “precarious” hustles. Beatriz, who was in her forties and still very active in sex work, also kept a formal part-time job as a cabaret performer, where she was insured but worked on commission, usually making little money. The way the club’s boss saw it, she provided workers with exposure and a platform on which to perform. In return this meant the club workers were obliged to perform only there, and were technically not allowed to accept offers for other events that could pay much better. Although she found ways to bypass it, Beatriz resented this labour control, and semi-seriously likened it to a mafia practice. Older sex workers increasingly relied on a mix of benefits, aid from LGBT associations, sporadic sex dates, low-paid peer positions in NGOs, and support from friends and partners, depending on what was accessible to them based on their networks and citizenship status.

Clearly, then, none of these jobs could adequately sustain the women on its own in the long-term. A year into her minimum-wage sales job, Rafaella herself went back to complementing her income by selling sex in Sygrou Avenue (see Kodonas 2022). Once the linearity of “sex worker to wage worker” collapsed, all that was left

was a series of unviable jobs that women had to combine or move across in order to adapt to the circumstances.

5.2.5 Work, legitimacy, and identity

“The acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms”

(hooks 1992: 370).

We saw that state narratives about integrating to the formal labour market directly meet with anti-trafficking perspectives that posit “exiting” the sex industry as a form of rescue and rehabilitation. In some cases, as in the Argentinian scenario of *travesti* cooperatives, or the triumphalist institutional narratives about trans people’s inclusion in the list of “vulnerable populations” in Greece, these ideas may come to shape, to lesser or bigger extents, the demands and rhetoric of trans and sex worker groups. In such accounts, “straight” work is presented as a source of dignity, legitimacy, social belonging, even citizenship (Cutuli 2015). On the other hand, advocacy that focuses more squarely on the rights of sex workers makes a point against stigma and violence while continuing to push for the recognition of sex work itself as a legitimate form of work to be chosen among others. Lobbying for state recognition has sometimes meant that sex work must be framed as a “routine economic activity” and “a normal business pursuit” (Benoit et. al 2017: 9 cited in Carlisle 2021: 574) in the context of expanding service industries. However, sex work being a vast umbrella term that somewhat uncomfortably tries to bridge identity and labour politics, this framework also carries problems.

To be sure, the critique to the erasure of sex work as a form of labour, and the attention to the exploitation, criminalization, and violence this invisibility brings, is important and remains very much necessary – particularly as anti-trafficking policies continue to structure the realities of workers in devastating ways. Nonetheless, its counterpart cannot be a different form of respectability/normalizing politics that ignores the vast class and racial differences in the sex industry, not to mention the fact that many workers would not even think of reclaiming sexual commerce as a source

of identity or legitimacy.⁹⁴ Decades after the introduction of the term “sex worker” into feminist and labour politics, we are no longer dealing with a situation where the only dominant representation of sex work is based on depictions of victimhood or criminality. As sex workers’ rights are increasingly gaining a place within global human rights discourse, postmodern feminism, and even state institutions, another obfuscating construction is becoming hegemonic: the figure of the empowered “erotic professional”, with the “trafficking victim” lagging somewhere behind as its negative Other. Sex workers and scholars alike have responded to this development, criticizing the ways mainstream sex work discourse caters to a largely middle-class, white, cisgender figure who can more comfortably embody this entrepreneurial standard (cf. Sumaq 2015, Carlisle 2021: 581 etc.). Building on these points, I believe a wider critique can be drawn by putting them together with my ethnographic material.

We saw that cis and trans women in the field engaged in a variety of jobs to survive, their “labour market participation” spanning commercial sex, informal cleaning and care, jobs subsidized by unemployment programs, wage work in the service sector, etc. They moved from job to job because they had no choice but to adapt, or because one kind of work was deemed preferable to another as circumstances changed. These movements made sense not as a linear path towards security, towards working less or under better conditions, but as a constant struggle to survive and live their lives as best they could. As the examples of Teresa’s hospital job and the Social Fashion Factory suggest, workers’ trajectories were also related to wider processes of restructuring within industries, and more centralized efforts to regulate workers and match them to the sectors that needed them.

Earlier, I suggested that sex workers’ reformulation of *la lucha* brings an important twist to productivist Marxist understandings of work, by firmly positioning sex work and reproductive labour as part of class struggle. Combined with Lilyana’s statement that “*no job is worth advertising*”, together these perspectives make sex

⁹⁴ As Dziuban and Stevenson note, some sex workers’ organizations that operate more as unions, particularly in the UK and France, have explicitly acknowledged the structural constraints that lead most people to do sex work, and have refrained from arguing that “sex work is just like any other job”. Rather, they have opted to widen their political scope and demands to larger societal change and labour market reforms (Dziuban and Stevenson 2019: 412).

work visible as a livelihood, but they also go a step further. They carry an implicit but class-informed aversion to the idea that any of these undervalued, exploitative and often dangerous jobs should be taken up as a claim for legitimacy and identity. We can remember here the way Teresa spoke about humiliation at work. The fact that she resented the public exposure of street solicitation and her effort to manage the stigma of selling sex around her family, did not mean she didn't hate her straight jobs too. Even less so, that she saw them as granting her a dignity somehow "lost" between the stroll and her trans-ness. Similarly, Beatriz pragmatically saw her formal work at the cabaret as a legible activity that granted her some rights in the eyes of the state. She enjoyed performing and considered herself an artist among other things, but recognized that her job was exploitative and she could not survive being paid on commission and "supporting" the club on slow nights. Furthermore, entering a completely white establishment as the first black/Caribbean performer involved several humiliations. Beatriz straight-forwardly described her workplace as racist, and she was right: anti-black and tropicalist stereotypes pervaded the numbers she was allowed to do, at least at first. As for sex work, she was conscious that, besides being unstable, dangerous and illegalized, for a black trans woman like herself it also involved playing with the racial fantasies of clients, marketing herself as the "exotic Latina", and often working within politics of desire that were pervaded by racism, sexism, and transphobia.

Perhaps, it could be argued that one common self-representation that women in the field identified with, was that of the figure of the fighter, or *luchadora*. But this was not as glamorous, as empowering as it may sound, and neither did women want to embody it constantly. Struggling constantly may be a necessity for survival, but we should not fall in the trap of romanticizing *la lucha* as so many other attitudes and ways of living under dispossession have been. For example, different researchers working in contexts of crisis have explored the moral traffic of terms like "resiliency" and "sacrifice" as the "common sense of austerity" (Streinzer 2021: 104, Alves de Matos and Pusceddu 2021). Researchers working in Cuba have advanced similar critiques for the more nostalgic framings of *la lucha* on the island after the Special Period, arguing that, posited as "every Cuban's daily struggle", it flattens class and race

inequalities and obscures specific processes of capitalist transformation (Steir 2022: 113). In their more gendered iterations, these kinds of common sense celebrate the “everywoman” who takes hit after economic hit, but remains afloat and dignified through an admirable force of perseverance and adaptability. No matter how difficult the conditions, she clenches her teeth and keeps working, usually because she has a family to support (cf. Veloz Contreras 2017a). The *longue durée* of colonial, brutally capitalist structures that underpin people’s mobilities and survival are pushed comfortably out of view. So do the gender logics that shape the terms under which this work is divided and carried out. Going back to the Greek context, this obsession with resiliency has become an annoying interpellation to say the least. In the backdrop of more than a decade of economic recession and multiple temporalities of dispossession weighing down on migrant and local workers in different ways, it is a depoliticizing logic that holds people to a standard of adapting to untenable situations glossed with a virtuous cast.

The women I met fought, but they also broke down, lost hope, became depressed and paralyzed by fear, entered into self-destructive spirals, and sometimes did not bounce back. The equilibrium they relied on was delicate, and very often, the particular choices they had to make as they “struggled” put them in grave danger. Beatriz, the fierce optimist if there was ever one, got increasingly tired as the years passed by. Driving back from a fruitless lawyer’s appointment where she had received bad news about her residence application, her despair was palpable. As she tried to wrap her head around the fact that things might not turn out ok, even after years of work and perseverance, she told me: *“I know you haven’t seen me lose hope, you know me to be a fighter... but this is too much”*. Being a fighter did not erase the sheer, daily exposure to violence and exploitation, the cruelty and the loneliness of having to rely on oneself and never let one’s guard down. And it absolutely did not mean that everyone survived.

5.3 Disposability and the value of women's work amidst capitalist crises

5.3.1 Labour reserves, women and the feminized worker

"The disposable, feminized worker is the one capital pursues across the globe and continually reinvents because she above all others gives away more of herself for free. [To] be feminized means that the value of your labor power lies in the value of your devaluation" (Hennessy 2013: 131).

The idea of a pool of reserve workers I open this chapter with is not new, and it did not emerge with the specific organization of employment relations that is usually labelled under "neoliberalism". Theorizing about the role of surplus populations, disposable workers, and the so-called waste products of capitalism is at least as old as Marxism. Based on specific examples of industrial capitalism during his time, Marx suggested that the working class was divided into sub-groups with different attachments to capitalist production and value generation. Ever since he spoke of reserve armies of labour, paupers, the *lumpenproletariat*, and the other subdivisions of the working class, a lot of debate has raged about the exact meaning and position of these groupings, spanning traditional productivist understandings of work and value to more feminist and postcolonial readings (Mezzadri 2019). Although in Marx's initial framing the lumpen were seen to have left the working class to survive in an underworld of crime and prostitution, later reformulations advanced less rigid understandings of class formation and politics. One famous such example was the Black Panthers' critique of the Marxist tendency of "lumping all third world peoples into the category of the *Lumpenproletariat* and then forgetting them there" (Cleaver 1967: 6), and their own emphasis on the role of the latter in class struggle. Since the 1960s and increasingly in the following decades, political movements and theorists highlighted how these different attachments to capitalist production, labour conditions, and experiences of devaluation rested on divisions of gender, race, caste, sexuality, which in turn were inextricable from class itself.

One of the earliest and most important studies that engaged the position of women as a differentiated labour force for capitalism was Maria Mies' work with lacemakers in India (1982). Mies understood that the women who produced lace for

export from their homes were wage labourers, whose position in capitalist production was underlined by the fact that they were seen and identified as housewives. Rather than arguing that this was a case of incomplete capitalist transition, or an anachronistic leftover of earlier working arrangements, Mies argued that this was a consolidated kind of integration into the global economy. Using this case study, she showed that “the traditional model of factory work and its consequent corollary, proletarianization, do not exhaust the possible ways in which women workers can be incorporated into the international division of labor” (Bair 2010: 209-10).

From the 1980s onwards, a wave of feminist studies focused on global assembly plants examined the ways women came to constitute a new group of workers, subjected to specific kinds of incorporation and valuation in emerging or expanding industrial markets. Particularly, research undertaken in maquiladoras in the Mexico-US border highlighted complex processes of rendering cheap labour by engaging femininity and race. Rather than taking for granted or homogenizing what “cheap labour” means in the world system, researchers looked at the concrete processes of dispossession and fragmentation reshaping the working classes in distinct but interconnected geographies (cf. Fernandez Kelly 1983:3). Of particular relevance to my arguments here, Melissa Wright’s ethnography *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Contemporary Capitalism*, unpacked the ways “the female laborer continues to represent the perpetually unskilled and untrainable worker whose value diminishes through time” (2006: 47).

Although Wright was more concerned with showing how “the myth of the disposable third world woman” structures subjectivities, labour relations and organizational practices in maquiladora production, her study also constitutes a useful rebuttal to contemporary theories of waste,⁹⁵ by taking seriously the ways disposability is tied to the extraction of value from women’s work in a high-turnover industry. Wright advances a Marxist approach, where working-class women in global assembly plants are positioned as “variable capital”, turning over in a “revolving door of disposability” (2006: 41). She writes:

⁹⁵ E.g. see Bauman 2003.

“In this particular manifestation, the Mexican woman is the utopian image of a culturally victimized variation of labor who guarantees her replacement—after being worn down by repetitive stress syndrome, migraines, or harassment over pregnancies—with fresh recruits who are, perhaps, leaving another place of employment for one of the same reasons. *That the same women are turning over as they move from one place to another does not disrupt the utopian image of their constant decline as part of their progression toward disposability.* Quite to the contrary, their value circulates through their continual flow from one factory to the next, since as a woman leaves one place of work, perhaps having been dismissed for missing a menstrual period, and then enters another once her menstrual flow resumes, she again represents value. [...]

This image of her as the subject formed in the flux between waste and value provides her contours as a variation of capital. With such a constitution, she can be nothing other than a temporary worker, one whose intrinsic value does not mature, grow, and increase over time. And therefore, as a group, Mexican women represent *the permanent labor force of the temporarily employed*” (Wright 2006: 87-8, italics mine).

The research of scholars like Mies, Fernandez Kelly and Wright on female workers was highly influential in the development of feminist political economy. More recently, scholars have turned to examining whether the concept of “feminization” provides a more apt description of the processes under which certain groups come to personify a desirable labour force on account of being devalued, extending beyond the strict confines of “woman” as an essentialized category. Revisiting the Mexican maquiladora example studied by Wright, Rosemary Hennessy (2013) argued that sexual and gender non-conformity have also come to constitute markers for supposedly docile, exploitable labour. Considering how trans and openly gay working-class people had few options for work besides sex work, and considering that from the 1990s onwards the numbers of female workers were not enough to sustain maquila production in the borderlands of Mexico, she shows that “the demand of cheap labor made adjustments in the gender demographics of the workforce inevitable and expanded the criteria for those bodies that would qualify as feminized, value-producing labor power” (Hennessy 2013: 136). Hennessy therefore suggests we pay

attention to “the changing value of sexual identity in relation to capital’s need for cheap labor” (Hennessy 2013: 137).

The exact limitations and advantages of the “feminization” framework may bear discussion that is beyond my scope here. The important point to keep is capital’s impulse to regenerate itself by incorporating more and more groups to serve as flexible, cheap workers. This can be linked to the separate but interrelated processes under which both the categories of cis-femininity and trans-ness/gender non-conformity come to structure the forms of one’s work and exploitation, in specific state policies and in the labour market at large. Such an understanding takes us further than the rhetoric of inclusion, which as we saw can itself operate as a way of connecting different groups to low-paid work. It also highlights how gender, sexuality, class, and labour are co-constituted. It is not simply that gender defines how one is made use of as a worker, but the other way around too. Cis and trans women’s work experiences involve multiple forms of gender discipline and regulation, that they find themselves having to negotiate to different extents as sex workers, cleaners, waitresses, or municipal gardeners working under OAED subsidies. Trans people’s difficulties at work in particular - “not being able to find it, getting a foothold in only a handful of industries, being subject to harassment and the risk of violence on the job” (O’Brien 2021: 57) - are indicative of the centrality of labour itself in how we can understand gender freedom and oppression.

5.3.2 Value and disposability in the sex industry

Let us now connect this idea of one’s devaluation being the source of one’s value to the specifics of my field. In the previous chapter, I showed how the illegalization and violence faced by sex workers operate as disciplinary mechanisms that diffuse value towards a host of other actors besides the women themselves. Tracing these connections is a first step towards undoing the conviction that informal, social reproductive work is outside capitalism or the circulation of value. We also saw that, even when sex workers eventually see themselves thrown out – literally disposed of - from sexual commerce, they continue to work elsewhere or complement their declining incomes in other occupations that surround the sex industry or transcend it altogether. Taken together, these two chapters have hopefully situated my

interlocutors as part of a group of workers who move across sectors and jobs, paid and unpaid work, production and reproduction. They carry out the labour that sustains marriage and other partnerships, satisfies clients' sexual needs, cares for children when their parents are working long hours, tends to the elderly when their relatives cannot, keeps houses and businesses clean, entertains customers and makes sure drinks are served with a smile. When they are needed there, they also take up low-paid, temporary, and often debilitating jobs in the formal economy, whether these be construed as "labour market activation" or an entry into wage labour proper. Visibly or not, women are working constantly, all the while facing the idea that their labour is not real work but a natural extension of their femininity, that it constitutes a personal service, a second chance, or training, that it is unskilled and they, in turn, are disposable, surplus workers to capitalism. Situating the analysis across sectors and types of devalued work the women move through, the myth of disposability and, by extension, understandings of women's work as unskilled labour become less convincing.

5.3.3 Disposability in the organization of work

In the sex industry, there are several ways in which disposability manifests, both as a demeaning discourse but also as a logic and a felt reality. Its operation is perhaps easier to identify in the more labour-intensive and organized sections of the sex industry. From my observations in brothels, it seems like women have a finite window for their stay at each workplace, where they become known and liked by regular clients who can come back to find them, until eventually they move to another place, and so on. Sex workers may "turn over" from brothel to brothel, and sooner or later, to different geographies and types of sex work, or other sectors altogether.⁹⁶ It also seems like

⁹⁶ The exact operation of this during the period of my fieldwork is hard to specify based on the more limited contact I had with brothels. In the ones I visited, first as an outreach worker and then less so as a researcher, women stayed for periods ranging from a few months to a couple of years. Unlike the factories described by Wright, labour conditions and relations could vary from place to place. Workers had different migration statuses, ranging from undocumented to pending asylum application, from short-term tourist visas to residence permits and full citizenship, and seemed to be associated with different kinds of facilitators. These factors also largely affected the terms under which they worked, and how long they stayed.

there is an age limit for sex workers working in such indoor businesses, which was not as narrow elsewhere in the sex industry.

This dynamic is reinforced by the attitudes of both bosses and clients. Besides the practical organization of workplaces, discourses of disposability may be directly taken up by madams and pimps to discipline women to intensive work that generates profits for themselves and other actors (*“if you leave, I can find a dozen others like you”*). Such denigration extends to the consumption of sexual services, as clients defend their own interests in ways that are directly hostile to the workers. For example, consider the following input in a national sex clients’ forum, commenting on a brothel raid that resulted in the removal and preliminary arrest of several women, including two migrant workers presumed to be victims of trafficking in the brothel: *“well done, maybe this way we’ll fuck some fresh blood [in the brothels]”* («καλά κάνανε μπας και γαμήσουμε φρέσκο αίμα») (Bourdela.com Forum 2022). It appears there is a productive relation between disposability, deportability, and high worker turnover in a sexist industry, that links back to the discussion of policing and illegalization I advanced in the previous chapters. The violence that comes with these regimes of labour and migration also plays its role: ranging from threats to rapes and murders, and perpetrated by police, bosses, pimps, clients, and other interested parties, it attempts to instill an understanding that women must be docile, acquiescent workers, and that their lives are worth something only as long as they remain useful to others. As Segato (2013, cf. Areli Veloz 2017b) has argued, this violence operates as a “pedagogy of cruelty”, that addresses a disciplinary message not just to the person who suffers its physical weight, but also to her peers. In such an understanding, violence (sexual or otherwise) is not a separate, cultural or ideological phenomenon, but intrinsically tied to capitalist labour relations, as a condition that helps guarantee women’s continuing exploitation through terror (cf. Arruzza and Bhattacharya 2020: 44).

Taking a more diachronic view of these dynamics, the marker of age in the sex industry presents a particularly complex iteration of the idea that one’s value lies in one’s devaluation. While young women’s sexual labour is generally more sought after, older women face a progressive desexualisation, finding fewer clients and having to

sell their services short. At the same time, the higher value placed on youth often meant that younger sex workers, especially those entering the job, could be subject to much more intensive control than older women who seemed to work more independently. As time went by, I got the tentative impression that forms of mediation more narrowly associated to pimping bore more heavily on younger women, or at least those perceived as going through their most “productive” phase in the sex industry.⁹⁷ As I discuss in the following chapter, there were many kinds of intermediaries active in the sex industry, whose role was enforced through forms of gatekeeping that limited independent access to work, as well as policing and illegalization that made working with “facilitators” a necessary compromise for many workers. However, at least from the little I could see, the intensive discipline and labour control of working with a madam or a pimp, or being in a more closely regulated space like a brothel, applied more specifically to those women whose labour could be harnessed to lucrative ends, at specific periods in their lives (cf. Bernstein 2007: 54). After working intensively for some time, sex workers whose faces had become all too familiar to clients, or who were getting older, and who in the meantime had acquired a certain know-how for the job, would move to other parts of the sex industry, combining different kinds of work or working more independently. By independent work I do not mean that they necessarily kept all their incomes to themselves; as illegalized workers, the streams of value continued to flow in many directions, including fines, bribes to police, fees paid to intermediaries and gatekeepers that the women did not equate to pimps. The latter included figures who profited off other people’s sex work without directly determining the terms and conditions under which it took place: webmasters who made sure online ads stayed at premium first-page spots in multiple websites, other sex workers who required a small cut of the money women made when they went to work in their street corner, etc.

Even police and bosses notwithstanding, as Lilyana, a 69-year-old sex worker emphasized, sex work is “*a job with an expiration date*”. For older sex-working women, besides finding themselves increasingly less desirable or even obsolete, getting older

⁹⁷ For a similar observation in the case of Tlaxcalan pimping networks, see Montiel Torres 2013: 191.

often also means that one's body starts to bear the signs of years of hard work and dangerous labour conditions. A lot has been written about sex work and health risks, with a big emphasis on HIV and sexually transmitted infections. While HIV was a reality in the field, it was neither the only nor always the biggest health problem. Considering the saturation of this literature, and the persisting problematic depictions of sex work as an exceptional harm meriting exceptional public health intervention (see Shah 2014: 26), I find it more fruitful to draw connections to other labour sectors. For, whether in ethnographies of sex work, the cleaning industry, or global assembly plants,⁹⁸ the hardships of a life of rough, devalued work register on people's bodies as chronic pains, persistent illnesses, repetitive stress disorders, and other physical and mental health problems. These are reminiscent of Puar's idea of debilitation as a way of thinking about disability and the body more widely, and connecting it to political circumstances and capitalist organization. In a manner that disrupts the division between normalized, state-sanctioned and criminal exploitation discussed earlier, Puar notes:

“debilitation as a normal consequence of laboring, as an ‘expected impairment’, is not a flattening of disability; rather, this framing exposes the violence of what constitutes ‘a normal consequence’. Such normalised violence constitutes the field of possibilities, the *milieu*, in which certain bodies find themselves located. ‘Certain bodies’ would include not only disabled bodies but proletarian bodies, women's bodies, transgender and queer bodies, and racialised bodies.” (Puar 2017: 186).

5.3.4 Complicating “diminishing returns”: skill, ageing and reproductive labour

We have seen how disposability - as an articulation to the labour market underwritten by ongoing processes of exploitation, turnover and debilitation - figures in workers' movements across different sexual markets and contributes to their shifting valuation there. By now, some important nuances must be added to this picture, by weaving together the discussion of sex work's situatedness within social reproductive labour, and engaging a more careful understanding of skill. For one, it is clear that bosses and clients' discourses of disposability largely rely on self-serving assumptions about prostitution as unskilled labour. Such assumptions should not be taken at face value.

⁹⁸ E.g. see Aguiar and Herod 2006: 2, Wright 2006: 25-6, Hennessy 2013.

Seeing all sex workers as interchangeably providing the same mechanical service erases a lot of the intimate, relational, and very difficult work that goes into prostitution besides “just” the sex. Even if a woman’s body is the only means of production she owns and can put to use for her survival, selling sex takes much more than offering some naturalized bodily faculty for pay – especially when you do it long-term.

Secondly, the realities of ageing in sex work can be far more complex than simple obsolescence, testifying to often gruelling processes of diversification and adjustments in one’s work. Here, the theoretical frameworks offered by theories on “waste” and “surplus” labour, fall short in capturing the reality at hand. Acknowledging how sex workers’ bodies are deeply and progressively devalued as they grow older, is different from seeing them as literal embodiments of “waste”, or as actually asexual. The same workers who described sex work at an older age as torture and humiliation, also pointed out in various ways that their services were still desirable. For example, Lilyana referred to some regular clients who preferred women closer to their own age, according to her because they searched for a more realistic semblance of companionship (cf. Bernstein 2007, for the concept of “bounded authenticity”). Although there is definitely a standard in the sex industry that privileges youth and beauty, it is helpful to remember that if sex work is reproductive labour, then it does not necessarily hold promises of retirement. Women are stuck with it until they die – even if the tasks change over time.

Finally, putting together the insights from maquila production and sex industry research, the idea of women as workers with “diminishing returns” can be complicated from another perspective. In the maquilas, the purpose of high labour turnover is to keep “women electronic assembly workers just long enough to extract the value from their dexterity, attentiveness, and docility before the processes of injury, illness, and anger overcome them” (Wright 2006: 26). When it comes to the sex industry, workers also encounter the pervasive idea that their work becomes less desirable with time. We saw how bosses and gatekeepers operate on that logic, often resulting in stricter forms of control for workers deemed to be in their lucrative, most productive phase. Nevertheless, rather than attributing this only to the need for fresh faces, or ageist

beauty standards in a strict sense, a more fruitful avenue opens up if we understand it in terms of relationships, specifically the relationships that can guarantee the continuity of extreme forms of exploitation. As the ethnographies of Wright (2006) and Hennessy show (2013), the longer workers stay together in one workplace and the longer they bear the brunt of the specific labour conditions on their bodies, the more likely they are also to begin organizing politically and to devise collective or individual tactics of subversion. If forming relationships with other workers and accessing collective knowledge is a first step in developing refusals, then the high mobility often imposed in these sectors must also be understood as an effort to limit such possibilities. Workers who stay long enough in one place to form community may offer “diminishing returns” because they know better than to acquiesce to the same conditions. For example, in his study of pimp networks operating out of Tlaxcala, Mexico, Oscar Montiel Torres observed that pimps made sure not to keep workers in the same place for too long, to avoid them building trusting relationships with other women.⁹⁹ Similarly, in her study of the Greek sex industry during the 1990s, Lazaridis claims that “flexibility, ephemerality and transferability” (being moved to provide services across geographies and workplaces constantly) characterized the labour conditions of sex workers who had migrated through illegal channels that heavily controlled their work (Lazaridis 2001: 84). Clearly, an organization of work that fortifies workers’ isolation has a direct connection to the ways they are devalued. Understanding how these conditions are enforced, seeing that they are made with specific goals, to advance specific myths, in specific social contexts and balances of power, highlights that they are always at risk of being undone. As I show in the final chapter, it is in the contingency of these factors that different spaces open up.

Conclusion: socially useful lies

Talal Asad once defined myth as “a socially useful lie” (2003: 28). The material of this chapter suggests that both labour market integration, and its flipside disposability, can be construed as myths that attempt to define the position of working-class, cis and trans women in labour relations. Going along with these myths means aligning with

⁹⁹ Oscar Montiel Torres, personal communication; cf. Montiel Torres 2013.

several other ideas, the main one being a specific construction of what constitutes real work, and by extension, the meaning of dignity, unemployment, and exploitation. A second idea that becomes almost axiomatic has to do with superfluity and waste. Taken literally, these concepts do a lot of necessary work in obscuring how workers marked as surplus are actually necessary and valuable, but only insofar as they can be treated as disposable.¹⁰⁰ Going against both of these ideas, this chapter has suggested that value-producing labour and working trajectories may look quite different than traditional productivist understandings or metaphors of “waste” and “surplus” let on. When we consider sex work within the larger constellation of women’s work (*la lucha*), and specifically address people’s movements across types of sex work or other sectors, we begin to see how capital continues to extract value from them, even when they no longer find a place in the sex industry itself.

We also saw that being incorporated into the production of capitalist value as “disposable” workers means there is considerable turnover. In Omonia, Sygrou, and other sex industry spots, flux was mixed with a sense of stagnation or periodic return as women fell back to known tactics. Throughout my research, people came and went from the places where I met them, they moved elsewhere, changed jobs, went indoors or moved to the street economy, returned, were arrested, got deported, migrated, retired to live off what little they had managed to save. Some died of accidents, of disease, at the hands of others. When workers disappeared from the places I was used to finding them in, I did not always know what to think of it. Registering the meaning of their absence was not always possible, especially when we had no other contact than these shifting spaces of work and sociality.

This leads to a final issue that must be addressed. Understanding disposability as a myth, or a particularly potent lie, does not mean dismissing its very concrete effects. It should be clear that the metaphor bears on lived reality in painfully material ways. At the extreme end of that we have the instances where working women are treated as literal embodiments of disposable humanity. Whether she is a prostitute or

¹⁰⁰ For a recent discussion and critique of theories that take “waste” and “surplus” as literal descriptions of certain segments of the labour force, cf. Arruzza and Bhattacharya 2020: 63.

a maquiladora worker,¹⁰¹ the murdered working-class woman stands as the ultimate freeze frame of feminine disposability. Once dismissed, now overpublicized in voyeuristic detail and meticulous countdowns, in its apparent stillness this image “obscures the tensions that actually hold it in suspension” (Wright 2006: 72). But for women navigating dangerous territories and constraints, the warning is clear: they better be careful and keep their heads down, because all it takes is one slip-up and they could be next. In the interplay between value and waste, the pervasive violence faced by women at their work and beyond, and the disposability that defines their position as exploitable labourers, are deeply, *materially* related. They are disciplinary mechanisms that extend all the way to death.

¹⁰¹ The mass and gruesome murders of maquiladora workers in the borderlands of Northern Mexico and particularly in Ciudad Juarez since the 1990s are a famous example here, discussed in Segato 2013, Wright 2006, and many more feminist analyses.

Chapter 6. To survive, but not merely: collective organizing and social reproduction¹⁰²

Introduction

Previously, we saw that high labour turnover in the sex industry and beyond plays an important role in the fluctuation between value and waste. One element of its operation is the attempt to keep workers isolated, fragmented from one another and without a sense of place or community. This, however, is neither easy nor definitive. In this final chapter, I focus on the tactics and practices that the sex workers I met have devised to survive and live together, even as they run against hierarchies, divisions, and internal regulatory mechanisms that cut all the way to their daily lives and relationships. Having sex for pay is often portrayed as an affront to hegemonic regimes of morality. This obscures the circulation of value that relies and feeds on precisely such a construction. The underlying idea of this chapter is that perhaps what is provocative is not selling sex in itself, but insisting on doing it and surviving together “in spite of a world... which hates our existence outside of its service” (Lorde 2018: 29). Illuminating aspects of *la lucha* that extend beyond individual struggle, I follow Jafari Allen’s attentiveness to the ways people “build community in the face of terror” (Allen 2011: 132). In the most direct sense, this involves surviving together in and through sex work, and as such can be understood as a form of grassroots labour organizing;¹⁰³ yet, it extends far beyond it. What this chapter comes down to is the

¹⁰² An earlier version of the arguments in this chapter has appeared in my article “Workers, Migrants and Queers: The Political Economy of Community Among Illegal Sex Workers in Athens”, published in the *Anti-Trafficking Review* in September 2022 (see Sampethai 2022).

¹⁰³ During the years of my research, there were a few organizations operating that were closer to formal labour organizing. Due to the liminal legal status of sex work, as well as the diversity of labour conditions that prevails in the industry, none of these groups took the form of labour unions. Most of them were formed as NGOs or interest associations, who also took on the role of advocacy for legal reform, consulting at different state processes, and acting as representatives on matters relating to sexual labour. The first of these, largely inactive during my fieldwork, was called “Greek Union of Prostituted Persons” (Σωματείο Εκδιδόμενων Ελλάδος). Another is Red Umbrella Athens, a non-governmental organization that was founded as a side-project of the Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS “Positive Voice”, and the latest project to emerge is the Network for the Empowerment of Sex Workers (Δίκτυο Ενδυνάμωσης Σεξεργαζομένων). These two operate as a cross between NGOs and community organizations; Red Umbrella has a more established relationship with street-based and brothel workers, whereas the Network is focused more on the needs and labour conditions of people doing online sex work, escorting, porn, etc. Finally, the Transgender Association (ΣΥΔ), though not focused on sex work strictly, is another very active organization working at the intersection of trans and sex worker advocacy and service provision. For the purposes of this chapter, I do not go into this more visible and

social reproduction of working-class, migrant, gender and sexual non-conforming lives that intersect as they are marked as disposable, exploitable to the point of extermination.

Like any social reproductive process for living labour, this one too is fraught with contradictions, tension, and ambivalence. While most workers had a lot to say about the less savory aspects of their community relationships, it was equally clear that the “subversive solidarities [of sex workers and minorities] in public space” (Vijayakumar 2018: 180-1) remain vital. The struggle to inhabit a world of exploitation, fragmentation, and occasionally deep betrayal, and to build one’s life with others there but on better terms, is the last dimension of the women’s struggle as I witnessed and understood it. If what’s at its heart is “*no para sobrevivir, pero prosperar*”¹⁰⁴ (Allen 2011: 2), and I would add, not only to prosper, but to do so with others, the stories I share are marked by catastrophes and victories on that count. I have tried to be neither romantic nor, worse yet, to paint a sociological portrait of a “problematic” community that is damaged by its circumstances and requires intervention. Instead, to suggest that all processes of family-making, relating, and surviving within capitalist value systems are pervaded by losses as much as life-sustaining forms of connection – and the more the pressure people are under, the harder these contradictions can become.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. After a brief analysis of how the notion of “community” has been taken up in research and policy-making relating to the sex industry, I offer concrete examples of how women and their peers worked together to alleviate some of the most pressing realities of criminalization, violence, exploitation and devaluation in their daily lives. Encountering hostile forms of state regulation that alternately claimed to “protect” or punish women like them, my interlocutors relied on grassroots strategies in order to stay afloat in an illegalized, high-turnover industry, work more safely, and negotiate between isolation and predatory forms of protection in their jobs and daily lives. I look at examples ranging

institutional-oriented politics. Even though some interlocutors had ties of different kinds with these organizations, they did not seem to regard them so much as part of their labour organizing in a political sense, but exhibited more pragmatic analyses of their role and their relationships with these groups.

¹⁰⁴ Translates from Spanish as “not only to survive, but to prosper”, and is cited by Jafari Allen in his ethnography (2011) as a driving force for black Cubans’ processes of erotic self-making and community-building.

from mobilizations to help co-workers and friends in detention, sharing know-how and information about dangerous clients, and working in groups, to the formation of chosen families as a practice that bridged sex work concerns and the organization of kinship and social reproductive work among trans working-class women of different generations. Finally, I consider how these practices both traversed and were defined by the cross-cutting differentiations of workers that variously bore the markers of gender non-conformity, racialization, illegality, and migrant-hood, in their experiences of sex work. While the sum of these relationships were marked by a certain understanding that the people involved shared a fate due to their common status as illegalized workers and “gender outlaws” (see Shah 2022:2; Bornstein 1994), they were situated in a wide and moving spectrum that extended from loose networks mobilized in emergencies to intimate and long-term forms of companionship and kinship. Tracing links from the dynamics of brokerage all the way to chosen families, I shed light on an expanse of social practices that were in complex and often conflicting relationships with one another, but seemed to respond to the same core issues of illegalization, invisible work, access to competitive working spaces, and heterogeneous notions of community and kinship.

6.1 Us against the world? The conundrums of community

Debates about the social world of people who sell sex have been heated among policymakers and feminists for at least a century. As an early version of anti-trafficking began to take root in Greece in the interwar years, the by now familiar vexed relationship between class, victimhood, and criminality came to prominence. Continuing to be treated like criminals and vectors of disease, sex-working women began to be seen also as victims of the men in their lives, who exploited them for gain. During the late 1920s, this new state/feminist preoccupation with women’s exploitation under pimps and lovers became a driving force that justified raids of unprecedented scale in working-class Athenian neighbourhoods, where prostitution/trafficking was believed to take place (Fotakis 2016: 52-3). Enforcing this regulatory tool meant gaining access to such areas and documenting the circumstances of their population. The first attempts were unsuccessful, as residents fought back against the police; so much so, that the police chiefs eventually resorted

to enlisting the entire police force. The area that was chosen for this mission was the refugee neighbourhood of Asyrmatos, which was summarily surrounded and put on lockdown. Officers conducted a door-to-door search, and took into custody every man and woman over eighteen. The latter were taken by the handfuls to police stations, where their fingerprints were collected. All women were forcibly subjected to medical examinations for STIs (*ibid.*). Those diagnosed were detained in venereal disease hospitals, where sex workers were put to work for their medical expenses until they were “clean” (Theodorou and Loukos 2020: 44-5). Some men were charged with criminal offences related to drug possession, sex trafficking, illegal commerce, etc., and the others were set free. As such anti-trafficking missions gained traction, women arrested for sex work faced pressure from police and philanthropic feminists to “rehabilitate” themselves, and some were sent off to factories, domestic work, or given over to marriage in the hope that they would walk a straight path under a husband’s supervision.¹⁰⁵

This vignette about the early history of anti-trafficking remains eerily relevant, particularly in raising some of the thorny issues that have plagued different conceptualizations of “community” in relation to sex work, to this day. For example: were the residents’ efforts to fight off the state officials from their neighbourhood simply a case of local exploiters, pimps and crooks defending their territory? Or were the police seen as unwelcome by all the residents alike, who resented such missions as attacks to their ways of relating and surviving? And if the raids were unwelcome to all, had people found other ways to negotiate opposing material interests among themselves? Whatever the answers are, judging by the outcome of police attention in these areas, the establishment of this new regulatory mechanism had little to do with the best interests of “victimized women”. Whether they were abused by local men or not, this assault on their neighbourhood marked their entire relational universe, *themselves included*, as criminal, and the state and upper-class feminists as saviours that maintained the monopoly of their legitimate exploitation. In the process, those

¹⁰⁵ The details of the mission in Asyrmatos, as well as the establishment of unofficial anti-trafficking mechanisms within the police force, are taken from Fotakis’ PhD research on the formation of the City Police in the interwar years (2016).

who actually sold sex were caught between the “rock” of localized exploitation and the “hard place” of state regulation.

Today, these conundrums about the meaning of “community”, its seduction or its perceived pathologies, remain highly politicized and are taken up by competing points of view.

Different hegemonic perspectives that coalesce in an anti-prostitution stance draw from specific understandings of class and criminality to paint a picture of pathological, damaged social worlds in the past and present of sex workers’ lives. Psychologizing narratives have “explained” sex work as a form of self-harm that originates in personal histories of broken, dysfunctional families and abuse (e.g. Nadon, Koverola, & Schludermann 1998; Simons & Whitbeck 1991). Exemplifying how this trope of broken-and-potentially-criminal is weaponized by states and other institutions, the contemporary anti-trafficking apparatus consistently promises - or more accurately, threatens - to “rescue” individual sex workers from others like them. As regulatory methods are elaborated and tested, sex workers’ ways of living and surviving collectively are scrutinized and prosecuted under the label of modern slavery and uniquely “unfree” labour (cf. Kempadoo et al. 2016, Bernstein 2018, O’Connell Davidson 2010, Dziuban and Stevenson 2019: 410). Workers sharing dates or workplaces for safety and companionship are often charged with pimping one another. Traffickers, bosses and other facilitators are invariably portrayed as racialized, working-class figures, usually male, who take it upon themselves to exploit their peers. Across such understandings, sex workers’ social relations are uniformly conceived as *the* location of trafficking, a hotbed of pathology, violence, and rebounding trauma.

On the opposite end of institutional sex work politics, “community” has assumed a positive charge that has come to define a new set of approaches to civil participation, public health, and outreach. “Community mobilization” and the use of peer workers became popularized in associated development and public health contexts during the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Vijayakumar 2018: 174), and more recently in the context of sex work and LGBT politics, where it was implemented primarily through programmes for HIV prevention. In the last couple of decades, appeals to “the community” have increasingly been taken up by policymakers, sex workers’ interest

groups, and third-sector middlemen to lobby for better representation for sex workers, to outline best practice guidelines for public health and outreach, to lend authenticity to specific interventions, and to use situated knowledge to penetrate social spaces that were previously inaccessible to state and NGO actors. While these new paradigms in development and social work may have opened up some useful new tools for the groups they concern, various researchers have pointed out troubling new forms of “government through community” (Li 2007), the erasure of capitalist divisions under tokenistic conceptions of social relations, and the buzzword-like quality of the term “community” itself (cf. Vijayakumar 2018: 175).

Finally, anthropological research on social movements and sex work politics has focused on the relationships and strategies that sex workers develop to survive criminalization, violence, and stigma. Usually taking a decisive stance against the pathologizing logics of mainstream anti-trafficking and its rescue missions, this research also goes beyond the focus on institutional sex work/NGO politics to emphasize the more grassroots and informal side of sex worker organizing. Inspired by the renewed anthropological and activist preoccupation with care and interdependency that became particularly pronounced in the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic (for an overview see Dillabough-Lefebvre 2023), researchers have looked keenly upon the practices that allow sex workers to survive together in hostile contexts of state repression and/or invisibility. Some have gone as far as to suggest a radical, liberatory potential in these community strategies; for example, in the context of Brazil, Moraes et al. have claimed that “the autonomous care structures created by street sex workers should not only be recognized and appreciated, but they also provide us a valuable example of what transformative, self-organized mutual aid looks like” (Moraes et. al 2020: 642).

While this research looks at concrete issues of survival and collectivity in articulation with capitalist social structures on different scales, and has resulted in several critical accounts of workers’ organizing amidst criminalization (e.g. Moraes et. al 2020, Dziuban et al. 2021), the emphasis on care comes with certain analytical problems. Indeed, some recent research has tended to reproduce the idea of an anti-capitalist outside where communities engage in mutual aid and where matters of

political economy, exploitation, and value are understood only as external pressures. While the new analyses of care are in dialogue with older feminist perspectives on social reproduction, Marxist-feminists understood the latter as an inherently contradictory process that weaved capitalist coercion with human sociability. As Mezzadri has noted, “social reproduction and care are not synonyms” (2019: 37), since the former is a broader term that “encapsulates both the reproduction of life and of capitalist relations *at once*; that is, of both labourers and labour power” (*ibid.*). In the elision from “social reproduction” to the rarely problematized concept of “care”, the latter tends to be advanced as a positive, if not radical, force against capitalism, a vision of romantic togetherness, and a value in itself (e.g. Chatzidakis et al. 2020).

Of course, research conducted before and after this trend, has explored the dynamics of collective survival in more nuanced ways; for example, Güler’s work (2020) with trans sex workers in Istanbul, and Zheng’s research with hostesses in China (2008), emphasize the life-sustaining importance of informal organizing, as well as the challenges that living in dispossession and marginality poses to the maintenance of community bonds among people who see themselves as sharing “a common fate” (Güler 2020: 160). In these accounts, policing, competition, stigma, increased mobility and worker turnover, and the internal organization of sex industry establishments are offered as concrete conditions that render certain social relationships precarious and volatile or allow others to flourish. Different forms of social organization in neighbourhoods, brothels, street corners, etc. make for different kinds of strategies and relationships, highlighting how disposability and exploitation are imposed by bosses, state actors, etc., simultaneously to addressing the ways workers develop to counter them as best they can.

In my field, all of these perspectives were visible in some way or another – policing and anti-trafficking missions conveniently elided between treating sex workers as victims and criminals, “community participation” defined the claims-making of trans and sex worker organizations, and workers went about organizing informally, forming temporary and long-lasting relationships, managing support and competition at work and beyond, as well as dealing with exploitation and violence from outsiders and from their peers. While generic appeals to “community” surfaced

in the context of NGO work, sex-working women pointed to ways of surviving together and recognizing each other that were more dynamic and context-specific, inextricable from the material realities of class, illegalization, and, for lack of a better word, queerness.¹⁰⁶ My interlocutors used a host of spatial and practice-oriented terms to describe their shared stakes and experiences, 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. Rather than painting a smooth picture of untroubled collectivity, they spoke about the exploitation and betrayal that also lined their intimate social worlds. It is to their perspectives I now turn to.

6.2 “*We were like a clenched fist*”: informal labour organizing

We have parked the car next to a slope that resembles more a path than an actual road, and we are making our way in the heat wave. We search intuitively, because there is no phone service and we can’t even look for our destination on the map. “*What is this place that they brought her to...?*” we ask one another. We pass some houses that look like they belong in a village, and reach a road on the top of the hill. It is full of heavily secured gates and expensive cars. It is the early afternoon and there is not a soul in sight. Every once in a while, I see a big Greek flag and I think we have finally found the police station, but it turns out it is just the personal flag of a villa. We start to go down the hill, and finally come across an old woman with some children who points us to the right direction. The scarce interactions we have with people are strange. They must be wondering what two women in their twenties are searching for on foot at this hour. We finally arrive at the police station, which is by the coast and surrounded by oleanders. It is a cross between a rural military camp and a hotel in a declining tourist resort. A few minutes later, Beatriz also arrives with a “friend”/client that she has convinced to drive her all the way to this seaside suburb. He is on edge and impatient to get on with the beach day Beatriz has promised him. Taking in the sight of all of us, the policemen on shift seem unsure about how to deal with the

¹⁰⁶ While none of the women I worked with would use the word queer to describe herself, I use it here as a shorthand for the aforementioned intersections between non-normative genders, sexualities, and labours. For a similar reasoning, cf. Stout 2014: 25–26. For an expanded notion of queerness that also resonates here, see also Cohen 1997.

sudden arrival of the strange assemblage of people that have come to visit their new detainee. (Field notes excerpt, 2020).

One Saturday night after the first covid-19 lockdown was lifted, Beatriz went out with her friend Yvelisse and a guy she knew who had a car, to celebrate her upcoming civil union and eventual regularization in the country. It is unclear whether it was the guy's driving, or whether the policemen they encountered thought that the presence of two black trans women in a car constituted a legitimate reason for a stop-and-search. Either way, the night out that began so triumphantly ended up with Yvelisse in a cell in a police station in the middle of nowhere, indefinitely awaiting deportation as she had no papers.

Yvelisse was another trans woman who had recently migrated from Cuba to Greece. In the few months she had spent in the country, Yvelisse had briefly lived and worked in Thessaloniki, and had subsequently come to Athens, where she worked on a trans stroll with "*some pimp*" (as Beatriz put it) who provided her with a room to work from in exchange for a probably disproportionate fee. By the time I met her, she had abandoned this working arrangement and had temporarily moved into Beatriz's flat, where she set up her independent work through sex ads. Before she had the chance to search for a flat of her own and apply for asylum (the Asylum Service remained closed for the largest part of this period due to the pandemic), she ended up imprisoned and alone, in a police station that did not know what to do with her and with whose officers she could not communicate as she did not speak Greek.

Although our relationship essentially began through and due to her detention, Yvelisse and I had already met. A month or so before they got stopped by the police, Beatriz had brought her to my apartment on a day when I was supposed to help her perfect the Greek translation of a new online ad she had set up. It was typical of Beatriz to call me with requests to help her friends, or occasionally to bring them along to things we did that could be useful for them too. If I was an asset to her on account of my ability to translate between Spanish and Greek, and to accompany and help her sort through different procedures, Beatriz shared her advantage with other migrant women and men she knew, mobilizing her comparatively larger network of allies and friends to help out with smaller or bigger crises.

True to form, upon Yvelisse's arrest, Beatriz set about calling everyone she could think of, including myself, the Transgender Association, her well-connected boss at the club where she worked, acquaintances that were active in LGBT-related NGOs, and so on. As none of us had a car at the time, and we had to visit Yvelisse in the remote police station where she was being kept to bring her necessities including food, medication, and clothing, both Beatriz and I looked for people who could drive us all the way there, including clients, boyfriends, friends of friends, and other unlikely candidates. An old friend of mine who worked as an immigration lawyer agreed to handle Yvelisse's case for free, and within three weeks of visits, WhatsApp calls and voice messages with her from her cell, we managed to get her released on the guarantee she would not flee and that she would submit an official asylum application.

The immediate mobilization of this diverse network in the face of a crisis may ring familiar to anyone who is close to sex worker, trans, and migrant groups. People who find their presence in public space under police scrutiny, and who deal with overlapping forms of illegalization due to their work, race, gender expression, and migration status, usually devise ways to collectively support one another in cases of emergency. The way Teresa put it about the trans stroll of Sygrou Avenue:

"If one of us was detained by the cops, we gathered clothing and basic necessities and took them to her in the police station. If something happened with passers-by or clients, we were all like a clenched fist, even if normally we weren't on speaking terms, one would defend the other. There is a solidarity in cases of emergency. The same goes for all the attacks we face in Sygrou, people shooting us with paintball guns or throwing yogurt and eggs at us. For dangerous clients, word gets around, he looks like that and has this or that car".

According to Mary, whose experience was mostly in indoor sex work, some of these practices included bosses and other sex industry actors besides the sex workers themselves: *"In the brothels, we had telephone numbers for all the 'houses', the service employees had worked in other brothels so they knew sex workers and bosses, so we got our information, if the Vice Squad was out patrolling, or if anyone dangerous was going around"*.

Overall, these networks included a wide array of practices that helped people navigate lives of sex work and gender non-conformity, and mitigated the troubles of illegality and income instability. Women exchanged information and resources about clients, policing, and ways of working; they facilitated each other's gender transitions by offering tips about daily routines and referrals to doctors; they lent each other money, shared their homes, and passed around HIV medication to peers who did not have access to health services.

Although probably unrecognizable through the lens of traditional unionizing, and while certain interlocutors were also involved in institutional sex worker and trans advocacy politics, some of these forms of collective action do constitute an informal yet established form of labour organizing that was in operation across different strolls. As I show later, for trans sex workers in particular, these practices carried even more weight as they extended beyond work, sustaining women both as trans subjects and as workers dealing in an illegalized sexual economy. As the contributors of *Transgender Marxism* have suggested, class struggle does not look the same everywhere, but takes different forms depending on the work itself and the organization of workplaces. Combining insights about trans lives and sex work, they show that

“For the trans people excluded from employment – mostly poor trans women of colour – collective action is in sex worker organising, in the highly organised systems of mutual aid in the ball scenes, and in the dense social networks through which people survive and support each other.” (O’Brien 2021: 58-9)

At the same time, “the clenched fist” that came together in times of emergency and against common enemies, was neither homogeneous nor free of tensions. From the stroll rivalries that Teresa mentions to the participation of brothel bosses and service workers in at least some level of information-sharing in these networks, it is clear that workers negotiated different alliances and degrees of shared stakes in their work, and their interests could be at odds depending on the context. Even amongst themselves, there were times when the strain of gossip, competition, and interpersonal aggression undermined workers’ trust in one another, operating as a kind of internal mechanism of social control that worked in tandem to the regulatory

practices of the state (Plambech et al. 2022: 150-1). Although they continued to invest in these forms of community and even survive through them, many women expressed a sharp disillusionment and hurt on different occasions. *“The trans world can be very complicated”*, Beatriz commented sadly after a temporary falling-out with her crew of Brazilian and Cuban women.

6.3 Saving one another

In 1995, a series of violent crimes terrified sex workers all over Athens. Antonis Daglis, a 22-year old local man posing as a client isolated and murdered three sex workers and attempted to kill more. He was caught in 1996 and confessed.

During that time, Teresa was new on the job. She worked in Sygrou Avenue, one of the main trans strolls in Athens, and one night she took a client who attacked her after having sex, trying to kill her. She managed to escape with only her keys in her hand, got in a taxi without any money, and fortunately, seeing how scared she was, the driver took her home without charging her. After that shock, she needed time off the stroll and went to work at her boyfriend’s bar in another city. A few months later, while she was bartending, she saw her attacker on television. It was Antonis Daglis, who had just been arrested for two known murders of sex workers. Teresa felt total panic.

Sometime later, she broke up with her boyfriend and had to return to Athens. With no other viable job in sight, she had no choice but to go back to sex work. Naturally, the prospect of taking a client alone terrified her. Some of her trans sex worker friends were still working on the stroll – the “sisters” with whom she started out on the job, learning from the same “mother”. *“It’s kind of our own version of family, you see”*, she told me, and went on to describe how they took care of her during those first months of her return. *“They took turns with clients so that I would never be alone on the street, and they were always attentive to arrange threesomes or group sex with me so that I could work without being alone”*. They did this for months on end, until they saw she could handle herself and had learned to “read” clients better: *“then, they told me the educational seminar is over, time to go out on my own now”*.

Looking back, Teresa said she had complete ignorance of the risks involved in sex work at the beginning. It was only upon her return to the job, and with the help of her colleagues, that she developed what most sex workers in my field alluded to in one way or another, the skill of “reading” and filtering clients and sensing which ones were dangerous. Street-based interlocutors from different strolls similarly described learning to navigate various kinds of risks by talking and working with other women. Learning from other workers occurred through conversations in the stroll cafes, where sex workers took breaks or waited for clients – *“we have all the time in the world to talk, all we do is talk”*, Eleni told me. But it also took place in practice, as workers exchanged clients along with information, or arranged group sex dates to include their friends and, in that way, work more securely and provide income opportunities for each other.

Teresa’s tale is one of many stories that make the stakes of trading sex in isolation painfully clear; it also shows that these practices of informal labour organizing are literally of life-and-death importance in a context where workers are constantly invited to ponder their own disposability. Based on her research with street-based sex workers in San Francisco, Bernstein paints a similar picture, suggesting that the collaborative systems developed by women who worked side by side on the street constituted “a more effective means of providing protection for one another than that offered by pimps, especially since their men were often elsewhere anyway, returning only sporadically to ‘empty the traps’” (2007: 56).

From attempted murder and rape to slower processes of debilitation, illegalized sex workers found their bodies exposed to a vast continuum of violence and hyper-exploitation that they tried to navigate together. For example, Eleni, a local cis woman who started selling sex as a divorced mother barely scraping by at a minimum-wage job, described similarly vital processes of community-building in Omonia. In her first year at work, she was blackmailed into repeatedly providing free sex to a man who claimed he was a policeman. She was so scared of getting caught that it took her a while to realize he was not a real cop and get rid of him: *“It wasn’t until I started going to the cafes here and talking with other women, and finally told them what was happening, that I understood he was lying”*.

Without claiming that the women could completely contain or overcome these threats through their informal organizing, they did create a store of embodied knowledge and practices in response to them. Sometimes, this knowledge was starkly at odds with the NGO perspectives that read sex workers as “at-risk” populations that had to be empowered about their work and educated about their health, particularly in relation to HIV. As Jolly has noted (2019) dominant frameworks on HIV/AIDS prevention and care position sex workers, trans women, and racialized groups as medical objects, whilst signifying their habits and relationships as problems. In my experience, the patronizing, sometimes sentimental narrations of NGO service providers about having been “*the one to deliver the news of her HIV diagnosis*” clashed with the perspectives of many sex workers who had already known they were HIV-positive, and relied on existing relationships of support with peers who had amassed considerable knowledge on how to live with the virus. Among migrant sex workers who were undocumented or avoided contact with healthcare authorities, medication exchanged hands along with information about what to do and where to go if one wanted to get tested or see a doctor for checkups, prescriptions and official paperwork. In the process, they crafted strategies that mediated between the biomedical frameworks of health services and the collective knowledge produced from within the circumstances and demands of their daily lives – to survive but not merely (cf. Jolly 2019: 123)

But if there was a time when the confluences of top-down public health management and disposability became particularly stark, it was during the pandemic. As state policy towards informal workers offered renewed tools for familiar forms of labour discipline (Dziuban et al. 2021), various scholars debated the meaning of necropolitics (Santos et al. 2021, De Genova 2022) for sex work regulation, in times of exception as well as in the business-as-usual operation of the capitalist state. Besides the decision to kill or let die, these processes rest just as much on slower forms of exploitation and precarization that may reach the point of extermination. In Greece, the introduction of measures against covid-19 involved the “re-bordering” (De Genova 2022: 12) of both international mobility and people’s movements within national territories. Restrictions on mobility were accompanied by financial penalties and a

proliferation of checkpoints that subjected illegalized workers to intensified policing and confinement, even as they had no choice but to continue making a living under worsening conditions. In Athens, sex workers faced lockdowns and measures that shut their workplaces, criminalized their and their clients' presence in public space, and left them isolated and 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 that process.

For my part, I observed interlocutors whose ways of working had become obsolete either go into huge debt to landlords, utility companies, friends, and informal creditors, 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 network 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.

However imperfect they may be, the wealth of these practices situates sex-working women as actors who try to craft their own strategies and codes of conduct with their peers. In doing so, they are constantly coming up against entrenched legal and biomedical frameworks that seek to objectify them as sources of contagion, as pathological, criminal and victimized. Worlds apart from the interventions usually described as "rescue", such small but fierce acts of support can only occur within communities of shared understandings and material conditions. As the stakes of

queerness, criminalization, work, and violence intersect, these ways 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'" (Allen 2011: 30).

6.4 Chosen families and entering "the life"

Addressing the subversive potential of affection and companionship among queer men, Foucault once wrote: "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 one another—there's the problem" (Foucault 1994: 136). 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" (Weston 1997: 18). Ever since, kinship has been a recurring theme in LGBT and sex work studies. Using's Teresa's story of trans sisterhood as a point of departure, this section explores the dynamics of family-making in the stroll and beyond. It takes the arguments of Foucault and subsequent queer ethnographers further, to show how intimate relationships among working-class people of non-conforming genders and sexualities offer ways of surviving across regimes of disposability and illegalization. Engaging with anthropological debates on debt, interdependency, and social reproduction, I highlight the contradictory nature of family-making and relatedness by centering the discussion on labour.

In her landmark study on chosen families, Weston refers to queer kinship as the product of cooperative histories of collective survival (1997: 115). 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 Omonia 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" (Ferguson 2017: 254). This process is facilitated through men's incorporation into kinship

networks, wherein parents/mentors introduce newcomers to gay life and sex work (Ferguson 2017: 257-9). Other studies, situated more squarely in the realm of the sex industry, have shown how familial discourses among sex workers and their pimps construct belonging while providing a moral and affective framework for exploitation (Weinkauff 2010). 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” (Plambech 2014: 194-5; cf. Testai 2008). In all these scenarios, the boundaries between facilitation and community, debt and obligation, are blurred, and navigating common realities as illegalized migrants, workers and sexual minorities, do not necessarily correspond to easy distinctions between support 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 criminalization, 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 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 this 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 specific stakes of aging outside normative labour and family arrangements. For one, state provisions for care are sparse in Greece, and care labour for the elderly and children is usually carried out by kin networks or private domestic workers, who usually themselves constitute a devalued migrant workforce (cf. Lyberaki 2011). Furthermore, Yiannakopoulos has described what aging has meant for older generations of gay and trans people who survived multiple forms of criminalization: “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” (2022: n.p.). 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.

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 (cf. Mai 2018: 171), 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 of us enter into a lot of debt to work in their flats, like, you know 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.”

Such examples are not uncommon. Christina, a trans woman from the Greek provinces who was our mutual acquaintance, 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 in Sygrou Avenue. These rooms offer a workspace close to the stroll, condoms, clean sheets, etc., but the rents workers have to pay are highly overpriced. This is because real estate is 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 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, who also identify varying degrees of agency in migrants' decisions to take on or exit relations of debt bondage (Ibid., O' Connel Davidson 2013, Testai 2008; Andrijasevic 2010). More recently, researchers working on supply chains have examined similar patterns of exploitation and control in industrial settings. For example, Andrijasevic (2021) has highlighted the ways time debt and employer-controlled housing produce unfree labour relations across industrial and informal sectors. While addressing the sexualized and gendered dimensions of migrant exploitation, expanding the scope to other labour sectors helps debunk the idea that sex work constitutes a unique form of violence or coercion, pointing instead to larger processes of capitalist appropriation of productive and reproductive realms.

In my field, these kinds of agreements represent the more profit-oriented side of a continuum of mediation involved in entering the specific stroll, which is very competitive. The more someone can rely on her kin and friends, the less dependent she is on such forms of brokerage and indebtedness. Yet, the distinctions are not entirely clear-cut. Consider the following dialogue between two interlocutors:

- Natalia was my mom, and I had two sisters. We were a family, we have lived together in shared flats, one helped the other...

- That helps on the job, you know, for people to know that you didn't just come out from nowhere, and that you have 2-3 people with you who got your back. In the brothels, it's much more impersonal, you have the service people but that relationship is an economic exchange, they're like employees, they don't care how you are doing or feeling. Usually they are people the boss trusts.

- If a girl goes out in Sygrou 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 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.

- 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 in Spain and Germany it’s the same. It’s probably a matter of need since many of us don’t have families.

The international literature (Güler 2020, Fraser et al. 2023) would confirm the two women’s statements. Among other things, this dialogue illustrates that trans interlocutors are aware of and position themselves as part of a wider history of trans/sex worker social reproduction that comes with its own forms of family-making. Furthermore, the ways relationships based on care work and obligation exist alongside relations of brokerage in my field, connects the discussions on debt, precarity, productive and reproductive labour. While trans women selling sex in public space grapple with specific needs and circumstances that are not ubiquitous to all forms of family-making or work, the tentative parallels drawn between communal obligations and debt relations in the stroll open up a host of questions that are relevant far beyond the sex industry. I am thinking here of two seemingly different theoretical analyses that can be brought into dialogue: Graeber’s work on debt and Butler’s writing on interdependency. Where the former uses an exhaustive 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,” (Graeber 2011: 18) the latter’s early work looks at community as pervaded by dependency and vulnerability, “our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another” (Butler 2002: 5). The value in

exposing debt as a social relation that is contestable and dynamic, rather than a neutral, technocratic, albeit thoroughly moralized fact, is undeniable. Indeed, we saw that the disciplinary force of debt is not always all-encompassing, and depending on what other options they had, sex workers sometimes abandoned working arrangements that they found too coercive. Nevertheless, unlike Graeber would suggest, it seems that the ability to leave one's debt unpaid is more a material than a moral issue: people need to have somewhere to go, ways to get work, a community to fall back on where the checks and balances of obligation are more humane. At the same time, this core dependency that Graeber and Butler both allude to is not abstract either. As with "community", generic notions of collective mutual responsibility gloss 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 dehumanizing, what is less explicit in these analyses but was 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.

6.4.1 A note on biological families

Besides the families they formed on the stroll and through their participation in trans life, many interlocutors sustained some level of involvement with their biological families, where they also had to negotiate a difficult balance between support and exploitation. 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 formed a nuclear family of their own meant that they disproportionally took on the gendered work of caring for elderly relatives, babysitting siblings' children, and generally being "the 'extra' caregiver" in their families (Doyle Griffiths 2021: 134). Their trans-ness and/or sex work was often used against them, and many interlocutors recounted painful stories of rejection and exploitation by family members who seemed to regard their place in the family as provisional. For some migrant workers, remittances sent home had become a way to

tentatively restore connections to parents and other family members with whom relationships had been previously rocky (cf. Piscitelli 2019: 289); others preferred to cut ties completely, resenting the sudden demands of relatives who had treated them with nothing but contempt. Certain interlocutors like Teresa and Yvelisse maintained close relationships with some family members that remained stable and valued presences in their lives. Others saw that their place in their families was contingent on a flow of resources and labour, which made their gender non-conformity or their participation in sexual economies tolerable, or even desirable (see Piscitelli 2019: 290) as long as it was not explicit. The ways the management of trans and sex worker stigma, and the labour of those who bear it sustain families are starkly visible in the words of Carmen, a Mexican trans red-light district and maquiladora worker cited in Hennessy's research:

“My mother said, ‘I prefer to see you dead rather than a homosexual,’ and my brother said, ‘If I see you dressed like a woman, I will kill you.’ But in the *zona roja* this is what I wore. I never asked for a taco from them. I was the one who was giving to them. When my twin sister was in the hospital, I went and she said, ‘What you are doing here in the hospital if you are a *pinche joto*? I am ashamed. You are a piece of shit.’ And I said, ‘I was the one who was paying the bills.’ And then she cried and cried and said, ‘I didn’t know.’ I told them I was in the red zone working as a prostitute and all of them were able to eat from my fucking in the Papagayo and the Siete Negro” (Hennessy 2013: 143).

These connections support the findings of other scholars, who have also written about how groups conventionally seen as antithetical or external to the institution of the nuclear heteronormative family actually carry out a lot of the work that sustains it. For example, based on research with hijras in rural India (2023), Saria shows how by providing care, financial support, and guidance to natal families and lovers, hijras are situated neither inside nor outside of the normative structures of marriage, property, and gender, but rather, exist “diagonally” to them. Drawing from Saria’s work and her own ethnography on trans politics and labour in Kerala, Parthan argues that frameworks about the “feminization” of labour must take account of the broader processes that enable “more and more extractive labour regimes by exercising

the procreative logic of the family upon a range of gendered subjects” (Parthan forthcoming, n.p.).

6.5 Workers, migrants, and queers

6.5.1 Finding common ground

As interlocutors encountered one another in the spaces where they hustled and dealt with the strain of illegalization and devaluation, shared tactics and agendas emerged. Their common participation in these spaces and in sex work became the ground to form relationships that often traversed the boundaries of queerness, age, migration status or ethnicity. These testify to the potential connections wrought from what Mezzadra and Neilson call “the multiplication of labour” (2013: 7), 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. In response, 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 women a fresh way to market themselves. New workers were often more sought-after but less experienced: by working together, newcomers could learn more safely, while mature workers did not lose clients as much and did not have to position themselves so competitively towards new women.

Mary, a local trans woman from the south of Athens, switched to this mode of intergenerational collaboration as her main way of working when she saw that her ad was getting less and less attention. In her early fifties, 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 the tools of the trade, 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”.

Workers acutely felt the ways in which their age, race, gender identity, and other markers contributed to their services accruing or losing value over time. Particularly at the peak of the sex industry in the 1990s, as facilitated by the mass immigration to Greece following the collapse of the Soviet Union, processes of hierarchization according to body type but also race, ethnicity, and religion were elaborated according to differentiated notions of whiteness and “civility”.¹⁰⁷ These became so common-sensical and acceptable that pop culture magazines published guides to the sex industry complete with charts that ranked sex worker populations based on their nationality (see Lazaridis 2001: 85-86, Nitro 1998). By the time I conducted my research, if age was one qualifier, race and racialized nationality definitely remained another that posited depressingly predictable, if sometimes seemingly contradictory, hierarchies of value and desire that workers actively grappled with. For example, Mary’s migrant sex work partners were overwhelmingly men of colour. Referring to her first partner, a young African man with whom she collaborated and eventually got romantically involved, until he raised enough money to go abroad for studies, she highlighted the “exotic” appeal they had as an interracial duo. Resonating with comments that Beatriz frequently made about her own collaboration with other black or Latina women, and how she integrated the exotic fantasies of white Greeks in her marketing, this provides another indication on the operation of racism and value across different labour sectors. In a country where minorities and migrants are constantly rendered as devalued labour by the interconnected processes of racialization, class domination, and illegalization, sex workers of colour seemed highly

¹⁰⁷ For example, while during the 1990s Russian and Ukrainian women were placed at the top of the pyramid, on account of being “tall and blonde” and “having class”, followed by other Eastern Europeans, Albanians occupied a separate, less desirable form of whiteness and found themselves at the bottom alongside African and Latin American migrants (see Lazaridis 2001: 85).

aware of how the same racist attitudes could sometimes be used towards more lucrative ends in the sex industry (and often, so did their bosses).

From fantasies of racialized hyper-masculinity to currencies of tropical sensuality, scholars have shown that sex industries trade in “a political economy of globalized black sexualities” (Allen 2011: 161). Referring to Cuba and its diaspora, Allen pinpoints how the “smiling, dancing, fucking, and working bodies” of Black Cubans generate value in sexualized markets through such reified performances, at home¹⁰⁸ and overseas (2011: 160). Similarly, Mascarenhas Neta’s research notes the processes of *sexoticization* lining trans women’s artistic trajectories from Brazil to Germany from the 1960s to the present. Mascarenhas Neta traces how certain trans artists of colour managed to migrate to Europe and craft a provisional place for themselves there, by engaging with colonial fantasies of the *mulata* and feeding what they recognized as the audiences’ “hunger for brown bodies” (see Mascarenhas Neta 2023, and Mascarenhas Neta 2024). In the Greek context, workers who operated under heavy constraints and the daily weight of racism, also played their hand in response to clients’ interpellations, and tried to find a niche to market themselves on more economically favourable terms within existing hierarchies. These efforts crystallized in individual strategies, as well as in the collaborations that workers with different positionalities established with one another.

Linking back to Teresa’s aforementioned story of sisterhood, sharing dates for group sex emerges as a common strategy that includes various combinations of cis, trans, migrant and local, experienced and inexperienced men and women. Such collaborations can be understood as a tactic for working more safely and getting know-how, a response to clients’ exotic fantasies and interpellations, and a pragmatic way of upgrading one’s profile in a sexist, racist, and ageist market that constantly requires fresh faces and scenarios. 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

¹⁰⁸ For a more detailed analysis of these dynamics in the sex tourist market of the island, see Allen 2011: 170-2.

escape the exploitation they face in the ‘straight jobs’ available to them” (Mai 2018: 3-4). 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” (Shah 2014: 153).

6.5.2 Fragmentations

While the cascading differentiations imposed on workers through regulatory mechanisms of gender, mobility, race and labour created grounds for alliances and connections, these relationships were neither always harmonious nor stable. Solidarities were forged and ruptured. In the very first interview I conducted for my fieldwork, I asked Eleni about more recognizable forms of labour organizing in Omonia. She stated that it was “*not just difficult, but impossible*” to establish any kind of collective agreement on the stroll about working conditions, prices for services, and so on. She pointed out that workers’ needs and circumstances were highly differentiated;

“if you are homeless and need to get money for a hotel room for the night, if you are in withdrawal from drugs, paying off a debt, an immigrant who just arrived and wants to send money to her family, or if you work with a pimp... you are under a lot of strain. How can you promise that you will not compromise at the end of the day? And it’s understandable that you might”.

After fifteen years of working in Omonia, and having reached her sixties, Eleni posited that the advent of “the economic crisis” and the saturation of the industry with workers facing rising economic pressures have had an impact.

“Back when I started, we had good relationships, the other women helped me learn, we talked to one another... I always had good relationships [with other sex workers] as I still do. Back then we shared the work more, there was a lot of demand, and we were fewer women, most of us Greeks. Nowadays, if a new girl arrives everyone looks for ways to get rid of her –unless they realize she has a pimp who will beat them up so they leave her alone”.

Overall, interlocutors agreed that solitary newcomers often had to rely on brokers to work without harassment (cf. Bernstein 2007: 54). Although current conditions have clearly had an effect, Eleni’s depiction of a communal past of better

relations, fewer workers, and abundant work, may exhibit some idealized nostalgia, and my material across groups and workplaces suggests that mutual support, competition and exploitation 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. Unlike Eleni, she did not own property and paid monthly rent for a small flat near Omonia.

The ways the two women experienced aging and weighed their retirement options are once again indicative of the connections and differentiations among workers with different statuses. It was much more common for Greek sex workers, particularly the ones who were from Athens and had maintained relations with their natal families, to own some property they could rely on as work got sparser with time. For example, after some years of working in Omonia, Eleni had bought her own apartment; as for Teresa, besides the small flat she rented for work in Sygrou, she had her mother's house to fall back on. Mary did not own property, but was able to cover her rent with the meagre Social Solidarity Income she received from the state. Meanwhile, migrant women with status ranging from undocumented to provisional to regularized did not have access to the same options. As a result, Lilyana was trying to find a stable job in a brothel as service staff, 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 and kept each other company 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.

Both Eleni's allusion to the past collaborative practices among "Greek workers", as well as my own observation of Caribbean and Latina networks mobilized to provide support, sociability, medicine, and work opportunities amidst a shared linguistic and cultural framework in the diaspora, suggest that informal mutual aid practices could

and did follow lines of ethnic, racial, and cultural belonging. This meant that at times they also reproduced the fault lines of separation that structured the sex industry and wider labour force, wherein people found themselves variously illegalized, segregated, and devalued. “*We Cubans have to stick together*”, a trans co-worker reproached Beatriz after her Middle Eastern friend roughed up an ex-boyfriend of hers that was part of her neighbourhood’s small Cuban community. Unfortunately, this sense of essential, shared *Cubanidad* had hardly stopped Beatriz’s ex from harassing her, waiting for her outside her apartment and threatening to assault her. The conflict that ensued highlighted that it was not always easy to pin down what it means to share “a common fate”. Nevertheless, Eleni’s own example, and this entire chapter, suggests that when it came down to the particulars, relationships were built on a host of other concrete commonalities while actively negotiating the extent of these forms of belonging.

In the end, Eleni, Beatriz, Teresa, Mary, Dolores, Yvelisse and my other interlocutors built their social worlds with other migrant, local, working-class, and “queer” figures that frequented their neighbourhoods and hangouts, worked in similar sectors, and found themselves summoned in state services or held in prisons at the same time as they did. These practices of community-building occasionally incorporated the odd person like myself and other locals who were outside of the sex work circuit but found ourselves close to the women, becoming an awkward part of their lives and negotiating our own differences and connections over the years.

Conclusion

In none of the accounts presented is togetherness simple or straightforward. Instead, notions of affinity are dynamic and rest on ongoing relationships of mutual obligation and support that take work and are a site of struggle in themselves. Solidarities are formed across differentiations 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 illegalization in the sex industry and beyond.

Clearly, the mix of materiality and affinity, mutuality and economics that I have outlined throughout the chapter is not unique to the sex industry or to chosen families. 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 under capitalism, showing that “care” is value-producing labour that is overwhelmingly carried out by women (Goddard 1996, Dalla Costa and James 1975). At the same time, researchers have shown how obligations based on expanded idioms of kinship form a crucial survival strategy in contexts of state-organized devaluation, racism, and impoverishment. Stack’s pioneering 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 (Stack 1974), powerfully illustrates how affinity is a matter that weaves together emotional and material survival. 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. Rather than cherry-picking a “positive” or “negative” depiction of these relationships, I have tried to let the ambivalence, the pain, and the moving instances of connection speak together, as they undoubtedly will and do in everyday life.

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 by the institutions that produce their very oppression. At the same time, to say that sex workers built “community in the face of terror” does not mean that they did away with the brutality, the exploitation, the shame and the loss that was inflicted on them. The women I met inhabited a world marked by violence and resentment for any form of alliance that did not serve its interests. There were times when their efforts were not enough, and the terror became overpowering. All that was left to do then was to grieve the companions and friends they had lost, or to dismiss catastrophes that exploded in

most threatening proximity as something that others had coming, that would not happen to them.

When I try to wrap my head around the fragility and the persistence of these relationships between women and those they considered as “their own”, to understand how they built their social worlds, I remember a conversation I had with Teresa during the second covid-19 lockdown. It was a bleak time, during which we checked in on each other frequently and tried to keep each other company. A talented gardener, she had come to my apartment with some plants she had grown in her mother’s yard. As we planted them together, we chatted. In expectation of a private insurance payoff that never ended up materializing, Teresa sketched out her dream for the near future: she would use the money to get an apartment together with Nelly, her trans sister from her early sex work days. Both of them had reached their fifties and lived alone on opposite ends of the city. Now that they rarely solicited in Sygrou, they saw each other less and were growing isolated. Reminiscing about their youthful cohabitation under their trans mother, Teresa projected a more peaceful companionship-in-retirement now. With their shared household as a base, she would visit her (biological) mother in her childhood neighbourhood in southern Athens, she would babysit and spoil her nephews, and she would spend time with her on-and-off boyfriend of 15 years. Amidst the imposed isolation of the pandemic restrictions, as well as the changing circumstances in her life and work, there was a tenderness in this prospect that genuinely seemed to make Teresa happy.

Whereas some scholars have lamented the transient, precarious nature of sex workers’ relationships and support structures (cf. Zheng 2008), Teresa’s daydream belies a long-term vision of survival and relatedness, that links class and sexual/gender non-conformity and dares to hope for a future rich with friends, lovers, elders, and other family members. However subject to breakdown and fragmentation they may be, to reduce these relationships and modes of family-making to merely coping in the here and now would be a poor portrayal indeed. Instead, this chapter has explored relationships of material and emotional support that sustained my interlocutors across different temporalities, by helping them survive in an extremely dangerous profession, establish structures of mutual obligation, care and provision, and grow old outside of

normative labour and family arrangements. As Jules Gleeson (2019) has put it, “to carve our way through the world is always to set a path for others. Reproducing ourselves means reproducing others. We can only ever survive together”. By making a claim to exist on their terms, by creating ways of surviving together, the women whose stories I share here are enacting a trail-blazing act of social reproduction.

Conclusion

C1. Sex work: Writing on the defensive

Talking and writing about sex work is far from straightforward. Not only because the conditions under which workers labour and the sex industry operates are complex and vastly heterogeneous, but because the terms of the discussion are already polarized, charged with binary tropes that may be comforting to outsiders, but are extremely hard to get rid of for those actually making a living through sex. Throughout capitalist history, sex for pay has been construed as a source of victimization and self-harm, a threat to morals and the health of the national body politic, as a degradation and a loss one cannot come back from. Sex workers have been treated as criminals and/or victims, and anti-trafficking rhetoric, both historically and in the present, has relied on such representations to further contain, control, exploit, and criminalize them. In response, highlighting the harm and violence of hegemonic anti-trafficking politics has been a huge part of sex work activism and scholarship for decades. Critiques have brought together questions of work, migration, sexuality, gender, race, and class to produce more nuanced understandings of sexual labour. As a visible sex worker politics developed in Europe and the US since the 1970s,¹⁰⁹ these public struggles over representation have been linked to a more practical intervention in policy debates. Sex workers' movements and allied NGOs have fought to shift the focus from sensational narratives of victimization and "modern slavery" to labour conditions and a push for rights, as well as counter the deadly stigma of prostitution by offering insights into workers' everyday lives and linking their activities in the sex industry to other forms of service provision that have proliferated since the 1980s.

Of course, what is at stake with such understandings of sex work is not just representational, nor even simply ideological issues. The urgency that informs the labour/rights perspective has to do with the fact that the consequences of

¹⁰⁹ Here I am referring to political activism by sex worker groups in the USA and some European countries, which largely revolved around the adoption of the term "sex work" and a rights-based approach. While this has become the most recognizable counter-narrative to mainstream anti-trafficking politics in these contexts, it does not exhaust the scope of sex worker political organizing.

criminalization, stigma, and mainstream anti-trafficking politics are extremely material, to the point of being deadly. Nevertheless, having to grapple with these entrenched and deeply regulatory narratives on sex work has, on many occasions, meant that counter-narratives must be constructed on the defensive, leading to different, but equally reified representations of “the sex worker”. Five decades after the birth of official sex worker movements in the US and Europe, the trope of the cisgender, female, mostly migrant, “trafficking victim” is now kept company by the genderless, classless, silently white, figure of the “erotic professional”, or “sexual service provider”.

Before I even started this research, the problems with the trafficking framework in all its disciplinary and anti-migrant force were more or less clear to me. Initially involved in different sex workers’ rights groups in Denmark and Greece, I also spoke on the defense, going with the idea that sex work was pretty much as normal and as shitty as any other shitty job. Wary of narratives of victimization, I paid more attention to indications of agency, dynamism, creativity, and community-making. This reflex, of constantly arguing against the anti-trafficking, carceral, humanitarian framework, stayed with me even as I entered the field and started to see that things were much more complicated. As the years passed, I followed different women navigating a vast continuum of exploitation, and trying to live their lives in a space of devaluation and violence that often took the forms of slow and quick death. I developed a growing dislike for the normality posited by mainstreaming sex worker rights frameworks. Although defensiveness is understandable and necessarily strategic in certain contexts, and the complexity of lived, everyday reality has never fitted well with the schematics of policy-making, here I have had the space and the luxury to try to think beyond the “normalized labourer” and the “degraded victim” that line sex work debates. I did not aim to write an advocacy report, nor to offer policy recommendations. My main hope has been to try and do justice to the stories and the struggles of the women who gave me their time and their trust, to the extent that they could and thought it was wise.

As it happened, the stories I tell in this dissertation are necessarily partial and filtered. The ways women narrated their labour trajectories and lives reflected how

they wanted to see themselves and others to see them, what they guessed I wanted to hear, and the occasional cracks and breakthroughs of trust and insight in between. Since my entry point into their lives was an effort to understand their work, the fragmented portraits that emerge across these chapters leave out many, very important aspects of who these women are, their aspirations, dreams, the things they love to do, their creativity, and their lives prior to arriving in Athens and entering the sex industry. This should not lead anyone to conclude that they defined their identity through their (sex) work, or that they had no life outside it. My own tendency to view my interlocutors primarily as workers, due to the lens of my research and the way this shaped our unfolding relationships, was in some cases partly overcome. Throughout the years I became close enough with some women that we started to talk about other things, we met each other's friends, and maintained our contact after the fieldwork itself was done.

Nevertheless, in retrospect I am inclined to think that even this was too little, too late, and I understand it as a dimension of the objectification that continues to underwrite ethnographic research. As I realized that many relationships that started through the research could come to an end, gradually or abruptly, regret was mixed with loss. People I knew left the stroll, changed work and hangouts, migrated, disappeared, and died. Even as I wrote about the high turnover, the danger, and the mobility of workers in the sex industry, I believed we would have more time. Many stories were left unsaid, missteps and blind spots unaddressed, happy times and celebrations missed, shared projects unfinished. I had come into the field not only to learn about sex work, but with a desire to also build long-lasting relationships that could transcend the research itself. In some cases, this happened, in others life and death got in the way. No matter what, each woman's story could be written from many different angles, and will always exist in excess of any kind of academic study.

C.2 The main arguments

One of my purposes with this work has been to trace connections by thinking across categories and strictly defined identities. I have taken a materialist approach to this endeavor, that rests on actually existing relationships, practices of sharing spaces and livelihoods, ways of coming together and coming apart, rather than symbolic or

ideological linkages. In a parallel to Shilpa Parthan's (Parthan, forthcoming) method of "anti-caste materialism" and trans critique in Kerala, India, the point here is not to cast different "figures" as somewhat analogous to each other in a move that ends up erasing them, but rather, to stick close to the people themselves as they make their way in concrete settings, and to work with the continuities, breakdowns, and hierarchies as they arise.

Putting together the material of the chapters, these are the main findings that emerge. The first concerns the ways regulation and illegalization work together in a system of governing prostitution and work at large which has a long history. For its intents and purposes, this system is successful: successful in disciplining workers (albeit never completely), and in generating and diffusing value to a host of other actors besides the women selling sex, that extend across licit and illicit economic domains and spatial territories. The seeming contradictions, the discretionary and selective forms of enforcement of different policies, should therefore not be attributed to a "weak" state unable to outline successful methods of containment, but rather, as a specific and long-standing *modus operandi* in itself.

A second argument concerns the connections between sex work and other forms of work and intimacy. The strict separations between domestic and sex work, marriage and prostitution, are differences that were enforced with time through direct and often violent interventions, but nevertheless nowadays fall within a hierarchy of reproductive labour that has real effects. The bet here is finding a way to examine them together without collapsing them into one another. This involves thinking across the distinction between paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive labour: if salaries are understood as a means to accessing necessary and desired resources for social reproduction (Arruzza and Bhattacharya 2020: 50-1), they are not the only means to do that. In that sense, my analysis focuses on the interweaving of paid and unpaid work, ranging from sex work to marriages, and its role in women's struggles for survival and mobility.

The connections of sex work with other kinds of labour extend beyond the informal economy. Examining prostitution only in terms of illicit activities, mafia revenues, and criminal organization obscures the concrete ways in which sex

industries articulate with state planning and formal sectors in many, fundamental ways that become apparent when one thinks in terms of value rather than the formal/informal binary. A case in point is the direct and often co-constitutive relation between sex and tourist industries. When it comes to the actual work, the tendency to locate exploitation outside state-regulated work also falls apart when we consider the cyclical movements of workers across licit and illicit industries, and their experiences at the bottom of the formal wage-labour sector, whether they are directly mediated by the state or not.

Rather than understanding sex work in terms of a binary between choice and coercion, I have used the binding concept of “the struggle” to situate sex work together with other forms of labour and to contextualize the labour processes of different women within a long history of labour management, amidst global and local transformations. Thinking beyond the tropes of trafficking and free choice involves understanding exploitation and resistance to it in more concrete ways, in a constantly moving dialectic of struggle. Seen as such, the continuum of exploitation, dispossession and isolation that workers face emerge as the key forces grounding the most extreme forms of coercion in sexual labour and elsewhere. Similarly, violence is not some nonsensical, irrational force that takes place on a strictly interpersonal level, but constitutes a structural form of terror on the nexus of gender, class, and race. In the last chapter, I show how community relationships exist both in continuum and contradistinction to the most severe forms of brokerage associated to pimping, forced labour, and what is usually glossed over as “sex trafficking”. On the flipside of that, research that has focused on the construction and maintenance of systems of sexual commerce under conditions of more extreme exploitation, has shown the importance of keeping workers mobile, fragmented from local social bonds, and isolated from one another (Lazaridis 2001: 84; Montiel Torres 2013: 195-6). The importance of these conditions, as highlighted in the more nuanced research on sex work and trafficking, also points our attention to potential cracks and weaknesses in the systems of discipline and coercion that structure many workers’ realities, particularly in their early years in the sex industry. By making these conditions concrete instead of all-encompassing, abstract, and eternal, we can start to think about what happens when

imposed isolation breaks down, when disciplinary mechanisms fail to completely contain workers and their desires for autonomy. In the end, rather than eschewing the question of violence and exploitation (Shah 2014: 192), my move here involves tracing their specific operation in different workplaces and as a result of distinct policies, and looking for the breaks and spaces that emerge as people connect their struggles and try to devise ways of surviving together.

Finally, an important implication of these findings relates back to the issue of methodology. Had I not decided to conduct research with women who were subject to different but overlapping forms of categorization and state management, all the while sharing a status as illegalized workers, the dynamics of connection and fragmentation I observed would not have been visible in the same way. The systematic attention I ended up giving to the layered processes informing the recreation of inequality and class division owes a great deal to this methodological choice. Other anthropologists made done similar moves of bringing together insight borne of research with different groups of sex workers; in many cases this has been after having worked in depth with each group separately over the course of years (e.g. Mai 2018). To fully illuminate the potential of researching sex work in that way, I would have to do the same. At this point, time limitations did not allow that; my decision to try and do it anyway, in a smaller scale and relying on the close connections I was able to build with specific women, rested on the fact that these groups found themselves circulating in shared spaces, where they met one another and where I eventually met them. In that sense, this analytical choice was an ethnographic finding in itself.

C.3 Revisiting the concept of struggle – *desde el otro lado*

When i visited Cuba for the first time in December 2024, I was already nearly done with writing this dissertation. The short visit to Havana – the other side of some of the trajectories I had followed so closely in Greece – put a lot of things into perspective. It illuminated that my study, rooted as it may have been in a local context and the concrete relationships I had established and observed in some neighborhoods of Athens, had never been only about one place but rather, had always been located at the intersection of multiple and transnational connections. Although this was something I already knew in some ways, it extended beyond remittances and such

direct forms of circulation. On a more profound level, it touched upon the social relationships and the ways of making sense of one's life amidst different kinds of (literal or metaphorical) dislocations, as practices and concepts with rich histories become localized and re-articulated at the intersection of different diasporas. For example, it became very clear that the informal labour/migrant organization of Cuban trans women I observed in Athens was not simply something that had emerged as people met during different stages of their journeys in Europe. Rather, the practices and often the networks of migrants themselves were transnational to begin with. As various trans Cubans already involved in the extensive and very active networks of trans people¹¹⁰ on the island thought about migrating temporarily or permanently, and the numbers of migrants leaving the island rose sharply in the last years, the WhatsApp groups and other networking tools used for mobilization and mutual aid within Cuba became tools informally used by new or prospective migrants to plan their trips, to arrive at places with a kind of community already at hand. Older migrants received the newly arrived at the airports, hosted them in their homes until they could raise some money, and helped them get oriented in the places of transit and destination. Meanwhile, once in the diaspora, these already existing practices were also enriched as migrants met and befriended other people hustling or socializing in the same spots, living in the same neighborhoods, and getting caught up in the same processes of scrutiny and criminalization by the state. It is these kinds of multidirectional processes that gave shape to the networks I observed in the field.

¹¹⁰ This insight is borne out of a formal interview conducted with members of the non-governmental association TransCuba in Havana, December 2024. TransCuba is a big organization whose extensive reach and activities has also allowed more informal forms of networking and community to flourish among trans people in Cuba.



Figure 2. It is July 2021 and I have visited Beatriz in the brothel where she currently works so we can sort out some problem with her Greek bank account. We are sitting in the kitchen, the two of us and the brothel service lady. Beatriz occasionally dashes out to the hall to greet prospective clients, then returns. In the kitchen TV the Greek Prime Minister is announcing the latest anti-covid measures and we are watching wearily, wondering what they will imply for informal workers in the sex industry. Our attention is divided between the television and Beatriz's phone. Glancing up to see what the Prime Minister will say about the vaccinations, she is simultaneously following the news on Cuba, where the largest anti-government demonstrations since the 1990s are taking place in response to severe shortages of food and medicine. Watching Cuban news from a Greek brothel in the wake of a 6-month public health quarantine that has reshaped mobility and the spaces of work, the strangeness of transnational connections and dislocations strikes me once again (Photo by author, July 2021).

To attribute practices of collective survival and the specific forms they take in Greece simply to the experience of migration or illegalization therefore started to seem slightly reductive. As trans Cuban women brought with them and adapted their know-how and community strategies in their journeys, I started to understand that the

practices of the multi-ethnic working people I had been collaborating with must bear similar histories with starting points in Albania, Bulgaria, Brazil, Russia, and so on, that became crystallized and collectively reworked on in the Greek context. These connections, which were impossible to trace completely in this project, are testimony to the argument that other researchers have made, that the anthropology of labour must always be global (Steir 2022, Kasmir and Carbonella 2008).

On another level, if my own arguments were rooted in the development of the capitalist state and its ways of regulating labour in the specific example of Greece, witnessing the expansive spaces of sexual/reproductive labour taking place between locals and foreigners in Cuba, and the ways the tourist industry – since its gradual liberalization in the 1990s - is organized centrally through the availability of exoticized sexuality, suggested that critical resonances can be deciphered across the capitalist/socialist divide. The capitalist logics underwriting tourism and sex in a nation-state that identifies as socialist complicated the ways I understood the processes I witnessed in my own field to be rooted in the specific operation of the capitalist state as a distinct historical formation. It also further highlighted how the organization of labour, sexuality, and intimacy is dynamic and rests on specific historical and geopolitical conditions.

Finally, it became clearer that the concept of *la lucha*, which I borrowed from my Cuban friends in Greece and which animates the arguments of this thesis, provided an even richer and contested terrain of meanings about labour than I had originally seen. It is as complex and contradictory as the realities that take shape between the island and the various transnational connections that emerge through tourism, migration, foreign investment, and the flow of people, value, and ideas to and from Cuba. Visiting Havana confirmed that there is still a lot to be said about the tensions surrounding the meanings of work, inequality, and resistance, which are nowhere near resolved and are constantly reformulating, both here and there. Although covering the distinct uses of the concepts *la lucha/luchando* in the island was beyond my scope, the ways they diverge and converge with the diasporic uses I observed in Greece provide some interesting directions for thought across the capitalist/socialist divide, as well as between regions with different socialist legacies (like Cuba and Eastern Europe). Much

like the practices I observed, it is a “keyword” that illuminates global connections and local re-formulations whose meanings remain a matter of contestation, as different people try to make sense of their lives while encountering changing social structures and contexts.

Epilogue

Throughout the years I was doing this research, it was often pointed out to me (directly or indirectly) that the topic of sex work was somehow “catchy”, something that students showed interest for – albeit being a bit on the “heavy” side. As I already discussed in the first chapter, I also entered this PhD intrigued by sex work, for reasons I could not yet pinpoint exactly. In any case, whether it is the association with transgression, criminality, sex, or violence, sex work’s connotations of sensationalized otherness have resulted in making it into another desirable item for consumption, that everyone seems to be both curious and to have a lot of opinions about. This popularity has not meant that the lived reality of selling sex is nowadays better understood or can exist comfortably in university or mainstream settings. Thinking about the politics of cross-racial desire and the exoticization of non-white people in 1990s United States, in her essay *Eating the Other* (1992) bell hooks described the ambivalence she and her peers felt about the growing expressions of enthusiasm concerning all things “Other”. Although her writing about desire may first seem irrelevant here, her words accompanied and continued to preoccupy me in the last stages of my research:

“The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – *that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten*” (1992: 380, italics mine).

Besides the obvious processes of racialization and exoticization at play in the sex industry, this quote reflects back on aspects of anthropological research in acute ways. For one, the fear she speaks of is present in the research relationships between anthropologists and the people we work so closely with, and underwrites how and whether we deal with the extractive nature of ethnographic work. Secondly, as ethnographies and articles travel far beyond the social worlds inhabited and temporarily shared by the researcher and the research participants, it highlights the

processes of academic consumption and circulation of the stories of real, living people who are separated by an often insurmountable distance from the spaces where their lives are examined and debated. Taking into account Anthropology's long-standing fixation with otherness, this applies to many of us. On my part, I am inspired by researchers who have addressed this by writing in a way that makes their interlocutors' lives "too big for easy consumption" (Behar 2003: xxii); by building and maintaining long-term, at times life-long relationships that change them and the people they met as research participants; by refusing to forget. It is something similar that I have tried to do here.

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