



**“We are not selling our bodies; we are just selling sex”: Exploring the alienated experience of sex workers across space and place.**

by  
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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the perceptions of five sex workers on the working conditions and nature of the sex work industry in Cape Town and broader South Africa. While the practice of selling sex commonly evokes negative stereotypes about the sex work population, this study considers how entry into sex work for many is a choice. Thus, sex work emerges as a liberatory practice, particularly for those who are fleeing from the conditions of township living and others from precarious jobs, prejudice, danger, or non-supportive families. In making this analysis, this study draws on Lefebvre and Massey's theories of space and place; Bourdieu, Standing's, and Butler's theory of precarity; Marx's theory of alienation; Gimlin's theory of bodywork; as well as Hochschild's theory emotional labour and emotional rules. In taking seriously the claim that sex work makes for an illegitimate means of work, this study explores the local meaning of sex work from the perspectives of sex workers themselves and the ways in which sex work as a form of work is affirmed as functional and a survivalist strategy. The study concludes that the exploitative and violent conditions experienced at the hands of clients, police, brothel managers, and other sex workers are due to the legal status of sex work in South Africa.

## **Abstrak**

Hierdie studie ondersoek die persepsies van vyf sekswerkers oor die werksomstandighede en aard van die sekswerkbedryf in Kaapstad, en binne die grense van Suid-Afrika. Terwyl die praktyk om seks te verkoop, as produk, bring te vore negatiewe stereotipes oor die sekswerkpopulasie oproep. Hierdie studie oorweeg hoe toegang tot sekswerk vir baie 'n keuse is, waarin sekswerk na vore kom as 'n liberale praktyk, veral vir diegene wat vlug uit die toestande van lae sosio-ekonomiese leef omstandighede, ander van onseker werke, vooroordeel, gevaar of nie-ondersteuning gesinne. In die maak van hierdie analise, maak hierdie studie gebruik van Lefebvre en Massey se teorieë van ruimte en plek; Bourdieu, Standing's en Butler se teorie van prekariëit; Marx se teorie van vervreemding; Gimlin se teorie van liggaamswerk; asook Hochschild se teorie emosionele arbeid en emosionele reëls. Deur die bewering dat sekswerk 'n onwettige arbeidspraktyk is, ondersoek hierdie studie die plaaslike betekenis van sekswerk vanuit die perspektiewe van sekswerkers self, en die maniere waarop sekswerk as 'n vorm van werk as funksioneel en 'n oorlewingstrategie. Die studie kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat die uitbuitende en gewelddadige toestande wat in die hande van kliënte, polisie, bordeelbestuurders en ander sekswerkers ervaar word, te wyte is aan die wetlike status van sekswerk in Suid-Afrika.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

*“We are not selling our bodies; we are selling a service.”*

- Pam, a participant in this study

Publics often holds various misconceptions about sex work, which is marked as disgraceful and a socially discredited activity. These misconceptions contribute to the misrepresentation and stigmatisation of sex workers. Sex work is considered to be inherently immoral and sinful, and this promotes stigmatisation as the moral bias against this activity overshadows the diverse reasons individuals choose to do sex work. These reasons vary and include economic necessity, agency, and personal empowerment. Sex workers are treated as a homogeneous group; however, this dissertation suggests that not all of them have uniform experiences of sex work, nor are their motivations for entering sex work the same. The reality, as demonstrated within this study is that sex workers are a diverse group with varying backgrounds, motivations, and working conditions, which are further complicated by race, class, and gender. The failure of the public, institutions, and media to recognise this diversity; made this research study come to life; however, the lack of recognition perpetuates stereotypes and hinders efforts to address the needs of sex workers (Weitzer, 2009).

There is a common perception that all sex workers are victims and have been coerced into this profession. Yet, all participants of this study and many other sex workers choose sex work freely and enter willingly as a legitimate choice. While some individuals indeed face exploitation, it is due to the criminal status of sex work. Disregarding the agency of sex workers and assuming victimhood only further isolates them from society and limits their ability to advocate for their necessary rights. Fear of judgment and discrimination deters sex workers from seeking adequate healthcare in the event of general health concerns but, most importantly, harm. The stigma imposed upon sex workers affects their health and safety, and the lack of legal protection prevents them from reporting violence and exploitation. Furthermore, sex work is criminalised by law in South Africa and, as a result, occurs underground. This makes sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation and violence, and they are deemed a criminal population (Outshoorn, 2005). Sex work through public discourse and by law is not recognised as a legitimate form of labour, yet in this research study, it is. The consideration of sex work as an unlawful means of work denies them basic workers' rights, such as access to healthcare, legal protection, and, most importantly, fair working conditions. The treatment of sex work as



a criminal activity exacerbates the stigma and discrimination attached to their identity, contributing to the misrepresentation of them as individuals and sex work as a profession. Media, the public and institutions sensationalise and perpetuate stereotypes of sex work. This reinforces social misconceptions and moral judgements, as sex work is depicted to be violence against women and the body, and sex workers as individuals - who have no agency (Weitzer, 2009).

This thesis examines and addresses these issues with the aim of fostering an open conversation about sex work. The objective of this research was to analyse the perceptions of sex workers on the working conditions of sex work in Cape Town, South Africa and what it is like working in the sex trade, with a focus on the various spaces engaged in and how place is found within the space created by sex work organisations. I became interested in this topic for a variety of reasons. However, my first engagement with anything related to sex work was a YouTube video by a channel called “Soft White Underbelly”, which was an interview with a sex worker. Thereafter, a different video with the same sex worker showed up on my explore page, but this time, it included her pimp, which further challenged my sociological thinking and analysis. I thus delved deeper into sex work as a topic of inquiry, trying to understand the landscape of the sex industry and the distinct roles found therein. Upon exploration into sex work from a sociological perspective, I found that little South African research has been done on the nature of the industry and its working conditions, *from the perspectives of sex workers themselves*.<sup>1</sup> I originally started this project by looking at third-party involvement within the sex industry, which is brothel managers and pimps.<sup>2</sup> etc., and how they are said to coerce sex workers into the profession. However, in my initial exploration of the topic, I realised my own understanding took on an essentialist approach towards sex work. After continuous reading and trying to educate myself about why sex workers choose to do sex work, I realised many of them choose to do it freely; thus, resulting in a change of direction in how I approached my research and with the change of approach; I wanted to present sex workers’ perspectives through research and not add to their false representation.

Indeed, understanding sex work is pivotal in shedding light on the numerous ways that the sex work community has been misrepresented. The broader objectives of this thesis were to challenge the stereotypes and advocate for the rights and well-being of sex workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Most research is about others’ opinions and thoughts of sex work.

<sup>2</sup> A brothel manager is associated with overseeing operations within an establishment where consented sex is sold and bought, and a pimp profits from the earning of sex workers through coercion and exploitation. Both of these roles in the context of South Africa are illegal.

Understanding the complexity of the issues involved and acknowledging the diversity within the sex work community helps combat the negative conceptions that add to their stigmatisation and discrimination. One of the large misconceptions that this project deals with is sex work being described as the sale of women's bodies, but the reality is that sex workers are just selling sex. I employ a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective to understand sex work in the context of South Africa. I use this perspective to guide the study's conceptualisation and framing and interpret the results. This perspective enables a focus on the structural and systematic factors that influence the lives of sex workers, and how their experiences intersect with race, class, gender, and capitalism. A Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective enables one to go beyond individual-level explanations and pushes moral judgements. The participants of this study are influenced by a complex interplay of systematic and structural factors such as poverty, gender inequality, racial and ethnic disparities, their misrepresentation and criminalisation, and these factors shape their working conditions and choices (Cock & Luxton, 2012, Wondimu, 2021).

When examining the working conditions of sex work and mapping the composition of the sex industry, I engaged with various sociological literature. I start by noting that sex workers hold precarious positions in society given that their community is subjected to political and moral censure. Their experiences of precarity result from criminalisation, discrimination, stigma, and essentialist notions attached to their identity. I employ Pierre Bourdieu (1998), Guy Standing (2011), and Judith Butler (2004 & 2009) to inform the use of precarity in this thesis. I use their contextualisation of precarity in combination to better understand sex work and the social contexts provided by participants. Bourdieu highlights that precarity is associated with poverty and job insecurity, Standing demonstrates how sex workers form a part of the precariat class, but Butler's notion of precarity lacks intersectionality.<sup>3</sup> As it is referred to as a general condition of vulnerability. In addition, I link participant's experiences of precarity to the rise of Neoliberalism in South Africa and how sex work constitutes a part of the informal economy.

Secondly, I draw on Henri Lefebvre's "*Production of Space*" (1991) and Doreen Massey's "*Space, Place, and Gender*" (1994) to describe the different spaces that sex workers engage in and describe the working conditions within each space, highlighting how they are similar, differ and the tensions between them. In applying the concept of spatiality, I link it to the brothel space, street space, and the organisational space or the space created by sex work

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<sup>3</sup> Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), it addresses the interconnected nature of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity. With this concept, she denoted the various ways our identities intersect and shape their experiences as well opportunities.

organisations. The levels of precarity are further complicated within each of the spaces listed, but even more so when the brothel space is considered abstract and conceived. The unequal power relations that occur within the brothel space, given that it is abstract and conceived, give rise to agents, also known as brothel managers, who control the means of production and labour power of sex workers. In lieu of the brothel space being marked by exploitative working conditions, participants classified it to be much safer than the street space. It is considered to be safer as it provides some form of protection due to sex work being criminalised by law and stigmatised by society. However, the brothel space is marked by an illusion of security, which I argue makes for a pseudo-family (Romenesko & Miller, 1989). In using Lefebvre's critique of abstract space and call for a space that gives rise to place. I demonstrate how the space created by sex work organisations within Cape Town makes for a safe, lived, and perceived space. This space plays a pivotal role in the lives of sex workers as it facilitates a sense of well-being, security, and community; sex workers within this space find "place" and form place attachment (Gottdiener, 1993).

Furthermore, within each of the spaces discussed, sex workers experience alienation in at least one of its four forms. In furthering the discussion about the working conditions of sex work, I employ Marx's concept of alienation. While Marx himself did not directly address sex work within his writings, I am able to draw connections between his theory of alienation and the experiences of sex workers working within a capitalist society, particularly in South Africa. Marx's theories of exploitation and alienation only analyse labour exchanged for wage; it does not take reproductive work into account. Sex workers, while performing productive labour within the various spaces identified, equally perform reproductive labour for clients in which their services extend to emotional labour and emotional work, hence further complicating feelings of detachment and alienation. In discussing this further, I employ Arlie Hochschild's (1979, 1983, 1993) contextualisation of emotional labour and emotional work, situating it in the larger context of interactive bodywork. Bodywork in this thesis refers to the work that individuals undertake on their own bodies, the paid work performed on the bodies of others, and the emotional labour that bodywork requires. While sex workers perform paid productive labour, they perform unpaid reproductive tasks such as care, emotional support, listening and attending to the emotional needs of clients (Gimlin, 2007). To maintain emotional and physical distance, sex workers utilise emotional management strategies in separating their identities from sex work. Therefore, in engaging the various sociological literature discussed, I was able

to highlight and demonstrate the perceptions of sex workers on the working conditions and landscape of the sex industry.

This thesis is divided into six chapters: The following chapter, chapter two, discusses the research methodology and tools utilised to collect data for this thesis. In addition, I describe how my internship at Sonke Gender Justice, working on the Sex Worker's Rights Project, contributed to the making of this research. Chapter three provides the contextualisation of sex work relevant to this thesis, in which the need to contextualise sex work stems from the conflation of academics, institutions, and discourse about what sex work entails. Chapter four comprises of the theoretical framework and literature review used for this study. The key scholars addressed in this chapter and whose work played a crucial role in data analysis and writing are Wondimu (2021), Cock and Luxton (2012), Beloso (2015), Armstrong (2020), Lefebvre (1991), Massey (1994), Gieryn (2000), Nevin (2013), Hochschild (1979,1983,1993), Wharton (2009), and Gimlin (2007).

Chapter five presents the findings of my research and addresses how sex workers perceive the sex industry and the experiences of their work. Chapter six concludes this thesis with a reflection on the findings, the value of analysing sex work from the perspectives of sex workers, and the implications as well as possibilities for future research using sex work as a topic of inquiry. The chapter to follow this one demonstrates how this research came to be, the decisions taken regarding how to conduct research, why it was so important to make calculated decisions with this project, the approach with which this was done, and the research instruments employed. The research tools utilised were informed by a qualitative focus group discussion, and the practical implications of the research methodology employed will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter Two: Research Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction:

The following chapter outlines the research methodology employed in this study. From February 2023 to August 2023, I did an internship.<sup>4</sup> at Sonke Gender Justice (SGJ)<sup>5</sup>. Where I worked on the Sex Workers Rights Project in the Department of Policy Development and Advocacy. The internship and my role encompassed work around the decriminalisation of sex work within South Africa. I worked on various projects related to this cause, and my work centred around research, public awareness, media engagement, the learning and utilisation of advocacy tools, and coalition building with a focus on lobbying for law reform on sex work. The internship provided me with a multifaceted understanding of sex work, as it exposed me to various aspects of the industry, its impact on individuals, and its broader societal context. It helped me grasp the legal frameworks and aspects of sex work as I studied the existing laws, proposed reforms, and their consequences on sex workers and their clients. Understanding the legal status of sex work in South Africa was crucial for comprehending the challenges faced by sex workers. I gained insight into the various socio-economic factors that contribute to people's involvement in sex work, such as poverty, lack of access to education and employment opportunities, and the role of systematic inequalities related to race, class, and gender. I learnt about efforts to reduce stigma, challenge stereotypes, and promote a more nuanced understanding of sex work. The decriminalisation of sex work is framed as a human rights issue. Within this, I was able to explore the rights of sex workers and issues related to safety, freedom from violence, and the right to fair labour practices. Overall, participating in the internship provided me with a comprehensive perspective on the a range of factors influencing sex work. It allowed me to engage with the real-world challenges faced by sex workers, and that is what I aimed to demonstrate within this thesis.

The location of my fieldwork was the headquarters of Sisonke<sup>6</sup> in Observatory, Cape Town, in the Western Cape province of South Africa and was conducted between June and July 2023. After careful consideration and suggestion by my work supervisor at SGJ and the Provincial Coordinator of Sisonke, I conducted my research with sex workers of Sisonke; I was familiar with the location, as it was close to the SGJ head office. Being an intern at SGJ at the time of my fieldwork had proven to be an advantage as it opened various social networks and engagement with the various sex worker organisations in Cape

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<sup>4</sup> A 200-hour internship is an accredited and compulsory component of the MA in Public Sociology and Anthropology at Stellenbosch University.

<sup>5</sup> Sonke Gender Justice is a non-profit organisation that works throughout Africa. Their belief is that women, men, and girls can work together to resist patriarchy, and advocate for gender justice and transformation.

<sup>6</sup> Sisonke is one of the leading sex worker organisations in Cape Town, South Africa and they form a part of the national sex workers movement in South Africa.

Town. The above-mentioned familiarity helped me navigate the space, put participants at ease, and build rapport as per my engagements with the various organisations.

In conducting the research of this current study, I chose to focus on a small group of participants/sex workers for the following reasons, one – this is a mini dissertation; therefore, I could not consult many people as my writing capacity was limited, and two – I knew that focusing on a small group would provide an in-depth analysis and not necessarily broadly stating what is already known. Once the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Stellenbosch University granted ethical clearance, I met with my worksite supervisor, who orchestrated a meeting with the provincial coordinator of Sisonke in request of work with their organisation. I explained the purpose of my research and what methods I would use; I needed to explain why I was interested in doing research on sex work, what impact my research would have on sex workers, and how my research would aid/contribute to the spectrum of permitting sex work or referring to sex work as work. Thereafter, on a separate occasion, I met with the provincial coordinator alone, and we discussed what would be the best way forward to attain my research objectives and what would be the most comfortable for participants. Before this discussion, I had originally planned to do qualitative interviews. However, he suggested that I do a focus group discussion – as he suggested that participants would feel more comfortable doing this in a group setting. He then stated that he would do participant recruitment on my behalf and distribute this study's information to the different sex workers within the organisation because that was their policy on allowing access to the research site and participants. We agreed on a date and time, and when I showed up, five sex workers were willing to partake in this study.

## **2.2 Research Design**

The primary research question is, what are the perspectives of retired sex workers on the working conditions of sex work and *working in the sex trade industry*? Arose from my preliminary research proposal. To respond to the main research question, the following subsidiary questions were explored and followed to guide the direction of my research:

- How do sex workers describe sex work?
- How do sex workers describe the use of their bodies in sex work?
- What do sex workers remember about their relationship with other sex workers and organisations?
- How much control do sex workers have over their work in the negotiation of sexual services, particularly with third-party involvement?

Given the complexity of these questions, it could not be answered quantitatively.<sup>7</sup> I am interested in uncovering the meaning of a phenomenon for those involved, understanding how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:5-6). I conducted qualitative research, and the research questions of this study are about understanding the realities and experiences of sex workers. A qualitative approach was most appropriate to gain some understanding of sex workers, their working conditions, and the landscape of the sex industry within Cape Town. I gained an “understanding of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and interpret what they experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:15). Thus, the purpose and key concern of this research study in making use of a qualitative approach is understanding sex work from the perspective of sex workers themselves and given that sex work is a political minefield of ideological and moral positions, delineating this difference is essential in producing research that contributes positively to the spectrum of sex work.

I decided to conduct a case study to present a detailed and intensive analysis of a solitary case. A case study is an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:35). According to Merriam (2008:8), a case study additionally refers to the in-depth description and analysis of a single unit (the case). A case study is thus an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:38). What a qualitative case study shares with other forms of qualitative research are the search for meaning and understanding; thus, a case study is designed particularly to suit situations where it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variables from their context. Furthermore, a unit of analysis characterises a case study; this unit could be a single person, a group, an institution, or a community (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:38). In this study, my specific unit of analysis is sex workers, who were my participants, and they formed part of a single unit within Sisonke. As the researcher of this study, I adopted the stance of the faithful reporter in which all data within this study is presented from the participant's point of view, allowing them to speak for themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> Quantitative research uses numbers as data and analyses them using statistical techniques and Qualitative research uses words as data, that is collected and analysed in all sorts of ways.

## **2.3 Data Collections Methods:**

### **2.3.1 Recruitment Strategies and The Internship**

Recruiting a focus group and gaining access to sex workers for research purposes was difficult, given the stigma and moral censure attached to their identity (Edmunds, 1999:8-9). I had difficulty gaining access to a research site which would allow me to speak to sex workers for research purposes; the process of gaining access was quite long and rigorous. At first initiation, I had to speak to my work supervisor at SGJ, where, at the time, I was doing an internship in Policy Analysis and Advocacy in sex work; she then sat with my proposal and suggested some changes to better align with the objective of advocating for sex workers and decriminalisation<sup>8</sup>. After the small, suggested changes were made, I then went through a research screening with SGJ's Research, Monitoring & Evaluation and Learning team (RMEL). It was a panel discussion about my research project, in which I had to motivate the purpose of this project and how it would aid the cause of sex workers' rights, and it was approved. Once approved, I had to approach and draft a research letter to the directors at Sisonke and the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) for possible access to participants and to use their spaces as a research site. This process, too, was lengthy and rigorous as it took months to get a response; I then first had a screening with the assistant co-ordinator of Sisonke and then after another screening with the provisional co-ordinator of Sisonke<sup>9</sup>. I sat with the provisional co-ordinator separately in another meeting, in which we discussed my sample and sample criteria, research objectives and methodology, and compensation for participants – using Sisonke as a research site and gaining access to sex workers for research purposes was thus finally approved.

### **2.3.2 Sampling Process**

The composition of the focus group was done through purposive sampling, whereby I selected specific individuals for this study because they could purposefully inform an understanding of this study's research problem. I selected a relatively small sample of five sex workers, with the aim of increasing the depth as opposed to the breadth of understanding sex work and the working conditions thereof in Cape Town. Purposive sampling was most appropriate for this study as it enabled me to select respondents that were most likely to yield appropriate and valuable information, resulting in the ability to identify and select effective cases. The reason for adopting purposive sampling assumed that given the aims and objectives of this study, specific sex workers may hold important and different views about sex work (Campbell et al., 2020: 653:654). In addition, better matching the sample to this study's aims and objectives improved the study's rigour and the trustworthiness of the data and results (Campbell et al., 2020:653). I, thus,

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<sup>8</sup> One of the main objectives of my research was to advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work and recognition of their work, as work.

<sup>9</sup> I received no response from SWEAT.



included a sample that fits the following criteria: a sex worker who has existed in the industry and who knows the most about the topic. Along with purposive sampling, the use of a focus group worked best for discussing the nature of sex work, whereby participants were able to talk to each other about what happens in their everyday lives and share experiences which only they could understand and relate to one another (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:114).

### **2.3.3 Focus Groups**

The forms of data collection used within this study were a focus group discussion and documents<sup>10</sup>. To construct my conceptualisation of sex work. This study occurred in and was facilitated by a group setting, whereby I conducted one focus group within the field. A focus group is an “interview on a topic with a group of participants who have knowledge on the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:114). While a focus group typically brings together eight to ten individuals for a face-to-face discussion of a particular topic, this focus group discussion comprised five participants; this study consisted of a *mini-focus group*. The group comprised of one Black male and four Black females, and each of them shared different experiences in relation to sex work, even though each of them come from the same socio-economic class. A mini-focus group only slightly differs from a standard focus group. This difference is marked by the number of participants; however, like standard focus groups – it is conducted in the same way, within a large room setting with audio recording. Mini-focus groups tend to require between ninety minutes to two hours to cover the topic at hand adequately, and in the case of this study – the length of time was one hour and twenty minutes. Given that this is a mini dissertation – using a mini focus group was most appropriate, and it offered some additional benefits such as the following: Firstly, given that there were fewer participants, I (as the researcher) was able to place more emphasis on the topic and less on polling the participants. Secondly, it allowed for greater detail with more in-depth probing into the nature of sex work and its working conditions. Lastly, it allowed for greater observational opportunities in which I was able to pick up more behavioural aspects from participants than I would have in comparison to a large group (Edmunds, 1999:19).

Using a focus group for this study was fitting because it enabled an interactive discussion, which led to the generation of data that might not have been accessible through individual interviews. During the focus group discussion, participants shared their views, they heard the views and experiences of others, and some participants even refined their own views considering what was heard (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:114). I have thus established that conducting a focus group was the appropriate methodology for meeting my research objectives. While the main advantage of using a focus group is that it can be

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<sup>10</sup> The Sexual Offences Act- to be further discussed later.

coordinated, conducted, and analysed within a brief period, there were various other advantages and disadvantages of using a focus group for this study.

The probing and clarification of participants' comments were easy to do in this environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:8). In using a focus group, I was able to receive rich qualitative data by facilitating an open discussion, and this was beneficial when exploring the nuanced experiences and perspective of sex workers about their daily lives. Furthermore, doing it in this way allowed for the coming together of individuals with diverse experiences and viewpoints related to sex work, and this enabled a comprehensive exploration of the subject. The group dynamic stimulated participants to share openly and reveal shared experiences, social norms, and collective beliefs, and these might not have emerged in individual interviews. Lastly, using a focus group provided insight into stigmas, social norms, and cultural attitudes surrounding sex work, and this brought forward the larger social context of sex work within South Africa (Edmunds, 1999:8-9).

Once the participants were selected, a discussion guide, also known as an aide memoir or moderators guide, was developed. I used the discussion guide as an outline when conducting the focus group, it ensured that the discussion covered all necessary topics. A discussion guide was used during the focus group with the purpose of outlining the topics to cover during the discussion, along with specific questions and potential probes that were useful to stimulate additional discussion (Edmunds, 1999:11). The topics covered were based on the research objectives and covered the following central themes;

- reasons for entry and departure
- working conditions
- the nature of the sex work industry
- precarity
- alienation
- bodywork
- emotional labour and management

The questions, however, were open for digression and left open-ended so that other related topics of discussion could come to the fore. The focus group was audio-recorded with the consent of participants to better enable the transcribing of the discussion, in which I was able to refer to all questions and review crucial aspects of the discussion needed to inform my research questions (Edmunds, 1999:66-67). During the focus group discussion, I took up the dual role of researcher and moderator<sup>11</sup>, whereby I kept

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<sup>11</sup> A moderator is a facilitator within a focus group, whereby they play a central role in facilitating the conversation, guiding participants through topics, and creating an environment that encourages an open discussion.

participants on track and ensured that all participants were given an opportunity to present their views and experiences. I guided the group discussion, ensured that the conversation flowed smoothly, and tried to create a comfortable and open atmosphere to build rapport with the participants. When the discussion would digress too far, I brought it back to the topic focus and tried to keep the discussion focused on the research objectives. I sought input from all participants to ensure that each person's perspective was represented and that all input was valued (Edmunds, 1999:22, 65-66).

#### **2.4 Data Analysis in concert with documentary analysis of the Sexual Offences Act (23 of 1957)**

I have chosen the use of the above-mentioned methods to uncover the many ways in which sex workers invest their time and effort in providing a sexual service. During the interview, I observed the way in which sex workers would speak about doing sex work, what it means to be a sex worker, how the industry is shaped, and what they must endure on all fronts. I explored the experiences and perceptions of the sex workers and placed this within the larger social context of sex work in South Africa. I viewed their experiences and perceptions in correlation to the Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957, which is a legal framework that criminalises sex workers, increases their vulnerability to violence and illness, and reduces the likelihood that abuse will be reported. South Africa criminalises all aspects of sex work, which means that both the selling and buying of sex is illegal. Sex workers historically have been among South Africa's most marginalised populations and are vulnerable to exploitation, ill health, and abuse (Sonke Gender Justice, n.d).

I adopted a careful approach to identifying various themes to address my research questions, thus using thematic analysis. Which is a "robust method that develops, analyses, and interprets patterns across a qualitative dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2022:48). General themes were identified in my focus group interviews, in which I identified and categorised the dataset systematically by coding and developing it into themes. I created my own themes, which included the conceptualisation of sex work (reasons for entry and exit), working conditions (space and place, precarity and alienation), and emotional labour and work (as experienced and expressed by sex workers during client interactions). With thematic analysis, and given that it is inductive, I could use it to inform theories and serve as a basis for further exploration and development. During my analysis, the focus remained on addressing the nature of sex work, the working conditions thereof, and the experiences of my participants, which I maintained by constantly referring to my research questions and aligning my thinking according to that. Once I had identified my different themes/codes, my data was analysed thematically. In using themes, I was able to explore the expression of shared/similar ideas and meanings – the themes are conceptual because they dig down below surface meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022:142).

Thematic analysis is particularly useful for exploring and understanding the subjective experiences, meanings, and perspectives of sex workers. It provided insight into how participants make sense of their experiences and social realities, particularly in relation to how the social structures within sex work influence their perceptions and experiences. Thus, with thematic analysis, I was able to achieve one of the main objectives of this study, which was to capture participants' voices' in producing literature about sex work from the perspectives of sex workers (Braun & Clarke, 2022:161-164).

I reviewed the transcription of the focus group interview to ensure and maintain the reliability of data and analysis. Reliability refers to the "extent to which one's research findings can be replicated" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:250); however, it is especially problematic within the social sciences because human behaviour is never static. Reliability within research design assumes that there is a single reality, that studies can be replicated and achieve the same results. I conducted my study on the premise that human behaviour cannot be isolated; I sought to explain and describe the world of those in terms of how they experience it. There were many interpretations of what is happening within the sex industry; this was highlighted in the different responses participants had in relation to the same question; it is clear that there are many explanations for the same thing, and there is no benchmark for specific answers. External reliability can thus not be ensured; however, internal reliability can be; as I was the only observer of this study, I additionally transcribed, coded and analysed my own data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:250).

## **2.5 Ethical Considerations:**

During the process of this study, I was guided by the Code of Ethics established by Stellenbosch University. All precautions before, during, and after fieldwork were taken to mitigate any potential risk or harm that might have come upon participants. Various principles specified in the code of ethics stipulated above informed this study. In adherence to informed consent, all participants were provided with a clear and comprehensive consent form that outlined the purpose, procedure, potential risks, and benefits of their participation. The informed consent form was shared with participants before fieldwork. At the start of the focus group discussion, I reread it and asked all participants verbally if they consent to taking part in this study, to which all agreed. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from this study at any point during the discussion without any negative consequences. However, I asked if any data up until the point of withdrawal could still be used, to which all agreed. It was made clear that participation in this study was entirely voluntary, and this was emphasised both in the informed consent form and during the data collection process. In adherence to confidentiality and anonymity, all data collected was anonymised with the use of pseudonyms and treated confidentially by limiting it to myself and my supervisor. Any identifiable information, such as names, ages, and locations, was carefully redacted and altered to ensure that participants could not be personally identified from the findings. To mitigate the reputational risk of

harm to the participants, this study is framed in an inclusive and non-dismissive manner in accordance with beneficence. Every effort was made to minimise any potential harm to participants, sensitivity, and vulnerability. The potential emotional impact of this research topic was considered during the design of interview questions. Participants were thus made aware at the start of the focus group discussion that in the event of emotional distress, vulnerability, or sensitivity, psychological services by the Welgevallen Psychological Clinic have been made available, and contact details were given. Lastly, all data pertaining to this study is stored on my password-protected Stellenbosch University OneDrive (Horn et al., 2015:5-9).

## **2.6 Self-Reflection:**

In this reflection, I delve into my experience as a researcher but also as a Muslim woman – researching sex work, something which is considered by religion, public discourse, and institutions to be morally and religiously degrading for women. I reflect on taking up these two roles within the field and the steps taken to maintain reflexivity throughout this research study. Given my role as the primary investigator of this study, my role extended beyond data collection and analysis as I was responsible for establishing the research questions, selecting a methodology, and interpreting the findings. Acknowledging my influence in the making of this study was crucial in maintaining transparency and ensuring reliability. At the very beginning, when formulating a research topic and problem, I battled quite hard with myself on selecting sex work as a topic of inquiry because I was cognisant that it could possibly be a sensitive and challenging endeavour, given how it is taken up publicly. However, I pursued it anyway because I felt that if doing research for any reason – it should be to give the marginalised a voice. I wanted to produce research that could empower sex work communities by amplifying their voices and advocating for their rights. I thought about the many ways in which I could actively involve sex workers in this research in hopes that it would, in some way, challenge stereotypes and promote a more nuanced understanding of their experiences because, as a group, they are quite misunderstood. I am a feminist with a blind desire and passion for research from the perspectives of women, particularly women who are undoubtedly in subordinate positions to others. Thus, I wanted to challenge the status quo, the myths, stigma, and social taboos about sex work. I wanted my research to contribute to discussions around human rights and social justice and to shed light on the challenges faced by sex workers, and this included issues of exploitation, violence, discrimination, and lack of access to healthcare.

In the interim of setting the abovementioned personal goals for this study, I was self-critical about whether I would achieve them. When first approaching this research topic theoretically, the feminist movement ordained a responsibility to choose a side within the sex work debate, which was either the liberal or radical debate. When researching what each of these debates said about sex work, I thought that none of

them aligned with my stance towards sex work because I did not view sexual commerce as a form of violence against women. However, I agreed with threads of the liberal debate. I then sought out Marxist-Socialist feminist frameworks and used them to reflect on my positionality in relation to the social context of sex work. This involved examining the power dynamics at play, the economic structures, and the social relations which contribute to the individual experiences of those who engage in sex work. Upon reflection, I realised that my own socio-economic background, class position, and upbringing influenced my perspective. I grew up in Mitchell's Plain and still reside here. It is considered a low socio-economic area. I would often see women standing on the street corners late at night, particularly on corners a few metres away from pubs or sports betting facilities. I remember being a young age and asking my father "why do they always stand on the corners late at night", to which he responded this is their way of making money. The interaction always fascinated me, and I think that is where my interest in sex work as a topic of inquiry originated. As a middle-class person of colour and coming from a low-socio economic area; I was aware that my background afforded me with certain privileges and opportunities, which influenced my worldview and shaped my understanding of life. However, I continuously felt empathy and had some understanding of the reasons why individuals would partake in sex work. I knew the circumstances of my community, how the lack of resources and economic need - drove people to pursue various avenues to generate an income. Of course, I developed a more nuanced understanding of sex work as I got older, but even more so when doing this research study and my internship at Sonke Gender Justice when working on the sex workers rights project.

While the abovementioned facets of my identity have shaped my interest and understanding of sex work to some extent, my identity as a Muslim woman and researcher has shaped multiple facets of data collection and other aspects of my research study. When first approaching and engaging with the various sex work organisations – it was noticeably clear that my bodily representation as a Muslim woman wearing the hijab<sup>12</sup> implicitly shaped how sex workers and other members of the various organisations would interact with and perceive me. As previously mentioned, I interned at Sonke Gender Justice before and during fieldwork, where all the work I did was centred around the decriminalisation of sex work; my worksite supervisor asked me at the time about my moral and religious stance towards sex work. It was not only a question of my positionality, but it was clear that my answer would shape the course of our working relationship and how smooth working on the sex workers' rights project would be. Upon reflection, I suppose they needed to know my intention as an individual (who is Muslim) and more so as a researcher, with the purpose that I would not produce research that would further ostracise sex workers. However, I did not have any preconceived notions about sex work, as, at that time, my engagement with

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<sup>12</sup> Hijab refers to the head covering or scarf that Muslim women wear.

sex work had been purely theoretical and literary. I will admit that before diving deeper into literature about sex work and the internship, many of my views about sex work were radical –although I would not have previously aligned with radical feminism<sup>13</sup>. As time progressed and I started understanding the landscape of the sex industry better – my views changed to liberal. However, I recognised that something more or rather better was needed to understand sex work within the social context of South Africa, hence why I propose a Marxist-Socialist feminist analysis of sex work.

Furthermore, from my observation at the start of the focus group discussion – I could see that participants felt a bit taken aback by my bodily representation. None of them said anything, but there were awkward glances between them, and then they glanced back at me. I realised right there that the success of this discussion lay upon me stating my stance and positionality to sex work. To which, I then said that the purpose of this research study is to contribute positively to their community, by allowing them to be the voice that leads this study and that I did not want my research to add to their misrepresentation. I additionally said that I was attentive to the nature of their work, circumstances, and their experiences. My dual role as intern and researcher was advantageous because participants eased up even more knowing that I came from Sonke Gender Justice. The internship equipped me with a greater understanding of the realities of sex workers, and it enabled me to relate better to participants as well as navigate the discussion in an effective way. At the same moment, one of the participants got up and asked me if I had the handbook for writers and researchers reporting on sex work. I said no because I understood the participants' need to give me the book. This made for a significant moment in the discussion because they relaxed even more, seeing that I was open to their guidance and input in terms of writing up this research. Throughout the entirety of the focus group discussion, I caught myself at many moments reaffirming my positionality in relation to sex work. I suppose the constant reiteration of my stance was my way of letting the group know that I was on their side, and appreciative of them sharing their stories and experiences with me. I even brought the discussion of religion to the forefront by telling participants about a comment made on my research presented at the 2023 SASA<sup>14</sup> conference, in which an academic spoke about sex work from a religious point of view; I used this comment and turned it around to myself in saying that my position as a researcher and as a woman practising Islam does not merge when engaging with sex work as a topic of inquiry. However, when reflecting on the discussion and analysing the data, I realised that I was too emotionally involved during the discussion, and I should have maintained my role as the observer/researcher better and distanced myself emotionally.

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<sup>13</sup> See chapter on “Contextualising Sex Work” for a better understanding of what I mean.

<sup>14</sup> The South African Sociological Association conference that occurred in early July 2023 at the University of Zululand, where I presented this research.

In conclusion, this chapter discussed the research approach and methods employed in this thesis. I provided insight into how this approach and methods were implemented. I point out the contradictory experience of conducting qualitative research, particularly in relation to maintaining one's role as a researcher and not getting too emotionally invested; however, even with that in mind, stating my positionality made for significance during the focus group discussion, and it was rewarding. My fieldwork was thus not only shaped by the existing literature on research design and methodology but largely by what came out during the focus group discussion, whereby which shaped the theory used to write this study. I do agree that a much larger study is needed, with a larger sample – as this study explores sex work in a particular way and highlights a specific group of sex workers' perception about the nature of the sex industry. The next chapter within this thesis focuses on contextualising sex work, what sex work is to sex workers, sex work organisations and my participants, in the context of South Africa, within sociology and the feminist debate.



## **Chapter Three: Conceptualising and Contextualising Sex Work**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I contextualise sex work; this is done in relation to what sex work is to sex workers, sex work organisations and my participants in the context of South Africa, within sociology and the feminist debate. The need to contextualise sex work stems from the conflation of academics, institutions, and public discourse about what sex work entails.<sup>15</sup>. Many women, sometimes men, and transgender people partake in sex work as a profession and as a livelihood strategy. It is essential that writers of sex work raise awareness and report on it truthfully (Nyembe et al., 2014:4). The source primarily engaged within this chapter is the writer's guideline provided by Sonke Gender Justice and the one given to me by the participant discussed in the previous chapter. The guide has been compiled with the purpose of writers and journalists writing and reporting on sex work accurately. It sets out basic facts about the sex work industry in South Africa, and it contains sections on appropriate terminology, use of images, and respectful interviewing procedures. The consulted guide is titled "*Sex workers and sex work in South Africa: A guide for journalists and writers*". I consulted this guide before data collection and used its techniques in the focus group discussion. The guide is employed within this chapter to conceptualise and contextualise sex work. This chapter, therefore, engages with relevant literature informing the conceptualisation of sex work relevant to this study. From previous research, it is evident that studies related to factors which surround sex work are dominant. However, it does not state what sex work actually is. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature and knowledge mostly done by feminists working in the sex industry, who insist that for many women, sex work is freely chosen.

### **3.2 The contextualisation of sex work by sex workers & sex work organisations:**

Sex work refers to the labour or service related to the exchange of sex for a negotiated reward, which is often monetary. The sex industry is said to include work such as pornography, phone sex, stripping, erotic messages, and other services related to sex. From a legal standpoint, "sex work refers to the selling of sexual intercourse or indecent acts for reward" (Nyembe et al., 2014:5). The United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)<sup>16</sup> describes sex workers as

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<sup>15</sup> In relation to this study, which was represented and discussed at the 2023 South African Sociological Association conference, academics conflated sex work to body modification, cosmetic surgery, and human trafficking.

<sup>16</sup> Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and World Health Organisation (WHO). 'Technical guidance for Global Fund HIV' (2011) Available:

individuals (female, male, and transgender adults) over eighteen who sell consensual sexual services in return for money or payment of some kind, who may sell sex informally or formally, occasionally, or regularly”. Sex workers, however, describe themselves as “someone who is earning and selling sex for exchange of money...We are market sellers because we market ourselves” (Nyembe et al., 2014:5). “It is a job; we support our families, we are single parents, and we are breadwinners”. Yet, sex workers are aware of the way in which their work is denigrated; they note that “it is a career like any other, but in the eyes of society it is not, and they call us names. So, we have to show them that we are something more than sex workers; we are peer educators<sup>17</sup>” (Nyembe et al., 2014:6). Simultaneously, there is an ongoing debate about whether to refer to sex workers as “prostitutes” or “sex workers”. Sex worker is the preferred term, and throughout this research project, they shall be referred to as such.

Historically, the term “prostitute” refers to shameful acts and carries negative connotations attached to the individual’s identity, and it is linked to false information about sex workers and the sex industry. The term “sex worker” avoids moral judgment and points to the buying and selling of sexual services as a means of work. Sex work as a form of employment has implications for labour laws, occupational health, and safety rights (Nyembe et al., 2014:6). Sex work is different from human trafficking and child prostitution; when mistakenly conflated, it– leads to sensationalised but inaccurate coverage<sup>18</sup>. Human trafficking refers to the movement of people under coercion for the purposes of exploitation. Therefore, sex work refers to the *choice* to sell sexual services – albeit sometimes under constrained circumstances, but it involves adults who consent to sex, thus not children. Trafficking is often linked to sexual slavery, but *sex work is a form of work and livelihood strategy* (Nyembe et al., 2014:14).

### **3.3 Who are sex workers, and what are their reasons for entry into this kind of work?**

In this study, sex workers are referred to as workers who, like other labourers in other occupations, engage in work to survive and as a means of upward mobility. Sex workers come from all walks of life and have a range of histories, lifestyles, and different experiences. The

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[http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/programmes/programmeffectivenessandcountysupportdepartment/gfresourcekit/20110909\\_Technical\\_Guidance\\_Sex\\_Workers\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/programmes/programmeffectivenessandcountysupportdepartment/gfresourcekit/20110909_Technical_Guidance_Sex_Workers_en.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> A peer educator (often sex workers but also other individuals) are individuals who engage and interact with other sex workers, they distribute information on sex worker rights, health, and human rights material.

<sup>18</sup> Before the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa, fear generated that there would be an influx of about 40 000 trafficked women and girls into the sex industry. After the World Cup, little attention was given to the fact that research showed no changes to the sex industry and, in fact, that not a single case of human trafficking was found by the Department of Justice during the World Cup period. See African Centre for Migration & Society (2014) Understanding Human Trafficking Issue Brief.

Available: <http://www.migration.org.za/uploads/docs/issue-brief-10.pdf>

sex work population within South Africa comprises of a diverse racial demographic, and many come from low socio-economic backgrounds, which demonstrates that irrespective of class; most sex workers make the rational decision/choice to sell sex. According to the South African National AIDS Councils (SANAC) report on sex work in 2013, there were between 130 000 to 180 000 sex workers in South Africa, in which 90% of sex workers were women and 10% men or transgender individuals. However, recent reports suggest that the numbers have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While most sex workers are women and their clients are men, this is not always the case. For instance, one of the participants in this study is a man who only has male clients. Sex workers in Africa are generally assumed to be independent contractors and do not work with pimps, but 13% of outdoor sex workers in Cape Town note that they do, in fact, work with a pimp<sup>19</sup> (Nyembe et al., 2014:14). Generally, sex workers solicit their clients in hotels, bars, massage parlours, and on the street; additionally, the participants in this study stated that they find clients on the internet, escort websites, and in brothels, and taverns.

There is no single or definitive reason as to why people choose to do sex work. Sex workers in the report provided by (Nyembe et al., 2014:8) state that individuals enter and engage in sex work for the following reasons: Firstly, it offers independence and autonomy. Secondly, no formal qualifications are necessary to enter, and third, workers are able to plan their own hours around their needs and can choose where and when to work. Fourth, some sex workers noted that they earn a good living from sex work and fifth, a study showed that, on average, some sex workers earn six times more than that of domestic workers in South Africa. Sixth, they have support from extended family, and lastly, female sex workers, on average, have to support four children or adult dependents. Consequently, the participants of this study stated their reasons for entry, and it is the following: Firstly, they were not working at the time, and sex work became their means to survive. Secondly, many noted that when living in the township and rural areas – they had no access to resources and opportunities, and sex work was an opportunity to do better. Lastly, they have dependents and see sex work as a means to look after their family. Therefore, given the reasons for entry provided by the report and participants of this study, it is clear that there are a variety of reasons for entry into sex work. Many of these factors intersect – which complicates the reality of sex workers whereby participants of the study additionally reported that sex work is, in fact, a means of survival.

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<sup>19</sup> For further engagement, see Gould, C. & Fick, N. 2008. Selling sex in Cape Town: Sex work and human trafficking in a South African city, Pretoria/Tshwane, Institute for Security Studies.

### **3.4 Placing sex work in the South African context**

In South Africa, all aspects of sex work are illegal, and sex workers are explicitly criminalised by the Sexual Offences Act (No. 23 of 1957) and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and related matters) Amendment Act (No. 32 of 2007). In addition to these two laws, provincial and municipal bylaws contain provisions that prohibit sex work. It states it will “importunate any person for the purpose of prostitution and solicitation” (Nyembe et al., 2014:9). The premise for the criminalisation of sex work in South Africa is that sex work is seen as a social ill that needs to be eradicated; hence it was outlawed. Sex work, however, continues despite the severe repercussions because, for many, particularly the participants of this study, sex work is their only means of survival and making a living. Criminalising sex workers has proved to be ineffective; it only maintains high levels of violence and leads to the spread of illness as they do not have access to proper healthcare. South Africa is currently reviewing its laws on sex work; it opened for public comment. Parliament had reviewed it; however, the Bill did not pass as Parliament argued that the industry needs an element of regulation.<sup>20</sup>

The speculation by organisations such as Sonke Gender Justice, SWEAT, Sisonke, and the Women’s Legal Centre is that sex work might receive legalisation and not complete criminalisation. This means that sex work will be regulated and legalised within specific areas and will be subjected to certain conditions like the Netherlands, Senegal, and Mali. The hope and aim, however, is that sex work receives full decriminalisation, which means that all laws criminalising sex work will be removed, including outdated bylaws. It is important to note that the legalisation of sex work is different from the decriminalisation of sex work. In a legalisation model, the state would be the main regulator of the sex industry and decide the conditions under which sex work could take place. In the decriminalisation model, sex workers would make decisions about the way in which they work. Under decriminalisation, consensual activity between an adult sex worker and clients would be legal, but under legalisation, it could still be illegal. Sex workers, however, still continue to receive complete criminalisation, and all aspects of sex work are regarded as a criminal offence, thus maintaining the legal protocols and severe repercussions if caught selling sex (Nyembe et al., 2014:10).

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<sup>20</sup> This comes from my internship at Sonke Gender Justice, working on the Sex Workers Rights Project.

Therefore, decriminalisation would recognise sex work as work and sex workers would enjoy the full protection of labour and occupational laws. The sex industry would be regulated like other industries within South Africa. It would provide sex workers with access to police services and adequate health care without the fear of harassment or stigma, and it would enable them to work from any location, as they now work in places that are extremely dangerous to avoid police. One of the risks of sex work is the elevated levels of violence from clients, police, brothel managers, and even the public; this could be reduced if sex work was not treated as a crime. Previous research found that one-third to half of all sex workers have experienced violence in the workplace.<sup>21</sup> In Cape Town, another study found that police officers have raped 12% of street-based sex workers.<sup>22</sup> However, these are reported cases; these statistics do not account for unreported cases and other geographic areas around the country. In addition, 70% of sex workers have approached various branches of the Women's Legal Centre across the country in request of assistance to report police brutality (Nyembe et al., 2014:11). Sex workers are in full support of decriminalisation and argue that it is the best policy choice for South Africa. This statement can be supported by the following statement from a participant in my study;

*“The working conditions of sex work...It is not safe at all. Up until we get decriminalisation... Even brothel managers are abusing sex workers... Clients are forcing us into somethings that we do not want to do because they are using their power, and they know we cannot report such cases at the police station... You do not have a choice... He (the client) knows that you are a criminal because we are called criminals as sex workers. You cannot go report such cases at the police station; they (the police) will just abuse their power against the sex workers... So, we just live in danger”.* (Max, 17 July 2023).

The abovementioned statement thus highlights that the working conditions of sex work are bad, that engaging in sex work is not safe as they experience violence from not only clients but the police too, and that their safety can only be guaranteed if/when decriminalisation is achieved in South Africa. As a citizen and researcher, I argue that decriminalisation would allow sex workers to have greater control over their working conditions, it would reduce stigma and improve access to support services such as healthcare and other civil services. South Africa can

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<sup>21</sup> Deering, K., Amin, A., Shoveller, J., Nesbitt, A., Garcia-Moreno, C., Duff, P., Argento, E., & Shannon, K. 2014. “A Systematic Review of the Correlates of Violence Against Sex Workers”. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(5): 42-54.

<sup>22</sup> Gould, C & Fick, N. 2008. *Selling sex in Cape Town: Sex work and human trafficking in a South African city*. Pretoria/Tshwane, Institute for Security Studies.

take a page from New Zealand's book on how to protect sex workers. Sex work has been decriminalised in New Zealand since 2003<sup>23</sup>; the Prostitution Reform Act removed criminal penalties for all aspects of adult sex work. It not only safeguards the human rights of sex workers, but it also improves their working conditions. Therefore, my study illuminates the bad working conditions of sex work, the violence and exploitation experienced at the hands of clients, police, brothel managers, and the public, and most notably, the need for decriminalisation— in which as the reader, one should reflect upon when thinking about sex work in South Africa and as a South African citizen use it as an initiative when the Bill for decriminalisation opens again for public comment (Nyembe et al., 2014:13).

### **3.5 The Contextualisation & Contrasting Ontologies of sex work in Sociology:**

The literature on sex work from a sociological perspective has changed within the last decade. Sociologists have researched and analysed sex work as “a form of deviant behaviour, a type of gender relation and as a distinct occupational sector” (Weitzer, 2009:214). Sex work within the sociological discipline refers to the exchange of consensual sexual services for money or goods, which can occur occasionally or regularly. Within current literature from a sociological perspective, sex work is based and defined according to three paradigms/frameworks. The first is called the deviance framework, the second – is the oppression paradigm, and the third is the empowerment paradigm. The deviance framework is centred upon the traditional stigma of sex work and highlights the ways in which it is subjected to social control and discrimination. The oppression paradigm holds that sex work is an ideal representation of patriarchal gender relations. It describes sex work as a form of subjugation, exploitation, and violence against women. It holds essentialist claims such as “sex work enables male domination, that most if not all sex workers were either sexually or physically abused as children, entered at the age of thirteen or fourteen, were either coerced or tricked into the industry by pimps or traffickers, are drug abusers, labours under appalling working conditions or desperately wants to exit the sex industry” (Weitzer, 2009:214). When generalised to all sex workers and the sex industry, these claims are misconceptions, but, in some cases, and in relation to particular sex workers, the claims could be true. This argument is proven true in retrospect to the data generated from this study, which are discussed more fully in my findings chapter.

Thirdly, the empowerment paradigm focuses on the ways in which sexual commerce passes as work, which includes human agency and may be potentially empowering for those who partake

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<sup>23</sup> New Zealand was the first country in the world to decriminalise sex work.

in this form of labour. It argues that there is nothing innate in sex work that prevents it from being beneficial to both parties, namely, the sex worker and the client. It suggests that just like any other economic transaction, sex work is a transaction for gain by all parties involved. Hence, this paradigm holds that “sex work enhances the individual’s socio-economic status and provides control over their working conditions, more so than traditional jobs” (Weitzer, 2009:215). It expresses sex work as a congeneric type of service work, arguing that it is similar to women’s work, in which sex workers and other women barter sex for goods. Theorists and individuals who adopt the empowerment paradigm only highlight success stories which demonstrate and express sex work as profitable and esteem-enhancing. From fieldwork and data collection, it emerges that it can, in fact, be liberatory for some, particularly those fleeing from the conditions of township living and others from precarious jobs, prejudice, danger, or non-supportive families. However, for others, it is not a liberatory terrain, as they experience violence from clients and police, work in abysmal working conditions and have highly negative experiences. It is the experiences of such sex workers that tend to be neglected within the empowerment paradigm (Weitzer, 2009:215).

Additionally, I argue that it is important to avoid essentialist conclusions based on only one framework or paradigm. The oppression and empowerment paradigms are both one-dimensional, and undoubtedly, empowerment and exploitation are both present within sex work, but there is variation. The sex workers who partook in this research study have stated that experiences of exploitation or empowerment depend on time, location, the type of sex work one partakes in and other factors. Therefore, sex work cannot be reduced to one definition as it is ingenuous and complex. The above-mentioned frameworks and paradigms do not align with the definitions and expressions of sex work – I have come to know through fieldwork. The polymorphous paradigm aligns more with how I would like to describe and express sex work within this research study. Ronald Weitzer developed this paradigm (2009:215), which holds that there is a collection of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences that shape sex work. It is cognisant of the multiple complexities and structural conditions within sex work, which is shaped by an “uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and job satisfaction” (Weitzer, 2009:215). Different from the paradigms mentioned above, it acknowledges that the circumstances of sex workers differ in relation to the following characteristics: 1) the type of sex work engaged, 2) the involvement with others, 3) locational and structural aspects and 4) characteristics which are intertwined with gender and race (Weitzer, 2020:401). Therefore, the polymorphous paradigm promotes an

intersectional analysis to understand and assess the conditions of sex workers. This better aligns with the research questions, aims of this project, and provides a suitable understanding of sex work within the context of South Africa.

### **3.6 Placing sex work within the feminist debate**

Feminist critiques are insistent that prostitution can only be understood in the context of women's subordination. Sex workers are perceived to be victims of male lust and forced into sex work through different forms of social coercion (Jaggar, 1997:9). Thus, there is a deep divide within feminism about what sex work is, as feminist approaches to sex work have shifted tremendously from one wave to another. During first-wave feminism in the late nineteenth century, most activists aimed to abolish sex work by using state power to end state regulation of brothels. The abolitionist associations were strongly connected to the Catholic Church, whereby they believed that sex workers needed to be saved and leave this work. Second-wave feminism produced two major discourses to the debate of sex work, first, one which aligns with traditionalism and produced radical feminist thought. Second, the creation of a discourse which framed "prostitution" as sex work and produced liberal as well as socialist feminist thought (Outshoorn, 2005:144-145). In the preliminary stages of the feminist analysis of sex work, it was treated in a reductionist way and defined as a deviant activity, as well as sexual slavery. However, it was later linked to post-modernity. More recently, it has been treated as a rational response to the socio-economic needs within the context of poverty, consumer culture, and the social frame that privileges male sexuality (O'Neill, 2001:15). As a starting point to understand what sex work means in the context of this research project; one needs to emplace it within critical feminist theory.

It is important to note that there are two positions to sex work which most feminists commonly take. The first position holds that women who work as sex workers are exploited by those who manage the sex industry, such as pimps and brothel managers (found to be mostly men). Moreover, the broader sex industry, along with sex work, serves to reinforce sex work as a patriarchal institution, which arguably is said to affect all women and gendered relations. The second position asserts that within contemporary society, sex work for many women is freely chosen. Whereby women choose to do this work, and when working in this industry, they deserve the same rights and liberties as others who work. This should include freedom from exploitation and violence in the course of their work (O'Neill, 2001:16). Therefore, there are various debates raised by feminists about sex work, and this is where one's positionality becomes adhesive. Conversely, some feminists want to support the eradication of



discriminatory practices which serve to punish and harass sex workers. However, arguably, there is rarely punishment for those who are involved in the buying and organising of sexual services, as research suggests that they need to be protected. In opposition, other feminists cannot support sex work and the sex industry as they find the work done to be morally and politically offensive (O'Neill, 2001:18).

I argue that it is these very positions that dominate discussions of sex work. It is important to bear in mind that sex work, like any other institution within contemporary society, is structured by attitudes, values, and beliefs. Sex work, in general, given its incendiary nature, is highly dependent on the naturalisation of principles that marginalise these women politically and socially (O'Neill, 2001:16). However, this study deals with questions as to why such attitudes, beliefs, and values are so deeply embedded when it comes to sex work more than any other institution. Does it have to do with social norms and mores which surround the vagina? Or is it because of perceptions of how the body is used in sex work? Such positions oppress sex workers, particularly women sex workers and silence their voices. Stigma, discrimination, and stereotypes about sex work are deeply embedded within the cultural framework of society, and this, in return, legitimates women's subordination as well as precarious positions in society. Therefore, this research aids in the discussion of sex work from the perspectives of sex workers themselves, as it is only through sharing their lived experiences that we truly understand sex work. Critical feminist theory thus aids in developing an interpretive understanding of sex work within contemporary society by focusing on the personal and experiential aspects of sex work (O'Neill, 2001:17).

This study addresses the Radical and Liberal Feminist debates on sex work, as they are the most dominant within feminist literature. It is important to note that while both perspectives strive for gender inequality, each differs in terms of how equality is/should be achieved. Liberal and Radical feminism are the two opposing schools of thought regarding sex work, policy reform and decriminalisation. Therefore, by sketching out and contrasting the theoretical backdrop of the Radical and Liberal feminist perspectives, I aim to demonstrate why I consider a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective to be better suited. Radical feminist discourse, synonymously referred to as "the sexual domination discourse" (Outshoorn, 2005:145), perceives sex work as the embodiment of women's oppression. It supports the above-mentioned position and oppression paradigm highlighted in the previous section, which classifies sex work as sexual slavery and defines it as an extreme expression of sexual violence against women. It asserts that sex work should be abolished and that all those profiting from

sex work, excluding the sex worker, should be punished. The sex worker is portrayed as a victim who requires help to escape slavery, as sex work is rendered to be a form of pleonasm. Many adherents of this position deny the idea of voluntary participation in sex work; they proclaim that no woman would prostitute herself by choice or free will (Outshoorn, 2005:145). The “work” aspect of sex work does not exist in radical feminism, as they do not accept “work” as a description of commercial sex. Famous radical feminist author Catharine MacKinnon draws parallels between Marxism and Feminism. She declares, “Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism, that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away... As the organised expropriation of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class, workers, the organised expropriations of sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman” (1989:3).

Given that sex work is described as a crisis under patriarchy and capitalism, MacKinnon argues that sexuality is “taken away” from women. Under patriarchy, hence, within sex work - women’s sexuality is argued not to be theirs at all as it becomes that which arouses desire within men. According to radical feminist theory, sex work cannot be described simply as a form of employment or labour with the same risks as alienation and exploitation as any other form of work. Yet, this research study proves this argument null. Sex as “that which is most one’s own” turns out not to be that way, as sex is shared with others in/during sex work. The “work” part of sex work is dropped as it is argued that there is only sex, which is inherently exploitative and degrading to women under the conditions of patriarchy (Sutherland, 2004:151). Radical feminists thereby link sex work to a litany of practices such as “abuses women” or “abuse of sex”. Therefore, radicals consider sex work as a form of violence against women caused by men’s assumed right to exert power and control over a woman’s body. Radical feminists do not want to establish a social acceptance of sex work; hence, the aim is to eradicate the institution of sex work itself (Sutherland, 2004:152).

Dissimilar to radical feminism, Liberal feminism does not regard women as victims but rather as empowered individuals. It is argued that while men dominate social structures, these structures need to be altered from within to redistribute power equally between men and women. It considers women’s struggle for equality due to the lack of equal job opportunities. Thus, scholars assert that there should be more focus on equality for women in the public sphere. This standpoint argues that sex work should be considered as a form of labour and maintains that the law/state should recognise “prostitution” as sex work. By recognising “prostitution” as sex work, it is claimed that women will no longer be denied their human right

to work and receive benefits that are guaranteed with employment under the law. The stance of prostitution as sex work is the dominant perspective within liberal feminism, and it holds that women have the right to agency and autonomy over what they choose as a profession. Liberal feminists sustain their position by emphasising the need to normalise and dehumanise the practice of prostitution by recognising it as sex work. They promote that the freedom to choose to enter sex work is a human right and maintain that women have the right to do with their bodies whatever they see fit. Hence, liberal feminism argues that if women are denied the right to enter sex work/become sex workers, they are being denied their human rights of equality, non-discrimination, liberty, and autonomy. Therefore, sex work is considered to be equivalent to other forms of work, and it should be decriminalised (Jaggar, 2018:102-103).

Central to the liberal feminist approach to sex work is liberal individualism – this approach is based on the belief that humans achieve dignity through autonomy, which is the right and freedom to choose options. In relation to sexual behaviour, individuals of either sex should be permitted to use their bodies as they see fit if there is consent from all parties involved and no harm is caused. Hence, choice, including the right to choose how to use one's body, is fundamental to the autonomy of an individual. Sex work, in retrospect to this view, involves the sale of a sexual service – which is argued to be no different from the services of a lawyer or doctor and is no less separate from the individual providing the service. Liberal feminists thus maintain that the state should renounce double standards and hypocrisy and permit both sexes the right to consensual sexual behaviour as long as said behaviour does not hurt others (Cooper, 1989:109). They argue that laws which outlaw sex work disproportionately harm women and that sex work is one of the few occupations in which women can achieve a measure of social independence and economic power. Henceforth, permitting sex work and decriminalising it is claimed to be a step toward empowering women and raising the level of women's self-respect. Sex work through the lens of liberal feminism is thus considered to be a personal choice and, therefore, legitimate. However, according to the social norms and moral institutions, it is not considered a desirable choice (Cooper, 1989:109).

Furthermore, liberal feminism has roots in different Western cultural tendencies which converge on the issue of sex work. Feminists who hold a liberal position argue that sex work is not as bad as it is painted to be and that it is no worse than other socially accepted practices. Sex work is considered to be better than most jobs available to women because it pays well for short hours, and there is considerable control over their work environment. In comparison to most precarious jobs held by women, sex work is declared to be the better option as - the sex

worker is said to decide which services they want to render, and the amount of time spent with a client. In defending sex work as a legitimate form of labour, liberal feminists assert the agency of sex workers (Jaggar, 1997:15). Hence, the liberal position holds that sex work is not a public nuisance nor a social embarrassment. Sex work thus affords women, specifically those from poverty-stricken homes and economically deprived backgrounds – the opportunity to earn a living for themselves, to support themselves and their families, and to exercise some control over their sexuality (Cooper, 1989:112). Therefore, there is an acknowledgement that while there are limited employment opportunities for women, most sex workers choose sex work freely (Jaggar, 1997:15-16).

In conclusion, many women, men, and transgender people engage in sex work as a means of work and a strategy of livelihood. It is important to acquaint oneself with accurate meanings and representations of social phenomena, particularly sex work, which is often falsely presented and misunderstood. Therefore, this chapter provides insight into the diverse ways sex work is contextualised from the perspectives of sex workers and sex work organisations, within the South African context, from a Sociological perspective and within the Feminist debate. Sex workers in this study are classified as workers/labourers, and they enter the industry for several reasons. However, sex work in South Africa and by law is still fully criminalised, but efforts have been made by the various sex work organisations in the country to change this. The road to decriminalisation is grim and dependent on a public understanding of sex work, and how it is perceived has implications on whether the bill will be passed. I encourage the reader to reflect on the contextualisation of sex work within this chapter; it is important given the misrepresentation and inaccurate information about sex work available within the public sphere. Although sociology contextualises sex work through various paradigms, the paradigm best suited for the contextualisation of sex work in this study is the polymorphous paradigm. This paradigm promotes an intersectional analysis of understanding and assessing the working conditions of sex workers. The intersectional and autonomous nature of sex work is thus no better understood than through a Marxist-Socialist Feminist framework, which I argue is best suited rather than the Liberal or Radical feminist perspective. The reasons in support of why I consider a Marxist-Socialist feminist lens to be better suited to understand sex work are discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Four: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### **4.1 Introduction:**

This chapter is divided into two sections. In Section One (theoretical framework), I outline the theoretical framework used to structure this research. I discuss in detail how a Marxist-Socialist Feminist perspective is better suited to understand sex work in the context of South Africa. Section Two (literature review) engages with relevant literature informing my conceptualisation of labour, sexualities, race, and sex work. I pay particular attention to key scholarships such as space and place, precarity, emotional labour and emotional work, and alienation. Additionally, I discuss these concepts in relation to agent-controlled work, the pseudo-family, class, capitalism, commodification, and interactive bodywork.

### **4.2 Section One: Theoretical Framework**

#### **4.2.1 Marxist-Socialist Feminism, in contextualising Sex Work**

The key concept and theoretical framework I drew on in the making of this research project was a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective. I used it to guide the conceptualisation and framing of this study and to inform the interpretation of results. Hence, the framing of this research project is grounded in the goals of Socialist feminism and arguments of Marxist feminism. The significance of this perspective goes beyond individual-level explanations and moral judgments; instead, it focuses on the structural and systemic factors which influence the experiences of sex workers. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intersections of race, gender, class, and capitalism within the sex worker industry.

At its core, Marxist-Socialist feminism allows for a structural analysis of sex work. It enables one to delve into the socio-economic systems, class structures, and power dynamics that underlie the sex industry. This approach is best suited to inform the aim and results of this research study, as it illuminates the root causes of sex work and the forces which shape the experience of sex workers. A Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective recognises the intersectionality of sex work, as it acknowledges that numerous factors such as gender, class, race, and sexuality – intersect to shape the experience of sex workers (Wondimu, 2021:1-2). Using this perspective to analyse the landscape of sex work helps avoid oversimplification and generalisations and provides a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences within the sex work industry. Therefore, socialist feminism is centred on understanding how the

systems of race, gender, sexuality, and social class work in combination, which results in women's exploitation and subordination as a result of capitalism (Wondimu, 2021:1-2).

Socialist feminist theory contains fundamental premises of both Marxist and Radical feminist theory. Radical feminism proposes that women's exploitation stems from the socio-cultural practices of capitalism and patriarchy, which Marxism asserts is the primary source of oppression and cause of women's inferior positions throughout communities. In the interim, the fundamental aim of socialist feminism is to overcome the historical exploitation of women, which is addressed through the institutions of capitalism and the male-dominated construction of communities (Wondimu, 2021:1-2). Marxist feminism provides a speculative perspective that rejects the argument that claims "women" are a uniform social category that is inevitably subordinated by men. Thereby, Marxist feminism argues that women's oppression is linked to specific historical and social conditions and provides various political strategies to overcome oppression. It has been found that the oppression of women in South Africa can be collapsed to the capitalist mode of production and women's precarious position in society (Cock & Luxton, 2012:117-119). Socialist feminism thus integrates gender, race, and class in a Marxist analysis of capitalism and class struggles.

Socialist feminism poses a utopia that aims to free women from cultural norms and advocates for women to have the same legal rights as men. It gives them greater control over their social reproduction, whereas Marxist feminism argues that this cannot be done without taking class differences into account. Marxist and Socialist feminism, in conjunction, work as a great mechanism to understand and analyse women's subordination to patriarchy and capitalism (Cock & Luxton, 2012:120). Sex work throughout history has been shaped by economic, social, and gender structures collated to its relationship with capitalism and patriarchy. While sex work existed through various forms of history, such as ancient civilisation, medieval and early modern periods – the Industrial Revolution left many women to move out of rural areas to find work, and this urban migration created a vulnerable population of women who turned to sex work due to limited economic opportunities. Similarly, the nineteenth century marked the emergence of "social purity"<sup>24</sup>, which opposed prostitution. Rooted in moral and health concerns, sex work was highly regulated and stigmatised. In the colonial context, the intersection between sex work and race becomes more pronounced. The colonial powers enforced strict controls over sex work amongst the colonised societies, which only further

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<sup>24</sup> The social purity movement was a late 19<sup>th</sup> century social movement that sought to abolish sex work and other sexual activities as it was considered immoral according to Christian morality.

perpetuated racial and gender hierarchies. Thereby, capitalism and patriarchy intersect with sex work; these systems reinforce one another and contribute to the exploitation and vulnerability of sex workers. By applying a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective, I am able to explore how the two still reinforce each other, leading to the commodification of sex (Beloso, 2015:48-50).

Socialist feminism thus poses goals that align with the main objectives of this project. The first is to analyse the exploitation of women based on capitalism and patriarchy from the perspective of women. Secondly, it advocates for people to have complete control over their own bodies and labour. Thirdly, it promotes social respect for the work people do, in understanding that all work should be considered socially significant. Thereby, Socialist and Marxist feminism endorses that the oppression of women is based on patriarchy and capitalism. It asserts the importance of understanding the continuing effects of imperialism, racism, and colonialism on women (Wondimu, 2021:2-3). The central claim of Marxist feminism is to eliminate the systematic oppression and inequalities which lead to the coercion and exploitation of subordinated classes. Marxist feminism argues that the systematic oppression of women is due to the capitalist system and means of private ownership of production within work and factories. The main objective of this theory, however, is to liberate women from exploitation by transforming the circumstances of their oppression, which, in the instance of my research, is to decriminalise sex work. (Wondimu, 2021:4-5).

Applying a Marxist-Socialist feminist lens to sex work reveals how sex workers are often pushed into the industry due to economic need, subjected to low wages and harsh working conditions, and frequently exploited by those in power, such as clients and brothel managers. Hence, this perspective places a large emphasis on their location in investigating the root cause of the exploitation of women (Wondimu, 2021:4-5). Despite Marx's lack of emphasis on gender disparities and women's status, Engels (1972) argued that men achieve dominance over women with their ability to produce a surplus of wealth. The division of class and labour was between men who owned private property and women who did not. Engels (1972) thus suggested that women's equality lies within engagement in employment and the overthrow of patriarchy. Women are undoubtedly exploited within the capitalist system. Accordingly, the path to liberation for women is possible via class struggle against exploitation. On the other hand, Marx demonstrates how capitalists can achieve upward mobility due to the exploitation of the labour of subordinate classes and women.

An important thread throughout this research study is Marx's definition of class, which describes how one class controls another's control over the means of production. Social reproduction, coined as labour, exists within all relations of capitalism; thus, within every relation between capitalist and worker or husband and wife lie gender roles. Women do the bulk of the work, under the control of men, to produce labour. Thereby, women are reproduced workers who sell their labour power to capitalism. In addition, wealth accumulates for the capitalists as they own the means of production. Those who own the means of production hoard for themselves the profit from the production of commodities, whose social goods are bought and sold for reproduction. Hence, women are used for their reproductive nature and are rendered objects within capitalism (Armstrong, 2020:3-5). With the use of a Marxist/Feminist perspective, I emphasise the concept of unpaid reproductive labour, which includes emotional and care work. This is expected from sex workers by clients and brother managers, which begs the question about the gendered nature of sex work and how it relates to broader issues of women's unpaid labour within society. In addition, this perspective enabled the exploration of how gendered ideologies of masculinity and femininity structure production in capitalism (Armstrong, 2020:7, Wondimu, 2021:8).

The primary aim of socialist feminism is thus to overcome the historical account of the exploitation of women, as it investigates the effects of fair distribution of resources in understanding the correlation between class and gender (Armstrong, 2020:7, Wondimu, 2021:8). Sex work then can be described as the "metamorphosis of the commodity itself", as it is argued to represent a distinct form of commodification, where intimate and personal services are bought and sold in the marketplace of sex trade. Sex work is viewed as an alteration of the nature of commodities, specifically the commodification of sexual services. The implication is that sex work, in its exchange of sexual services for payment, represents a unique and transformative aspect of commodification, highlighting the complex interplay between labour, intimacy, and economics. Marx described it as the most abstract form of crisis under capitalism (Beloso, 2015:49). Although many feminists frame discussions of sex work in relation to gender and sexuality, within this research study, I situate sex work within class. The definition of class from a feminist perspective is an "ontological, static category which serves as a reified identity marker on par with race, sex, and sexual orientation" (Beloso, 2015:52). In defining class in this way, it highlights two things; firstly, in relation to Marx and how social classes are reified in capitalists societies, the identity category marked by feminism is treated as a fixed. Secondly, from a socialist perspective, it demonstrates how the static nature of this category



can reinforce gender norms and patriarchal structures and how this intersects with class-based oppression (Beloso, 2015:52-53). Society, therefore, transforms already-sexed bodies into hierarchically gendered individuals. This identity marker serves in the interests of power, and it could be through reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating inequalities. Consequently, there is a lack of attention to women's exploitation as workers and as commodities. Hence, with the use of Marxist-Socialist feminism, I express women as labourers and sex as a particular product of individual labour. With the use of Marx, I marked this crucial difference, which is the difference between the labour production for direct consumption and labour involved in production for commodity exchange under capitalism (Armstrong, 2020:7, Wondimu, 2021:8-9).

The above-mentioned distinction demonstrates the difference in the labour involved in the production of sex and oppression, whereby labour's relation to the means of production under capitalism only becomes visible once the distinction is made between sexuality, sex, and labour. Beloso (2015:50-52) states that situating sex work within classwork highlights the extraction of surplus value of all labouring bodies, which would "denaturalise the gendered and sexualised inconsistencies that prevail under capitalism". With this conceptual difference, I aim to uncover the intersectional and autonomous subject of sex work, as it is a political minefield of ideological and moral positions which dominate discussions of sex work. Thus, this research places sex work within the class and generates a discussion of sex work from the perspective of sex workers themselves, bringing attention to their understandings and experiences within the various spaces in which sex work occurs. With the use of a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective, I was able to recognise the agency of sex workers and their collective actions. Hence, this lens enabled me to highlight the importance of labour rights, empowerment, and solidarity among sex workers to challenge inequality and exploitation (Beloso, 2015:50-52).

In conclusion, applying a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective to analyse sex work in the context of South Africa is of significance as it goes beyond individual-level explanations and moral judgements. It enables a focus on the structural and systematic factors which influence the experiences of sex work. In retrospect, to the participants of this research study, it is clear that the experiences of sex workers are influenced by a complex interplay of structural and systematic factors, and these factors shape their working conditions and choices. Some key structural and systematic factors that influenced the experiences of sex workers in this research study, to be discussed more broadly in my findings - are economic inequality and poverty,

gender inequality, racial and ethnic disparities, the criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex workers, sex work organisations and advocacy, and violence and exploitation. Lastly, a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intersection of race, gender, class, and capitalism within the sex work industry. This research ultimately aims to contribute to more informed research, policy, and advocacy in the field of sex work and gender studies.

### **4.3 Section Two: Literature Review**

#### **4.3.1 Space & Place, Agents, the Pseudo-family & Precarity**

In the context of examining the working conditions of sex work - the concepts of space and place are intricately linked to understanding its landscape and how the working conditions differ across the distinctive spaces. This discussion draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Doreen Massey (1994) to elucidate the use of these concepts and their application to spaces such as brothels, the street, and the organisational space.

According to the authors mentioned above, “space” is conceived as being “real, lived, and socially produced”. Spatiality is a broader concept encompassing both space and place; it recognises the complex interplay of these concepts in shaping social life. It emphasises the dynamic and relational aspects of spatial relationships and how space and place interact to influence social phenomena. Massey (1994:4) contends that space can be seen as a social relation that extends over a geographical area. Thus, space represents a “geometry of power”. Contrary to the conventional view of space as an inert arrangement of physical entities, often described as Euclidean space, the utilisation of the concept of space within this study is linked to the idea that it is shaped through social interactions and the conditions of each space, which gives rise to social place. Moreover, space is a performance – a recursive interplay between the spatial and the social within distinct power relations. I thus employ the concepts of space and place to interpret the sex work landscape as experienced by the participants of this study. Place represents a particular expression of these relations, a particular moment in the web of social relations and understandings (Massey, 1994:5). It is a space imbued with meaning and significance through human experiences and interactions; it can carry cultural, historical, and emotional significance. In other words, spatiality is a construct formed by the “multiplicity of social relations across spatial scales, from global influence of finance and telecommunications to the local dynamics of political power, social relations within communities, workplaces, and households” (Massey:1994:4).

However, place is the outcome of spatialised social relations and narratives surrounding these relations. Place only exists in relation to a specific criterion, such as one's home, office, or country. Consequently, place becomes tangible, socially constructed, and socially produced through meaning. Massey (1994:5) suggests that place emerges from the anchoring of meanings onto space, in which it reflects efforts to contain, assert ownership, immobilise, include, and exclude. Nevertheless, when perceiving places much like spaces – as products of social relations, ever-emergent rather than pre-existing and perpetually evolving, place thus serves as a tool for making sense of diverse and dynamic spaces. Place is not space – as space refers to the physical dimensions and geographical locations where social interaction occurs. Place is made as people ascribe qualities to the material and social stuff gathered within each space, such as “ours or theirs” and “safe or dangerous” (Gieryn, 2000:474). The formation of emotional and sentimental bonds between people and a place is only brought together within a space, and individuals associate place with fulfilment, triumph, and sometimes trauma. Place attachment can thus develop, facilitating a sense of security and well-being. This research project explores the practice of sex work in crafting places, delving into the working conditions of each of these spaces, questioning if they vary, how they vary and in what ways they are the same. Chapter five illustrates how sex work is performed in these different spaces and how the working conditions vary across each space, as well as how place and place attachment come about as sex workers find a safe space within organisations such as SWEAT and Sisonke.

When contextualising and exploring the brothel space and the working conditions thereof- I attribute the role of an *agent* to the brothel manager - as they take on the managing role of sex workers. Agents, argued by Mittal, Rangel, Staines, Yotebieng, Strathdee, and Syversten (2018:3), sell the bodies and labour of female sex workers as a “commodity and prevent them from escaping sex work”. An agent can be defined as an “individual who manages street-level sex workers, induces, promotes, and profits from them (Mittal et al., 2018:3; Weitzer, 2009:228). Agents provide temporary employment for sex workers, in which they invest and control sex-worker revenue for their own upward mobility. The basic issue between agents and sex workers is who owns the means of production and what the means of production prevalent to this relationship is. The unequal relation of power and class subordination between agent and sex worker are grounded in a system of ownership (Saunders, 2006:10). By taking a Marxist capitalist perspective, it appears that agents have become an embodiment of a “capitalist” who lives off the income of women and men who work on the street by controlling their labour and labour power. The social role of a brothel manager within the sex industry

functions in accordance with capitalistic values such as masculinity and patriarchy. Therefore, within Chapter Five, when exploring the brothel space in relation to the concepts of spatiality – I demonstrate how agents do, in fact, impose control over the labour and labour power of sex workers, to the point that they become alienated on various levels.

According to (Nevin, 2013:2-3), modern conceptualisations of masculinity reflect the capitalist ruling class hegemony and patriarchy. Paternalistic and patriarchal values are attached to capitalists, and similarly, it is attached to the role of the brothel manager or agent within the sex industry. Masculinity, in this sense, is categorised by flaunting money, power, and women in front of other men. The analogy of describing masculinity in this way serves as a reference to how brothel managers and pimps are argued to flaunt and objectify women for financial gain. The enterprise of pimping or brothel managing is rooted in selling sex for money; hence the sexual services of women sex workers represent a currency of exchange that improves the economic and social capital of men (Nevin, 2013:5-6). The bodies and sexuality of sex workers are commodified and treated as property that may be sold and bought until they possess no economic value. Capitalistic-Patriarchy features within this relationship as it encompasses distinct patriarchal roles of male and female. The structures of patriarchy are pervasive in modern capitalistic society, and it is portrayed at a micro-level within the organisation of the brothel manager-sex worker relationship. This, I argue, makes for a “pseudo-family.” I explore the notion of a pseudo-family in relation to spatiality as it comes out within the brothel space. Nevin (2013:8-9) asserts that the pseudo-family structure provides an illusion of security due to the hierarchal relationship in which the brothel acts as a protector, decision maker and disciplinarian. Consequently, this illusion of protection is illustrated through the sex workers’ description of a brothel as “safer” than the street. However, in reality, a brothel manager exploits the labour of sex workers, notably female sex workers. This family dynamic may be an extension of the traditional family in which men are typically the heads of households and women the performers of domestic-like labour.

While the brothel space provides an illusion of security, it is important to bear in mind that sex workers, moreover, female sex workers – hold precarious positions within society. Sex work is heavily subjected to moral and political censure; sex workers thus experience precarity because of the stigma and discrimination attached to their identity. The level of precarity is further complicated in retrospect to the brothel space, as the public not only holds a perception of sex workers but of this space, too. Historically, precarity refers to uncertainty beyond human control, as evidenced by Bourdieu (1998), Standing (2011), and Butler (2009). However,

within contemporary research, uncertainty is recognised as a central element of precarity. Some scholars intricately link precarity to capitalist-wage labour, viewing it as an ongoing process that involves dismantling the welfare state and the rise of low-paid, temporary, and unprotected employment relations – linked to flexible or atypical employment conditions. This research demonstrates how neoliberal policies within South Africa have resulted in increased social insecurity, which gave rise to precarious employment (Decoteau, 2016). In a social context, Precarity refers to the state of insecurity, instability, and vulnerability that individuals/groups experience in various aspects of their lives, particularly in economic, social, and employment domains. The state of precarity can manifest in diverse ways and be closely tied to various structural and cultural factors.

When exploring the concept of precarity and its relation to sex work, it becomes evident that sex work is a domain whereby precarity is particularly prevalent and complex. Firstly, sex work as an employment option arises from economic precarity, where individuals enter to supplement their income and as a means of survival. Economic instability, limited job opportunities, financial insecurity, and low educational attainment drive people to engage in sex work. Secondly, sex workers often face social precarity, which includes stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion. Society marginalises and ostracises sex workers; this leads to social isolation and a lack of support networks. Thirdly, the legal status of sex work in South Africa is that it is criminalised. Thus, sex workers are subjected to arrests, harassment, and prosecution, which leads to constant uncertainty and fear of legal repercussions. Therefore, precarity is conceptualised in line with the notions of race, class, and gender from an interpretive perspective: how, within these different spaces, sex workers experience precarity in relation to their working conditions. Precarity can thus manifest in political, economic, and social disparities and unequal power relations. It is primarily experienced by marginalised, improvised, and disenfranchised individuals who are exposed to economic insecurity, violence, and forced migration (Butler, 2004).

### **4.3.2 Emotional Labour, Emotional Work and Emotional Rules**

In the context of examining the nature of sex work and its working conditions - I explore the performance of emotional labour and emotional work as introduced by Arlie Hochschild (1979) and how it influences sex workers' relationships with clients. Hochschild (1990:118) describes emotion as an awareness of four elements that individuals commonly experience at the same time: 1) appraisals of situations, 2) change in bodily sensations, 3) the free display of expressive gestures, and 4) a cultural label applied to specific patterns of the first three elements. Humans learn how to appraise, display, and label emotions in relation to the emotions of others. Therefore, the expression of emotion, which was once considered to exist in the private sphere – has shifted to the public sphere, in which it has been made saleable by organisations. For organisation/workplace purposes, emotions have become a commodity that can be controlled, and workers must learn to express the prescribed emotions (Hochschild 1979; 1983; 1993).

During their employment, a worker might be expected by their employer to elevate their own status or the status of a client/customer to have the upper hand or exert a particular form of control over others (Hochschild, 1979). The sex worker, in the context of my thesis – needs to elevate and constantly manage their emotions when interacting with clients and other sex workers. While they perform emotional labour, their interaction with clients extends to emotional work, and constant emotional management enables them to detach meaning and intimacy from clients. However, in order to enhance the service and experience - sex workers strive to create comfort in the space where the service occurs and when in contact with clients to induce liking and care. Emotional labour thus encompasses the intricate process through which workers suppress, conceal, and manage their genuine emotions while simultaneously fabricating and projecting a desired emotional response within a specific context.

Hochschild (1983:147) identifies three key attributes that are common in jobs which require emotional labour: 1) face-to-face contact between the employee and client, 2) the requirement for the employee to induce a specific emotional state in the client, and 3) the capacity of the employer to influence the emotional conduct of workers through a degree of control. Hence, occupations that fulfil all three categories mentioned above, such as flight attendants, introduce a dimension of work often overlooked: emotional labour. This encompasses emotional work, adherence to emotional regulation, and an interplay of social exchanges within the public sphere (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). Within service-orientated professions, like that of a flight attendant – emotional management becomes a part of the official job requirement, as noted by Wharton (2009:147-148). Individuals are expected to market their professional skills and

emotions in the service of the organisation/companies' profitability and upward mobility. Emotional management transpires in the public sphere, moulded by cultural and societal norms which dictate what emotions are deemed suitable and acceptable to express (Wharton, 2009:148-149). Therefore, sex work might be considered an unlawful means of work, but it indeed makes for a form of emotional labour as it is a service job and requires emotional management.

Wharton (2009) asserts that both sex workers and clients regulate emotions within the context of cultural and social structures, which ultimately influences the experience of clients and sex workers and shapes the overall dynamic of the sex work industry. Hochschild (1983) characterises emotional labour as a predominantly negative concept wherein employees must exchange a portion of their authentic selves to stimulate clients within an organisation/workplace in return for job security and financial compensation. The negative feature attached to her conceptualisation of emotional labour stems from personal and social aspects, in which workers employ surface and deep acting. Both forms are argued to have consequences and include a sense of estrangement due to the constant interruption of one's emotions and bodily demeanour (Gimlin, 2007:362). Nevertheless, Hargreaves (2001) argues that Hochschild (1983) overlooks the pleasure that some individuals might derive from engaging in emotional labour. Hargreaves posits that Hochschild may overemphasise the exchange value of emotional labour by focusing on its profitability and the emotion of "selling out" at the expense of its use value, which lies in the genuine emotional exchanges that occur as an act of sincere emotional giving (Hargreaves, 2001:1074). The nature of emotional labour depends on the power dynamics and objectives prevailing in the workplace, including whether the organisation/workplace's primary aim is profit-orientated. However, while sex work may not fit the conventional mould of work, there are power dynamics and objectives that prevail within the sex industry, particularly in relation to the different spaces in which sex work occurs and in experiences with clients, brothel managers, pimps, and other sex workers (Hargreaves, 2001:1073-1074).

In the context of emotional labour, emotional rules emerge, which guide employees on the extent to which they should engage with clients during interactions (Hochschild, 1979,1985, 2003, 2011). These rules help facilitate "emotional work" by establishing a sense of obligation or entitlement that regulates emotional exchanges (Hochschild, 1985:56). Emotional work is a related concept to emotional labour. However, it extends beyond the workplace and encompasses the efforts people engage in to maintain relations or to meet the emotional

expectations of the next person. While emotional work is often done in relation to family and friends, this notion can be extended to sex workers – while they render a service, they often need to make clients feel loved, provide comfort and express care – which is invisible and unpaid. Emotional work thus involves efforts to modify the quality or degree of emotions/feelings. Emotional rules are essentially social guidelines that govern how individuals strive to feel, representing a set of collectively recognised norms (Hochschild, 1979:561-563). The enforcement and management of emotions as “appropriate” or “inappropriate” occur through classifying the former as normal and the latter as peculiar. This can be linked to what Bourdieu metaphorically describes as “rules” in the game of social life, which dictates the permissible actions of players; this can be referred to as “emotional rules” (Jenkins, 1992). Within the context of sex work, emotional rules align with professional and service standards of the client-to-sex worker experience, in which sex workers constantly need to manage their emotions during interactions with clients.

Emotional rules are the implicit guidelines and expectations that govern how individuals should express and manage their emotions in a given social or cultural context. These rules vary across workspaces, cultures, and specific social situations. Sex workers are expected to be carefree and up for anything in their interactions with clients but still maintain distance in emotional displays to create a barrier between intimacy and service. Emotional rules dictate which emotions are acceptable to display, how they should be expressed, and when they should be displayed. The management of emotions within one’s workspace is often undertaken to safeguard the personal identity of the worker. However, the question arises as to how emotionally distant or involved sex workers should be and, to what extent they should invest in the personal lives of their clients, and to what extent their interactions with clients should affect their lives. Nevertheless, while emotional rules are shaped by society – individuals still retain the choice of how to react in a specific context, which intimately intertwines with their personal and social identities (Hochschild, 2011:31-32; Theodosius, 2008:97). Complex and contradictory relationships between bodies, work, emotions, and identity also benefit from elucidation by alienation theory.

#### **4.3.3 Alienation & Capitalism, Commodification & The Female Body:**

In the context of understanding the landscape of sex work and the different spaces in which sex work is performed – it is apparent that sex workers experience alienation within these various spaces. I thus explore Alienation theory - one of the fundamental aspects of Karl Marx’s socio-economic and philosophical thought. His conceptualisation of alienation remains a cornerstone



of his critique of capitalism, and in chapter five – I delve into this existing body of literature. The discussion draws further into the distinct types of alienation and how each type of alienation can be used to understand the working conditions of sex work. The notion of alienation has transcended its original context of the nineteenth-century industrial society; whereby in this research, I will use it in contrast to the social context of sex work. I argue that Marx's alienation theory is and continues to be a lens through which we can understand various aspects of modern life, particularly sex work within twenty-first-century South Africa.

Marx developed his theory of alienation within a specific historical and philosophical context, which is shaped by the socio-economic conditions of his time. Hence, to understand his contextualisation of alienation, it is essential to consider the various phenomena described and discussed below. It provides key elements for the context in which Marx's work is written and the developments of alienation. Firstly, Marx wrote during the nineteenth century and this period signified - the Industrial Revolution. This era marked for momentous growth in technological advancement, urbanisation, and the rise of industrial capitalism. The production process of factories and machines were transforming, which led to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of industrial capitalists. Secondly, capitalism is of great significance to the development of his theory of alienation – hence, the economic system during Marx's time was indeed capitalism. It is characterised by private ownership of the means of production and the pursuit of profit. Under capitalism, Marx observed that workers were increasingly alienated from their labour and the products of their labour. The third phenomenon out of which Marx developed alienation was class struggles. The idea of alienation developed in the context of pervasive social inequality and class struggles. Marx observed that the working class, the proletariat, was exploited by the capitalist class, the bourgeoisie. Henceforth, he believed that this exploitation was the central source of alienation (Sayers, 2005).

As society underwent, industrialisation and capitalism unfolded – a periodic economic crisis transpired. This marked yet another profound effect on society within that century. Along with an economic crisis came recessions and depressions; these crises highlighted the instability of the capitalist system and exacerbated the suffering of the working class during economic downturns. Factory work during this period was widespread, and dangerous working conditions, long hours, and monotonous tasks often characterised it. Workers had little control over their work processes, which, as a result, led to a sense of powerlessness and alienation, and in the context of this research project – sex work. Lastly, when developing his theory of alienation, Marx took philosophical influence from George Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach.

Hegel's dialectical method and historical materialism profoundly impacted Marx's thinking. In addition, Feuerbach's materialist critique of religion and his focus on human alienation from the essence of humanity also influenced Marx's conceptualisation of alienation (Sayers, 2005:609-610). Therefore, when considering those mentioned historical and philosophical contexts, it is important to remember that Marx's theory of alienation was a critique of/the dehumanising effects of capitalism.

Marx's theory of alienation explains the "paradox of social power and isolation which characterises contemporary capitalist societies, in which feelings of powerlessness and loneliness are intensified despite objective increases in humanity's social power and interdependence" (Oversveen, 2022:440). Thus, Work is regarded as an unwanted activity forced upon us, as a mere means to an end. While we labour, the exercise of our productive powers is experienced as alien and external. Work should not be experienced in this way - unalienated work can be defined as a "productive and creative activity, which should be fulfilling and serve as an expression of our creative power, and not simply a means to an end but as an end itself" (Sayers, 2005:610). Under capitalism, workers create products by investing their own labour with natural resources to create something new of economic value. In such a manner, work becomes objectified as it is transformed into a commodity that can be bought and sold on the market. Hence, the root of alienation is thus when an individual's labour becomes disconnected from herself or himself (Shantz et al., 2014:2530). In everyday language, alienation is a loose and vague term which denotes a feeling of meaninglessness or a state of discontent or unhappiness in relation to work. However, within Marx's writings it is a precise theoretical term with an exclusive meaning (Sayers, 2005:609).

Alienation thus refers to "a situation in which we relate to our own product or activity as if it is something independent and hostile" (Sayers, 2005:609). When applying it to work or labour, my work is alienated when 1) its product appears to be an independent and hostile power working against me, and 2) the labour seems to be an external activity, a mere means to an end. Participants of this study speak about sex work as a means of survival, and this marks how they experience labour. Marx further described alienation as an "objective condition through which workers are physically estranged", and he believed alienation to be a terrible psychological state (Smith, 2013:1). For Marx – the enigma of alienation resolves the three following factors, "1) the actual needs of man, 2) the ingredients of a morally desired life, and 3) whether society conduces or militates against the satisfaction of man's needs" (Nielsen, 1968:124-125). He considered the notion of power to be at the crux of alienation, as the basis of all forms of

alienation is, in fact, just power that some men wield over others. Alienation thus focuses on how capitalism impacts the relationship between the worker, their labour, the products of their labour, and the social structure. In contrasting alienation theory to sex work, it is essential to note that the negotiation and transaction of sexual services is an underground and misrepresented economy, whereby the product or machine refers to women, the marketing refers to the exploitation process, and the purpose is financially motivated.

Marx identifies four types of alienation, which will be used in contrast and applied to the social context of sex work and the working conditions thereof, to be discussed more in-depth in chapter five. The four types of alienation are: firstly, workers are alienated from the product of their labour, whereas Marx argues that under capitalism, workers are alienated from the products they create. Workers typically do not own or have control over the items they produce, as they are owned and sold by the capitalists or the bourgeoisie. As a result, this lack of ownership and control leads to feeling a sense of detachment and estrangement from the fruits of one's labour. This form of alienation is expanded on later, in which I discuss how sex workers feel alienated from their bodies and sexual services and how clients dictate the terms and conditions of the encounter. Secondly, workers are alienated from the process of labour, through which workers in the capitalist have little to no say in when, how, and under what circumstances/conditions they work. They are subjected to the control of the employer, who determines both the pace and method of production. Therefore, the lack of autonomy, agency, and control over the labour process might result in feelings of powerlessness and disconnection from one's own work (Nielsen, 1968:125-126; Smith, 2013:1). This form of alienation is expanded on later, in which I discuss how sex workers face coercive and exploitative conditions at work.

Third, workers are alienated from themselves and human potential, as Marx believed that work should be a means for individuals to express their creativity, skills, and abilities. However, under capitalism, work has become a means of survival instead of self-fulfilment. Workers are repeatedly coerced to perform monotonous and repetitive tasks, which results in a sense of underutilised human potential and loss of individuality, and sex work as a form of work – described by the participants of this study is a means to an end, the job sometimes becomes monotonous which affects their flow of income. Lastly, workers are alienated from fellow workers and society, as capitalism promotes competition among workers. This fosters a sense of individualism, as the competitive environment could potentially erode workers' sense of community and solidarity. Marx argued that alienation from fellow workers and society makes

it difficult for workers to recognise their common interests and unite against the exploitative nature of capitalism. This relates to the way sex workers face social stigma and discrimination from mainstream society, which is expanded within my findings chapter. Therefore, Marx stressed that these forms of alienation are inherent to the capitalist mode of production. He views capitalism as a system that commodifies labour and reduces human beings to mere apparatus of production. Marx's conceptualisation of alienation and its diverse types will be further discussed in chapter five, as its relation to understanding sex work in the twenty-first century (Nielsen, 1968:125-126; Smith, 2013:1).

This chapter delves into the literature and the theoretical framework that informs this thesis. The chapter hereafter presents the results of my research, in which I discuss the details of what was discovered through data collection. By merging the established theories with the findings of this study, I aim to enhance an understanding of sex work in hopes of shedding light on the complexity of- and nuanced experiences of sex workers.

## **Chapter Five: Findings Chapter**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I detailed the literature that informs the findings of this study. In this chapter, I unveil the findings derived from data collection. Through my investigation into Cape Town's sex economy, this study was guided by wanting to understand the working conditions of sex work and the landscape of the sex industry, particularly from the perspective of sex workers themselves. Through a thematic analysis, the findings discussed in this chapter are cast against the backdrop of existing sociological theory, in which I forward a discussion that accentuates both the continuities and deviations of theory about the phenomenon observed. In using the above in combination, this chapter sheds light on the working conditions of sex work and complexities that characterise the lives of sex workers and the broader nature of sex work within South Africa.

This chapter starts by discussing the relationship between precarity and sex work, whereby I draw on Bourdieu (1998), Standing (2011), and Butler (2004, 2009). I proceed by linking participants' experiences of precarity to neoliberalism in South Africa and highlight how sex work constitutes a part of South Africa's informal economy. Secondly, I draw on Lefebvre's (1991) and Massey's (1994) work to describe the different spaces that sex workers engage in and describe the working conditions within each space, highlighting how they are similar, differ and the tensions between them. The spaces identified are the brothel space, street space, and organisational space; each of the spaces is discussed in contrast to Lefebvre's spatial triad and Massey's notion of place. Thirdly, within the various spaces identified, sex workers experience alienation and at least one of its four modes. I use Marx's theory of alienation to further the discussion of the conditions experienced by sex workers, from clients, police, brothel managers, other sex workers, and society. Lastly, the work of sex workers extends to reproductive labour, and I employ Hochschild's concept of emotional labour and emotional work, situating it in the broader context of interactive bodywork (Gimlin, 2007)

### **5.2 Sex Workers as the Precariat, Neoliberalism, and the Informal Economy**

Sex workers hold precarious positions in society, as they make for a population that is heavily subjected to political and moral censure. They experience precarity due to being criminalised and the discrimination, stigma and generalisations attached to their identity. I employ *Bourdieu (1998), Standing (2011), and Butler (2004, 2009)* to facilitate a discussion of precarity. Each of these authors contextualises precarity in a fundamentally unique way, and using their conceptualisations in combination, they inform an understanding of precarity befitting to sex

work and the social context thereof. Precarity as a state of insecurity and vulnerability is intricately linked to structural and cultural factors within employment, social, and economic domains. According to Bourdieu (1998), within Millar (2017), precarity is associated with poverty and job insecurity. When neoliberal reforms began to erode the guarantees of full-time employment, he argued that it gave rise to flexible employment. Precarity can thus be seen as a labour condition; from this perspective, precarity refers to precarious work, which is “characterised by job insecurity, part-time employment, lack of social benefits, and low wages” (Millar, 2017:2-3). Precarious work refers to employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and considered risky from the worker's viewpoint (Millar, 2017:3). Sex work as a form of work, I argue, is precarious work, and sex workers experience precarity within different domains of their lives. Sex work as an employment option for participants arises from economic precarity whereby participants noted that they had limited job and educational opportunities and experienced economic instability and financial insecurity. I draw on the following statements from participants to support my argument:

*“I became a sex worker because I was not working at the time. So, I needed something to survive on.... What made me become a sex worker was the conditions that I was facing; it did not force me, but it made me realise that I can make a living out of it”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

*“The time I started doing sex work, I come from a rural area, Eastern Cape. My mother was not working for a long time, and then both of my parents passed away. And then I came to Cape Town to look for a job and did not find a job at all. I then started to do sex work, as I saw it being done around me”* (Luna, 17 July 2023).

*“I decided to be or become a sex worker because I had a child & I was not working... I realised that after I had my child, I needed to make money & help myself for better; I then started selling my body to put food on the table”* (Charlotte, 17 July 2023).

Participants resort to sex work as a form of employment out of economic precarity. However, sex work as a means of work can be linked to capitalist-wage labour, as it involves low-paid, temporary, and unprotected employment relations. Sex work is atypical as it makes for a peculiar form of employment that encompasses distinct conditions and labour relations. Within the South African context and when drawing on Decoteau (2016), I argue that neoliberalism has forced poor women<sup>25</sup> to rely extensively and sometimes exclusively on sexual exchange to

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<sup>25</sup> Women who fall into this category were found to be Black, working-class, and come from townships or rural areas marked by various deficits (economic, social, and environmental)

support their families. Sex workers, and notably the participants of this study, use sex as a currency to survive economic hardship and to support their families because no other opportunities are/were available. Sex work becomes a means of survival for many women in South Africa, and the neo-liberalisation<sup>26</sup> of the South African economy only further exacerbated unemployment and informal work, thus increasing the number of individuals who enter sex work (Decoteau, 2016:290-291). However, South Africa's adoption of neoliberalism was slightly different from other colonised nations as it achieved democracy late. The neoliberal reforms were introduced in the late 1980s by the African National Congress (ANC), in which they adopted the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Macroeconomic Strategy (GEAR)<sup>27</sup>. However, the adoption of neoliberalism only further exacerbated the already high levels of racial, social, and class inequalities. Unemployment rates increased; by 2005, persons aged 15-24 were 58 percent men and 72 percent women (Decoteau, 2016:292-293).

South Africa's adoption of neoliberalism affected all classes; however, its most significant impact has been on the expansion of poverty and precarity. There was a focus on men's unemployment in the post-apartheid era, thus leaving women to be excluded from the formal economy. Given that minimal state welfare is only provided based on motherhood, poor women sought out other means of work to generate an income and support their families. Decoteau (2016:293) asserts that the forms of social welfare institutionalised a gendered burden of care without providing women with enough money to support their households. Many women, particularly Black women such as all my participants, either delved into social reproductive labour or sex work. Sex workers thus form a part of a class called the "precariat", which Standing (2011) refers to as "a heterogenous group ranging from migrants to call-centre workers, or any person working part-time, and all of these workers share a lack of work-based identity, and loss of different forms of labour security" (Millar, 2017:3). While sex workers do not fit the conventional definition of the precariat, I argue that they do fit into this category given that they are workers who lack a work-based identity, as their identity is attached to stigma and discrimination. This leads to their exclusion from mainstream employment opportunities, which not only forces individuals into sex work but also exacerbates the precariousness of their work. In addition, sex workers face social precarity, which results in

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<sup>26</sup> Neoliberalism refers to an ideology premised on the belief that unregulated markets, free from state intervention are the best means of economic development.

<sup>27</sup> This included the following strategies: opening its national borders to international corporations; accepting the apartheid government's international debt of \$20 billion; outsourcing production (for example, of textiles) to international markets; cutting social spending on housing, welfare, education, and healthcare; and privatizing social services.

social exclusion and a lack of support networks as society marginalises and ostracises them. As a group, they experience labour insecurity, such as no commitment by the state, no protection against violence, lack of access to health care, and no protection in the event of job loss, nor do trade unions represent them. Sex workers do not have the same employment rights and protections as other workers, and the absence of these rights contributes to their vulnerability. Therefore, job security and employment rights for sex workers are only achievable through decriminalisation (Millar, 2017:3-4). To support the findings, I present here I draw on the following statements by participants in relation to asking what the working conditions of sex work are;

*“I wanted to, to exit is because when it comes to a point by whereby now your family gets to know what you are doing. And the community, the stigma around the sex work industry. That alone? It can put you down. It is one of the reasons that made me relocate. I had to relocate and move to a different area where nobody knew me, and nobody knew my story. So, there are places that you will go to, and you will feel like people are looking at you with that eye. Like oh look at her, look at that "thing", like you are cheap or what” (Pam, 17 July 2023).*

*“It is very dangerous, and sometimes things just get worse. And if government can do something for us [decriminalise sex work]. It would be better because it is going to be secured or safer for us on the street, or security/officials will be there for us. People will respect us then” (Grace, 17 July 2023).*

*“The working conditions of sex work it is just bad. It is not safe at all. Up until we get decriminalisation...And he [the police officer] knows that you are a criminal because we are called criminals as sex workers. You can go and report such cases to the police, so they abuse their power against the sex workers, so we just live in danger; it is not safe at all” (Max, 17 July 2023).*

Butler (2004) refers to precariousness as “common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself” (Millar, 2017:4) and classifies vulnerability to be the same for everyone regardless of class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, or age. Although she maintains that everyone is vulnerable, she acknowledges that vulnerability is distributed unequally. Butler, thus, forwards precariousness as an unavoidable vulnerability that is a condition of sociality and precarity as the specific way socioeconomic and political institutions distribute the conditions unequally. She explores precarity in relation to gender identity, sexuality, and social norms, in which she argues that the categories and norms that define our identities are not fixed but contingent on



social, cultural, and political contexts. While Butler's work on precarity was done on gender performativity, how she extended her conceptualisation is of significant use in understanding the social context of sex work. She extends her conceptualisation of precarity to broader social and political contexts, in which she emphasises how certain groups, particularly marginalised groups such as sex workers, can be particularly vulnerable due to economic and social instability. This added lens of precarity is useful in understanding sex work, as Butler points to the systems of power that contribute to the precarisation of certain people and groups (Butler, 2009:2-3). The systems of power in relation to sex work and the social context of sex work in South Africa involve the state, clients, police, law enforcement, and third parties such as brothel managers or pimps. The fear of violence and abuse contributes to the precariousness of sex workers and their work. Therefore, the legal status of sex work in South Africa subjects sex workers to arrests, harassment, prosecution, and working in exploitative conditions.

While Butler's conceptualisation of precarity helps understand certain elements of the social context of sex work, I argue that her concept lacks intersectionality. Her analysis of precarity in relation to the one-dimensional definition of vulnerability does not consider the true complexity of the lives of sex workers, their working conditions, and life circumstances. Through data analysis, it is apparent that the interconnected nature of social organisations, such as race, class, and gender, is important to understand the working conditions and experiences of sex workers, particularly in the context of South Africa and how each of these factors work together. Sex workers, like other individuals/groups, have multifaceted identities, and intersectionality thus recognises how these identities intersect, leading to unique and complex experiences. For example, four Black women in the focus group discussion came from townships or rural areas, and one Black male only has male clients. Each of them shared different experiences in relation to sex work, even though each of them comes from the same socio-economic class. Sex work looked different for each of them, even though each of them entered the industry due to economic precarity.

Intersectionality helps identify and address the specific vulnerabilities and forms of marginalisation that sex workers face. They experience heightened levels of violence from clients, police, and even third parties, as well as discrimination from the public and even other sex workers. Butler's definition of precarity does not take structural inequality into account; sex work is criminalised by law, which affects sex workers tremendously, adding to their marginalisation. Lastly, given that sex workers hold precarious positions in society and that sex work makes for precarious work, intersectionality enables the empowerment of sex workers

and the advocacy of their rights. By recognising the diverse experiences of sex workers, intersectionality can be useful in working towards dismantling systematic oppression and promoting inclusivity. This could lead to more effective campaigning around decriminalisation, labour rights, and improved working conditions (Collins, 2015:9-11).

Within the context of South Africa, sex work constitutes part of the informal economy due to the legal restrictions, stigma and discrimination, economic vulnerability, limited access to healthcare, and given that they form informal networks for protection and support. I argue that precarity can be linked to the informal economy as both highlight the challenges faced by people working within informal employment types. As previously mentioned, sex work as an employment option for sex workers in South Africa rises out of unemployment and lack of adequate resources and opportunities. South Africa's formal sector regarding job creation and opportunities has failed to keep up with the expanding labour force, and many unemployed individuals have turned to the informal sector. Informal employment has accounted for most of the job creation in South Africa over the last decade; high unemployment levels in the country can thus be attributed to an underperforming formal sector and the inability of the unemployed to enter informal labour markets. Through contextualisation, the informal economy is characterised by informal activities such as low-productivity employment and as a survival strategy for poor households; South Africa thus has an informal sector of 2.35 million informal workers (Davies & Thurlow, 2010:437-439).

The informal economy is a feature of capitalist development, as production is recognised through flexible labour regimes. The distinction between the formal and informal economy rests on the notion of self-employment, whereby Han (2018:334) asserts that the informal economy should be viewed as the "entrepreneurialism of the poor, as people are taking back some economic power that has previously been centralised by agents who sought to deny them". She further emphasises that the informal economy has an intimate relationship with populations considered criminal, characterised by flexibility, exploitation, and abusive entrepreneurs and defenceless workers (Han, 2018:334). The notion of precarity and the informal economy intersect as both are marked by a lack of job security, legal vulnerability, low wage and income insecurity, limited access to social protections, exploitation and lack of labour rights, and lack of access to education and training. These concepts, in combination, demonstrate that sex work forms a part of the informal economy and is precarious work, as these marks describe what sex work is in the context of South Africa (Han, 2018:334-335).

### 5.3 The Brothel Space as an Abstract and Conceived Space

The level of precarity is further complicated in relation to the brothel space, as society/the public not only holds perceptions about sex workers but this space as well. Sex workers choose to work within brothels as a means of seeking protection from the uncertainties and vulnerabilities inherent to their profession. In drawing on Lefebvre (1991), I was able to examine the working conditions of sex work and how they differ across the various spaces. Sex work is performed in different spaces and locations, some unknown and others known. The spaces identified and discussed, derived from data collection, are the *street space*, *brothel space*, and *the space created by sex work organisations*. Each of these spaces are created through interaction, and each is “real, lived, and socially produced” (Massey, 1994:4).

Lefebvre’s theory of space is quintessentially Marxist, socialist, and modernist but unfolds critically. He argues that space is not neutral; it is actively provided through social processes and interaction (Merrifield, 2000: 170-171). Paying homage to Marx, Lefebvre’s production of space is likened to the production of any merchandise or commodity, whereby space is not a passive surface for reproductive activity; it is actively produced as part of capitalist accumulation strategies. Space marks for an active moment in the expansion and reproduction of capitalism (Merrifield, 2000: 172-173). Space is thus “*perceived*<sup>28</sup>, *conceived*<sup>29</sup> and *lived*”<sup>30</sup> (Gottdiener, 1993:131)<sup>31</sup>. The production of space encompasses the interplay of these three classifications. However, his notion of space is further complicated, whereby there are two distinct categories of space, namely abstract space and social space. Abstract space refers to a hierarchical space pertinent to those who control social organisations, represented by knowledge and power. In contrast, social space arises from everyday life experiences materialised through individuals’ actions. Individuals who work from a model of abstract space continuously try to control the social space of others and their everyday experiences. In contrast, social space always transcends conceived boundaries and regulated forms. Therefore, the concepts of abstract space and social space are deployed to understand the working conditions of sex work, in displaying the similarities, differences, and tensions between them, mapping the landscape of the sex industry in Cape Town.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Refers to the space of everyday experiences.

<sup>29</sup> Refers to the space as planned and presented, by authorities.

<sup>30</sup> Refers to space as directly experiences and appropriated by individuals.

<sup>31</sup> This is additionally referred to as the spatial triad and it highlights the dialectical relationship between spatial practices, representations, and lived experiences.

<sup>32</sup> It is important to bear in mind that the working conditions described are related to a particular group of sex workers and are the experiences of the sex workers who took part of this study.

Although sex is sold and bought within the different spaces sex workers engage in; they differ in relation to location, visibility, risk, safety, and work arrangement. The locational differences between the street space and brothel space are as follows: The street space encompasses sex workers offering their services within public spaces, such as street corners, alleyways, or other outdoor locations, and clients typically approach sex workers directly on the street. The brothel space marks for sex work that occurs within the confines of a brothel; these establishments are designed for the buying and selling of consensual sex. Brothels range from small, privately-run operations to larger, more organised establishments. However, brothels within South Africa operate underground and are considered illegal (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005:201-204). In terms of visibility, the street space is more visible to the public as it occurs in an unsecured area where sex workers actively seek clients and vice versa, and with this level of visibility comes increased vulnerability and stigma. The brothel space is more discreet as all activities take place indoors, and there are measures in place to protect the privacy of sex workers, and it is heavily monitored (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005: 203-204). A participant in this study noted that:

*“A brothel is much safer because that guy cannot leave the premises without paying you. There is nothing he can do because there are cameras everywhere; you can scream, someone will come, and you can report anything immediately”* (Max, 17 July 2023).

Working within a brothel comes with demanding conditions, and sex workers are always constantly under heavy surveillance. The brothel space thus makes for an *abstract space* and *conceived space*. It is constituted by power and a hierarchy, as brothel owners/managers exert control over the sex workers who work in the confines of the brothel. To support this argument and relating it to the work arrangement within a brothel, participants noted that; brothel managers oversee any transaction, the brothel sets the price and takes a portion of the earnings made – it is a fifty-fifty split, and sex workers have no engagement with clients until the service. Clients that enter dictate what type of sex worker they would like: *“In a brothel, they will say – I want fit girls or slim ones”* (Max, 17 July 2023). Brothel managers make the brothel space an *abstract space*, in which the space is marked by contractual obligations and conditions stipulated by those in power. Participants note that working in a brothel is a *“conditional contract”* (Max, 17 July 2023) and *“if you choose the protection to be there, you need to understand that there are rules of being able to work there.”*<sup>33</sup> (Grace, 17 July 2023).

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<sup>33</sup> These are short statements provided by participants when asked to describe and discuss the brothel space.

Therefore, I argue that brothel managers make the brothel space an abstract space and act their role as *agents* because they take on the managing roles of sex workers. Mittal and authors (2018:3) assert that agents sell the bodies and labour of sex workers, who are mostly females, as a “commodity and prevent them from escaping sex work.” Agents are “individuals who manage sex workers, induce, promote, and profit from them (Mittal et al., 2018:3; Weitzer, 2009:228). Brothel managers/Agents work from a model of abstract space as they control the social organisation of the brothel; they are at the top of the hierarchy within this space as they provide temporary employment for sex workers. Their upward mobility is dependent on the revenue generated by sex workers. There is an unequal relation of power and class subordination within this space and a system of ownership grounds this relationship. Consequently, Lefebvre emphasises that a *conceived space* involves plans, maps, and mental images that individuals create to organise and control the space. Conceived space refers to a conceptualised space, a space that is constructed by those in power. Dominant people or groups often have the power to influence these representations, shaping how the space is perceived by the group they are trying to control (Merrifield, 2000:173-174). This space comprises of various signs, jargon, codifications and objectified presentations used and produced by agents. Lefebvre believed such spaces to be the space of capitalists, whereby the authoritative party plays a “substantial role and has a specific influence in the production of that particular space” (Merrifield, 2000:174).

#### **5.4 Agents and the Means of Production**

The basic issue between sex workers and agents is who owns the means of production<sup>34</sup> and what precisely the means of production prevalent to this relationship is (Saunders, 2006:10). In the context of the brothel space, and it simultaneously being an abstract and conceived space; the physical space, infrastructure provided for sex work to take place, the supplies used, and the organisation and management of the brothel can be considered to be a part of the means of production. However, this space is marked by ownership and control – the agent thus owns and controls the means of production. Although sex workers use the facilities and resources provided by the brothel, they do not own the means of production. Sex workers within this space are considered labourers and service providers; their labour and labour power are sold as commodities – and are used for the upward mobility of a higher class. Marx states that

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<sup>34</sup> According to Marx, the means of production consists of all the physical and abstract resources, aside from labour that can be used to produce goods and services. Examples include buildings, land, commodities such as gold or potatoes (each can be turned in a product that can be sold).

“capitalists” can only achieve upward mobility through labour exploitation<sup>35</sup>. In relating this to Marx’s contextualisation of class, agents can control another class’s means of production by employing a model of abstract and conceived space. Social reproduction, coined as labour, exists within all relations of capitalism; thus, within every relationship between capitalist and worker or husband and wife, particularly brothel manager and sex worker, lies gender roles. Women do the bulk of the work under the control of men to produce labour; thereby, women, particularly the sex workers within this space, are reproduced workers who sell their labour power to capitalism. In addition, wealth accumulates for the capitalist/brothel manager/owner as they own the means of production. Those who own the means of production hoard for themselves the profit from the production of commodities, whose social goods are bought and sold for reproduction. Hence, women are used for their reproductive nature and are rendered objects within capitalism (Armstrong, 2020:3).

### **5.5 The Pseudo-family within the Brothel Space**

The labour of sex workers and their labour power thus becomes a commodity in exchange for protection. Sex workers consider the brothel space to be safe due to their criminalisation. This protection, however, is a phantom, as the brothel space provides an illusion of security. I agree that working within a brothel is less taxing and less violent on the body. However, it is not much safer than working within the street space. Four participants stressed that the brothel space was much safer to work in than the street space. In the interim, the same group of participants mentioned the following:

*“Even brothel owners are abusing sex workers because up until now. Whether they are making money or not, especially if you are not like making money. You are not allowed to bath for the night” (Max, 17 July 2023).*

*“It is very hard also to actually intervene on any problem or any issue with brothel sex workers and managers. Because they will tell us in the manner that this is our business, do not enter it anyway. Like for example, there were ladies who were saying if you did not make money, we were not getting any food. We are not eating. And whenever you go to do like outreach, you are not allowed to speak with them” (Max, 17 July 2023).*

*“In the brothel there is a lot that is going on or happening inside there. Now, because of this, this terms and conditions or the contract that you have, you cannot link out the information.*

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<sup>35</sup> It is important to note and stress that while this working relationship is exploitative, I am not stating that sex workers do not possess agency or are incapable of making their own choices regarding this type of work.

*The brothel owners will be like if you speak with these people, this is the consequences... Most of the brothel owners are actually foreigners. They do not have only one agenda; they are pushing their own agenda that is drugs... And before anything, the client who buys something inside there to smoke and then there is also sex work going on in the building, so is two things that happen in brothels at the same time” (Pam, 17 July 2023).*

How much safer can the brothel space be if sex workers are experiencing the conditions stipulated above? In considering the brothel space as an abstract and conceived space and the way in which agents operate within this space, it appears that agents have become an embodiment of a “capitalist” who lives off the income of women and men who work in the brothel by controlling their labour and labour power. The social role of a brothel manager within the sex industry functions in accordance with capitalistic values such as masculinity and patriarchy. Masculinity, in this sense, is categorised by flaunting money, power, and women in front of other men. Thus, brothel managers flaunt and objectify women for financial gain. Additionally, the structures of patriarchy are pervasive in the modern capitalistic society, and it is portrayed at a micro-level within the organisation of the brothel manager-sex worker relationship. Capitalistic-Patriarchy features within this relationship as it encompasses distinct patriarchal roles of male and female. I thus argue that the brothel manager-sex worker relationship makes for a pseudo-family. The pseudo-family structure encompasses an illusion of security due to its hierarchal relationship and within the brothel space – the brothel manager acts as a protector, decision maker and disciplinarian (Nevin, 2013:5-9). A pseudo-family comprises of a man and woman that works for him. The pseudo-family, in fact, emerges as a heteropatriarchal mechanism whose organisation, character, and context serve to further depress rather than enhance the lives of female sex workers (Romenesko & Miller, 1989:109).

The family structure is hierarchical, and the “man” holds the top position. He (as the brothel manager) collects all the money that women earn and makes decisions about how it is spent. He is the disciplinarian of the family; if he is not happy or one rule is broken, and especially if the workers are not making money, he is the person who decides upon and meets out the punishment (Romenesko & Miller, 1989:120). Within the brothel space, this “family”, in its ideology, structure, and the role it plays in the constitution of gender identity and sexuality, plays a pivotal role in orchestrating the appropriation of women’s labour and in the production of women’s social and economic subordination. The patriarchal culture and structure of this relationship mimic the appropriation of women’s unpaid labour within families and in the broader context of the economic and social conditions of sex workers; this further legitimises

them. The concept of the pseudo-family is indeed problematic. However, sex workers and brothel managers are connected by these kin-like bonds because of the lack of protection provided for sex workers within South Africa. The pseudo-family thus emerges out of a need for protection, given the criminal status of sex workers in the country and the lack of protection and resources. The family offers stability, money and even love to those who participate in it; however, it is structured in a way that women, in fact, gain little from it. Therefore, the security of the pseudo-family for sex workers is largely illusory, and this highlights that sex work is underpaid, undervalued, and highly feminised (Romenesko & Miller, 1989:119-121).

### **5.6 A Safe Space: Finding a Place & Forming Place Attachment**

Lefebvre critiqued how those in power could reduce space to abstract; He argued that abstract space tends to ignore the lived experiences of individuals and specific social practices that shape a particular space. He advocated for recognising the uniqueness and diversity of social spaces and people. He argued for a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of space, particularly space that gives rise to “place.” Lefebvre’s critique of abstract space demonstrates how the brothel space, as an abstract-conceived space, ignores the lived experiences of sex workers (Gottdiener, 1993:131). In relating to his call for a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of space, I argue that sex workers find a sense of “place” and form place attachment to the social space created by sex work organisations in Cape Town. For a space to be considered “social”, it must be *lived* and *perceived*. When asking participants to describe the importance of the sex work organisations and the role these organisations play in their lives, but also in the larger context of sex work in South Africa, they noted the following:

*“For me, when I first came to these spaces, these organisations will help you... when going, I started to share with some of the management my experiences, and then they say it is exactly the same experience that we have experienced”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

*“The organisation is coming every month to my place in Lilly Ville<sup>36</sup>. The organisation knows that if they come to Lilly Ville, they will find the sex workers in the street. Sometimes they even go and give us the condoms”* (Luna, 17 July 2023).

*“The organisation, it is helping sex workers gain knowledge, and also equips us with skills. For example, they will be like trainings, computer skills for sex workers that maybe want to exit or retiring. It hosts a safer space, whereby sex workers can talk about their issues, their*

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<sup>36</sup> This is a pseudonym for the participant’s area of residence.



*daily challenges that they are facing out there. We have a support group for HIV positive sex workers, whereby they talk about prep work, were to find if they need help. Also, Mothers and Children<sup>37</sup> is dealing with the mothers and helping the kids of sex workers... The organisation, it is helping us also, it is opening our mind, because we came to industry, not knowing some things, like how to deal with the human rights violation cases, but through the education that we got in the organisation. Now we know what to do. If you have not been helped or assisted, what you should do. Also, maybe if we got arrested, you should look at the name badge, you must be able to describe the person. Also, to fight the stigma and discrimination out there... The organisation, it gives us that opening, it gives us that education, to think about sex work and what it is actually about” (Max, 17 July 2023).*

From the abovementioned testimonials, it is clear that the space created by the organisations is not just a safe space; it is a place of comfort, a space of learning, and a place where sex workers can relate to one another, share their experiences, and know that they are not alone. In creating reference back to Lefebvre, I argue that the space created by organisations can be considered a perceived space as it enables sex workers to share their subjective experiences and engage with others who share similar experiences. Perceived space is not a passive container; it is a space that allows people to construct meaning and engage in lived experiences, whether that be their own or the lived experiences of others. Secondly, the organisational space also makes for a lived space, whereby it encompasses a space of everyday life marked by social interaction and routine activities. Lived space is dynamic and subject to change as people engage with the space and adapt to their surroundings (Merrifield, 2000:173-175). Therefore, the utilisation of the concepts of perceived and lived space can be linked to the idea that the organisational space is shaped through social interactions, giving rise to *place*.

In reference to the participants’ statements above, it emerged that participants feel a sense of place within the space created by the sex work organisations. According to Massey (1994:4), place is a space imbued with meaning and significance through human experiences and interactions; it carries cultural, historical, and emotional significance. Place emerges from attaching meaning to the space; it is socially constructed and is made as people ascribe qualities to the space (Gieryn, 2000:474). Participants have formed emotional and sentimental bonds with the space and the people within the organisation. Based on my observation of the entire group of participants, they all seemed close to at least one person in the group. The organisation

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<sup>37</sup> This is a pseudonym for the organisation.

space consequently not only makes for a safe space for sex workers but an educational space as well, whereby they teach skills and teach members how to navigate the everyday social experiences of a sex worker. The organisation space then becomes a place, as sex workers associate this space with fulfilment, triumph, and a space to share traumatic experiences. Sex workers thus form place attachment to the organisational space because it facilitates a sense of well-being and sense of security and community.

### **5.7 How Sex workers Experience diverse types of Alienation**

Evidently, sex workers within the brothel and street space experience alienation and at least one of its different forms. Precarity theorist Standing (2011) in Millar (2017) argues that the “precariat” as a class is categorised by alienation and anxiety given the vulnerabilities and instabilities experienced (Millar, 2017:3). Sex workers do not only navigate the various spaces in search of protection and a sense of belonging, but specific spaces further foster a sense of alienation. In furthering the discussion of the working conditions of sex work, this discussion draws on Marx’s theory of alienation and its’ diverse types. Alienation is experienced differently by each participant and within the various spaces identified. While Marx himself did not directly address sex work within his writings, I am able to draw connections between his theory of alienation and the experiences of sex workers working within a capitalist society, particularly in South Africa. According to Marx, alienated labour is categorised as forced and involuntary labour, in which the worker finds no purpose or pleasure, no contentment or fulfilment, and no mental growth or physical development. Within this state, individuals feel isolated, unworthy, and insignificant, marked by a sense of powerlessness and feelings of oppression (Mukhopadhyay, 2021:1-2).

Marx uses the term estrangement to describe this theory of alienation, which delineates the separation or detachment of beings/things that are or have been naturally tied together. He further asserts that alienation is a symptom of the industrial age and capitalism, whereby workers sell their power, strength, expertise, and skills to the capitalists. The workers thus have no control over the product of their labour and the labour itself, which becomes a means to an end for the capitalist. As a result, workers become estranged and fall prey to alienation. In the making of alienation, Marx notes that this creates two limpid classes, notably the working class and the capitalist class. Whereby the former is “labouring and alien, and the latter is the non-worker but controls the worker and gets the profits of others’ labour” (Shah, 2015:48). Marx presented alienation as the phenomenon through which the labour product confronts labour as something alien, and the production of labour is felt to belong to someone else and it simply

becomes a means for workers to meet the needs of life; hence work becomes a survivalist strategy. The capitalist system thus created four distinct ways in which workers are alienated: alienation from the product of their labour, alienation from the process of labour, alienation from oneself and your potential, and alienation from fellow workers and society (Nielsen, 1968:124-126).

Participants, while delineating the working conditions of sex work and the landscape of the sex work industry, undergo feelings of alienation and encounter at least one of the four types within the spaces they engage in. In contrasting alienation theory to sex work, I assert that the negotiation and transaction of sexual service is an underground and misrepresented economy in which the product/machine refers to sex workers. The first type of alienation discussed by Marx refers to workers experiencing alienation from the products of their labour, synonymously referred to as objectification. He describes human beings as labouring animals; when producing an object through labour, it stands in conflict with the worker as they do not own the thing they have produced (Shah, 2015:49). This lack of ownership and control results in a sense of detachment and estrangement. Participants, while doing sex work, often felt alienated from the product of their labour, which in this case is their own bodies and sexual services. Some participants viewed their own bodies as a commodity for sale, *“I needed to make money and better myself; I then started selling my body to put food on the table”* (Charlotte, 17 July 2023). However, others classified sex work as work and as the sale of a service: *“It is very dangerous, sex working. We define it as work/working”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

The second form of alienation refers to workers being alienated from the process of their labour, whereby, as a worker, you have no say in when, how, or under what circumstances/conditions you work. Workers are subjected to the control of the employer, who determines the modes of production, resulting in feeling a loss of agency and autonomy, resulting in feelings of powerlessness and detachment from one’s work. Sex workers experience alienation from the process of their labour as they work in exploitative and coercive conditions. This involves working in unsafe working conditions, working with brothel managers and pimps, and the lack of autonomy in deciding what services to do with a client. The nature of sex work appears to be exploitative and coercive; all participants noted that they work in bad working conditions; however, it is only bad because sex work is criminalised, and if it were to be decriminalised, they would work in better conditions. The conditions change every day, whereby they experience violence and pressure from clients, police, and brothel managers. They work in unsafe conditions, and there appears to be a lack of autonomy and agency in decision-making

in terms of dealings with clients, brothel managers, and even police. I have combined the first two forms of alienation in contextualising the working conditions of sex work, as the elements overlap and are similar in terms of what sex workers experience from clients and employers, such as the brothel manager. Although sex workers administer the transaction and render the sexual services to the client, participants noted that they do not have control over the way in which their services are used, as clients largely dictate this. Clients dictate the terms and conditions of the service, and this lack of control results in sex workers feeling a sense of powerlessness and alienation from the product of their labour (Nielsen, 1968:125-126; Smith, 2013:1'; Shah, 2015:50; Mukhopadhyay, 2021:3-4; Petrović, 1963:420-422). I draw on the following statements to support my arguments:

*“I wanted to exit because of the danger. I met this client from Northwest. I travelled all the way from Joburg. We were chatting online, and when I reached the place, he was no longer answering or contacting me. I slept at the police station for the night. He opened his phone the following day. I met him; I was not allowed to go out; he would lock me inside the house. I cannot use the bathroom; I had to wait for him until he comes back from work”* (Max, 17 July 2023).

*“Clients are forcing us into things that we do not want to do. They use their power and are aware that we cannot report to the police. I would meet a client, maybe he smokes or does cocaine, he will show you money, like a lot of money. And they say, if you smoke or do this with me, I will give you this, and you do not have a choice; you just have to do it. You can say, I cannot do this; I do not want to, but it does not matter to them. You end up doing it because of you there at his apartment, you do not have a choice to leave. And he knows that you are a criminal. You cannot go and report such cases to the police, so they abuse their power against the sex workers, so we just live in danger; it is not safe at all”* (Max, 17 July 2023).

The abovementioned statements by one participant highlight the way in which clients dictate the use of the service in terms of when, where, and how it should be rendered. Sex workers are placed in unsafe conditions, particularly when travelling far to see a client, and the risk rises as they experience exploitative and abusive conditions by clients. Money is used as a mechanism of coercion to consent, and sex workers end up having to follow the conditions dictated by clients, even if they do not want to do it, such as drugs or a different type of service than first agreed upon. Clients hold power over sex workers as they are aware that they make for a criminal population; sex workers thus have to endure whatever is necessary as they cannot

report it to authorities. In reference to Marx, he notes that at the core of alienation is power, specifically power that some wield over others (Nielsen, 1968:124-125). This demonstrates the dreadful conditions sex workers must endure to make a living; however, they will not leave, as sex work has become their only survival strategy and is a means to an end. As a result, this proves the limited control that sex workers have over their working conditions; hence, they experience alienation from the product of their labour<sup>38</sup>. I accordingly draw on a similar scenario by another participant to strengthen the point made:

*“And especially online, when you have to go out and meet a client, it is more dangerous... Going out on the street its more dangerous. I have experienced this; it happened to me. I was supposed to meet someone, made the appointment for two hours, it was supposed to be a night... I travelled far... One of the mistakes that we make is that you will not even carry enough money with you; if anything happens, you can go back home. I had to wait in this garage, it is cold, and it is a night, and now my phone is dying, and it is not safe”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

While sex workers experience exploitative and violent conditions from clients, brothel managers, police, and pimps experience similar conditions. As previously noted, when contextualising the brothel space at headings 5.3 and 5.5.; brothel managers exert control over sex workers, as they not only manage them but profit from them as well. The working conditions within the brothel space are exploitative. In alignment with Marx’s idea of alienation from the product of labour, sex workers experience economic exploitation as the brothel space and managers take a portion of their earnings. Sex workers are paid less than the value of their service, and this leads to a sense of alienation from the financial benefits of the labour. To support this argument, I draw on the following statements by participants:

*“You have to pay the brothel. It is half-half, and the client pays the brothel - for example, if the brothel is saying it is R750. They will take R350, and the rest of the money is yours. They do this with each and every client”* (Max, 17 July 2023).

Not only do brothel managers take a portion of their earnings, but they also impose arbitrary rules and subject sex workers to unsafe working conditions. Within the brothel space, sex workers have limited power in decision-making as they do not have control over their working conditions, the type of service provided, the pricing, and scheduling; these conditions are decided between the client and the brothel. Therefore, this results in a lack of autonomy and

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<sup>38</sup> This further demonstrates why sex workers consider the brothel space to be safer and as a means of protection.

control, contributing to a sense of powerlessness and alienation from the labour process. I first draw on an example of a participant's experience, in which they were forced to render a service they did not agree on; however, given that that was the agreement between the brothel and client, the participant had no choice but to follow through with it.

*"Sometimes, maybe even at the brothel, you went to the client in the room, and then you agreed to do something. But then you will end up doing something else, maybe because of language you do not understand what he is saying. Example, he maybe says you are going to do anal sex, and you do not know what it is. Now you just do it or when it happens, and then you like what is this but then the client will say, but you agreed even when you did not verbalise it"* (Max, 17 July 2023).

I draw on statements supporting the arbitrary rules that need to be followed, the exploitative conditions that follow if the rules are not abided by, and further highlighting the coercive working conditions.

*"Even brothel owners are abusing sex workers... Whether they are making money or not, especially if you are not like making money. You are not allowed to bath for the night"* (Max, 17 July 2023).

*"It is very hard also to actually intervene on any problem or any issue with brothel sex workers and managers. Because they will tell us in the manner that this is our business, do not enter it anyway. Like, for example, they were ladies that were saying if you did not make money, we are not getting any food. We are not eating. And whenever you go to do like outreach, you are not allowed to speak with them"* (Max, 17 July 2023).

Although the brothel space is described and considered to be safe by participants, brothel managers or the brothel space does not prioritise the well-being of sex workers, as they do not provide support or the necessary resources for their safety, health, or personal development. I posed the following question to the participants, *"In the event that something does happen, and you are working in the brothel, what measures do they take to help you?"* In answering that question, a participant noted the following:

*"It is hard for them, remember - the brothels are not supposed to operating at all. So, it is also hard for them to report such cases"* (Max, 17 July 2023).

The participant recalled an incident that happened within the brothel space, where the brothel managers could not do anything to help the sex workers when faced with legal implications.

*“There are incidents that have happened... what police are doing now; they will mark money and try to disguise themselves and go to the brothel. Then after afterwards, they will go to that place and ask for that money. And they know where they mark it. So that is how the girls will get caught”* (Max, 17 July 2023).

The abovementioned example highlights how, firstly- legal implications are still within the brothel space regardless of the illusion of “protection” it is said to have; thus, in the process of their labour, the legal vulnerability experienced results in feelings of alienation as sex workers are in constant fear and threat of arrest, and prosecution. Secondly, while police and law enforcement are essentially doing their job by raiding the brothel space, sex workers experience exploitation and elements of violence from police, and the level of violence is further complicated, given their criminal status. Sex workers often encounter harassment from police and are subjected to arrest and extortion. Their experiences with police are double-edged as police make use of their services, yet - they use the criminal status as a means of manipulation and economic exploitation. Participants noted the following conditions experienced at the hands of police:

*“You know what, even they come to buy sex from us, but then still they want to arrest you”* (Grace, 17 July 2023).

*“Because they do not want to pay now, they abuse you, and they even say they will kill you. They often fine us and sometimes want us to pay them when we say no. They say I will arrest you. You know what, some police officers pick us up with the van, you drive around in the van, and you get to a place. They say, if you want us to release you, do to us what you do for your customers”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

The conditions that sex workers have to endure while working range from economic exploitation, violence, harassment, and lack of agency to emotional and physical abuse. All of the working conditions discussed demonstrate how sex workers, as workers, experience alienation from the product and process of their labour. While the experiences described by participants here are negative, it is important to note and recognise that not all sex workers have negative experiences and that not all of them have limited autonomy; it is just a question of how much agency they actually have. The limited autonomy, however, does not only stem from being controlled by clients, brothel managers, and police but sex workers are pressured by economic insecurity as well. The sex workers in this study all engage in sex work voluntarily, like other sex workers, regardless of how bad the working conditions are. Clients, brothel

managers, police and ultimately, social attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping the conditions of sex work, and these conditions are further discussed in relation to Marx's other two forms of alienation, namely alienation from oneself and human potential and alienation from fellow workers and society.

Marx believed work to be a vehicle for individuals to express their abilities, skills, and creativity; however, under capitalism, work has become a means of survival and not self-fulfilment. Through the repetition of monotonous tasks, workers lose a sense of individuality and identity. Sex work as a form of work, as described by participants, is a means to an end and a survivalist strategy, which sometimes becomes monotonous, and this affects not only their flow of income but their self-identity, too. All participants have stressed that each of them has joined sex work out of economic need, as no other options or opportunities were available. Sex work as a form of employment for all participants is not a mode of self-fulfilment, as they sought to sex work out of desperation to generate an income to see to themselves and families. Work under capitalism, in a Marxist sense has become the thief of job and self-expression. This notion is further complicated; as participants note that offering a sexual service often becomes repetitive and banal, and if they do not come up with innovative and thrilling ways to entertain a client, they will end up making no money. Additionally, a participant noted that as the sex work becomes droning, it has a direct implication on income generation, for this reason they wanted to exit the sex industry (Nielsen, 1968:125-126; Smith, 2013:1'; Shah, 2015:50; Mukhopadhyay, 2021:3-4; Petrović, 1963:420-422). I draw on the following statement to support the argument stipulated above:

*"You must also have the skills and try to work something out in order to attract clients, so that you can make money. If you have one style<sup>39</sup> right, the clients will come now[buy your services] because you are new and attractive. But next time, you have the same style, every time the same, you need to continuously change your style. Like change your wig to Red, Blue, Orange and so on. In sex work, it is very tough out there, so you need to market yourself, you need to make yourself out so that you can make money. So, the only thing that made me think of exiting, was the fact that there was no money"* (Max, 17 July 2023).

From the statement provided above, it is palpable that sex workers need to adopt personas and roles during engagement and encounters with clients. This takes a toll on an individuals' self-

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<sup>39</sup> Style refers to the way in which the sexual service is rendered. Each sex worker renders a service different that is unique to them.



esteem and identity and can lead to a disconnection from one's authentic self. Furthermore, the experience of performing sexual acts for money, even in the event of harm or when sex workers have no personal desire nor enjoy those acts, can result in self-alienation and internal conflict. When posed with the question "*Since entering sex work, did you at any point feel that you wanted to leave, or did you at some point leave and come back?*" another participant noted the following:

*"I thought or wanted to quit, because of being robbed of my money, during doing sex work and I was raped too. I wanted to report it to my family, but I thought maybe my mother going to think I am a disgrace, if I talk about it. But then I ended up staying, because it was a job opportunity. Where else would I get a job, so I returned because no one is going to give me money"* (Charlotte, 17 July 2023).

The abovementioned statement highlights the following: firstly - even in the event of harm and experiencing exploitative conditions, sex workers will not leave due to economic need. Secondly, when performing sexual acts for money, it can be self-alienating and cause internal conflict, such as when the participant was conflicted about telling her parent about the horrible event that happened to her. Lastly, it demonstrates an overlap between experiencing alienation from oneself and human potential, as well as experiencing alienation from society and fellow workers. The participant noted that even when experiencing harm and violence, she was reluctant to tell her mother, and this is due to the stigma and discrimination attached to the sex worker identity, but also broader the stigma and shame attached by society to victims of sexual violence and abuse. In reference back to Marx and the fourth form of alienation, in which workers experience alienation from society and fellow workers. Sex workers face social stigma and discrimination from society, as the public holds moral judgments and has negative attitudes towards them as a group (Nielsen, 1968:125-126; Smith, 2013:1'; Shah, 2015:50; Mukhopadhyay, 2021:3-4; Petrović, 1963:420-422). Given the clandestine nature of sex work, sex workers, particularly the participants of this study, hide their profession from friends and family due to the fear of rejection and largely legal repercussions. The social stigma and discrimination experienced by family, friends, and society result in feelings of estrangement. I draw on the following testimonials by a participant to support the argument stipulated above:

*"I wanted to exit because it when comes to a point by whereby now your family and children gets to know what you are doing. And the community, the stigma around the sex work industry. That alone? It can put you down... I relocated and moved to a different area whereby nobody*

*knows me, nobody knows my story. So, there are places that you will go to, and you will feel like people are looking at you with that eye. Like oh look at her, look at that "thing", like you are cheap or what. So those things they can affect you emotionally and psychologically... This will make you sit down and say - Maybe I should just leave this, but then you look at your kids and say that I need to provide for them. I have myself as well that I still to make something out of myself. So now it is well those are the things that make you want to exit but at the very same time you cannot leave it because of your circumstances” (Pam, 17 July 2023).*

The fear of judgment from family and friends, due to the social ills attached to the sex worker identity and the industry as a whole, has sex workers wanting to leave and exit. However, once again, out of economic necessity, they stay and continue to work in the industry regardless of the various coercive and unfair conditions experienced. Furthermore, the sex industry within Cape Town and the surrounding areas, as described by participants, is a competitive market. The competition to attract clients and make money is ferocious, to the point that sex workers become jealous of one another and use herbs to damper one another’s success. Sex workers do not share the prices of their services either. As a new sex worker, you even have to pay other sex workers a portion of your earnings to operate within a space they occupied previously.

The competition amongst sex workers fosters individualism, and within certain spaces, the solidarity and sense of community amongst sex workers have been eroded. It is essential, however, that sex workers maintain unity, as they only have each other to lean on, given their criminal status within South Africa. Given that sex work takes place within a competitive market, the fierce competition fosters an environment whereby some sex workers perceive each other as rivals. As a result, this leads to a lack of solidarity and contributes to social isolation and alienation within the sex work community. Additionally, Marx emphasised the importance of workers coming together to challenge exploitation and improve their working conditions; however, given the jealousy and competition, this might be difficult and result in a lack of collective bargaining and, in return, reinforces alienation (Nielsen, 1968:125-126; Smith, 2013:1’; Shah, 2015:50; Mukhopadhyay, 2021:3-4). See the quotes from the interviews below. Pam describes her experience when first joining a group within a sex work organisation.

*“The problem is us as sex workers, this is what we do in our spaces, they are jealous. The same thing that we do in our spaces is what we do outside there... We do not work in a unit outside when we do sex work. We cannot. We do not tell each other of how we work, because if I tell Luna, what I do or my skills, she will use it for her clients” (Pam, 17 July 2023).*

Participants highlighted the competition and jealousy among sex workers.

*“The danger is not only from the clients but also experienced amongst each other, amongst each other because there are groups. If this group is winning, another group is going to be jealous of that. And they can and do use blackmail, and imoti<sup>40</sup>, they even be physically fighting<sup>41</sup>”* (Pam, 17 July 2023)

*“And there is also this jealousy amongst the sex workers. I will not tell Pam where I am going, nor will I tell her how much I charge per service”* (Max, 17 July 2023).

*“But it is like everyone wants to be up there; each and everyone wants to be up there<sup>42</sup> ..., for example if Pam is coming to our spot and I have been there for years, she must buy for me a bottle or she must pay. For her to stand on that spot, she must pay some money, for her to be able to make some money. Or if I did not make money, then she made more money, just give me some of hers”* (Max, 17 July 2023).

It is important to recognise that while all the abovementioned forms of alienation can be applied to the sex workers of this study, the experiences of sex workers are diverse and multifaceted. This cannot be applied to all sex workers, as not all sex workers experience the same type or degree of alienation, and some may have more agency and control over their work than others, given their role and rank. A participant noted that there are levels within sex work, pointing to a hierarchy within the sex industry, *“you know, as any other industry or qualification, you start from the low, and then you grow these levels... You start on the road, where you start in taverns. And then you see that in Township, you feel that what I am getting in the township is not much or enough. Let me now go from the tavern to the club, so when you get to clubs now and, you get into the city. Now you get to clubs, now it is now your is all about benefits,”* and *“the levels are all about the rates, right? The rate within a tavern or from the internet is different from a brothel”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

Additionally, social and legal factors play a significant role in shaping the experiences of sex workers, and these factors and conditions can vary widely from one space to another, as demonstrated clearly within this study’s findings. The analysis of alienation within this section in the context of sex work is, therefore, extremely complex and within the spaces established. Sex workers experience estrangement and detachment in multiple ways, pointing to the

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<sup>40</sup> Imoti is the use of herbs to bring about a desired outcome.

<sup>41</sup> Due to the fact that some sex workers and groups are making more money and attracting for clients than others.

<sup>42</sup> Up there meaning at a certain level or the highest level.

experiences of workers within a capitalist society. Marx noted that all these forms of alienation are inherent to the capitalist mode of production; capitalism thus commodifies labour and reduces workers to apparatus of production (Nielsen, 1968:125-126; Smith, 2013:1).

As Marx discussed, capitalism turned labour into a commodity, and workers were treated like commodities. In the context of sex work and the working conditions discussed throughout this chapter, it is apparent that sex workers are objectified, commodified, and treated as products, which are marked by experiences and feelings of precarity as well as alienation. The commodification of labour makes for a fundamental element within Marx's critique of capitalism, and this concept is largely discussed in *Capital Volume 1*. While I will not go into great detail about how this came to be as I do not have the space here, there are crucial elements within the commodification of labour that are important to mention when demonstrating how sex work essentially is commodified labour. In distinguishing between labour and labour power, Marx notes that the former is the actual work performed, and the latter is the capacity to work. It is noted that within the various spaces discussed and particularly within the sex worker-brothel manager relationship, sex workers sell their labour power as a commodity, and it is sold in exchange for a wage (Musto, 2010:90-93). Commodified labour, by definition, refers to the process through which goods or services are treated as commodities to be bought and sold within a market (Silbaugh, 1997: 84-85).

Several factors have been discussed and highlighted throughout the making of this chapter that contribute to the commodification of sex work. The premise of sex work is providing sexual services to clients in exchange for money or compensation; the transactional nature aligns with the basic principle of commodified labour, whereby services are exchanged for value.<sup>43</sup> The entire negotiation and transaction of consensual sexual services between clients and sex workers is economic; it is governed by supply and demand principles, and there is fierce competition between sex workers; hence, the economic aspect of sex contributes to its classification as commodified labour (Poudel, 2020:290-291). Therefore, while Marx's theories of exploitation and alienation analyse only labour exchanged for wage, he does not take reproductive work into account. Sex workers, while performing productive labour within the various spaces identified, equally perform reproductive labour for clients in which their services extend to emotional labour and emotional work, hence further complicating feelings of detachment and alienation.

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<sup>43</sup> This relates to Marx theory of value, particularly exchange value.

## **5.8 Sex work as Emotional Labour & Interactive Body Work and the need for Emotional Management**

Reproductive labour traditionally encompasses work and activities involved in the context of the family and household. The notion of reproductive labour can be extended to sex work; other than providing a sexual service, sex workers perform related reproductive tasks such as care, providing emotional support, listening, and attending to the emotional needs of clients. In furthering the discussion about the working conditions of sex work and the nature of the industry, a substantial portion of the experiences of sex workers are centred around their interaction and engagement with clients. Before discussing and demonstrating why I consider sex work to be a form of emotional labour, sex work as a form of employment first needs to be situated within bodywork. The concept of bodywork sits within the larger literature scope of the sociology of the body. The notion of bodywork encompasses the following elements: firstly, the work performed on one's own body; secondly, paid labour carried out on the bodies of others; and lastly, the management of emotions and emotional displays (Gimlin, 2007:353). Given the criteria stipulated, I situate sex work within bodywork, in which I argue it to be interactive bodywork, and through framing it within this way, I demonstrate how it makes for a form of emotional labour, extending it to emotional work and emotional rules.

While famous for his writings on work and work relations, Marx paid little to no attention to matters of the body but given that sex work encompasses the use of the body on many levels, it could not be left out of the discussion nor ignored<sup>44</sup>. Above, I have identified three ways that the concept of bodywork will be employed within this study. Society requires its members to do work on their bodies to transform them from their natural state to one that is more culturally accepted; the expectations, however, differ from one population to the next. Body management practices largely fall upon women, who are expected to spend money and effort on their appearance. In identifying a gap within the literature, sociology ignores mundane forms of bodywork such as daily bathing, deodorising, hairstyles, the application of make-up, and dressing, and the relevance of bodywork to the individual's experience of employment (Gimlin, 2007:354). Sex workers spend a lot of time and effort on their bodily appearance, as it has a direct line to the number of clients they receive, which dictates the amount of revenue made. As previously noted in section 5.7 of this chapter, sex workers need to maintain and constantly change their bodily appearance to attract clients and make money. The notion of bodywork in

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<sup>44</sup> For further information of the omission of work-related matters to the body, one could check out Foucault and his writings about the body as sexualised.

attributing it to sex workers encompasses the mundane tasks of bodywork and the relevance of the body in their experiences of sex work as a form of employment. Along with changing their bodily appearance, participants noted that they put on workplace persona to appease the clients, thus linking back to self-alienation.

Appearance, sexuality, and the representation of both through particular forms of body management are central to sex work. Gimlin (2007:356) argues that sexuality and its embodied display via grooming, dress, demeanour, and flirtation are inherent to employment forms that encompass sexual services. She further notes that “without ceasing to be an instrument of labour, the body exhibits its sexual features in everyday work and its relations. Sex is thus made susceptible to controlled satisfaction, but no matter how controlled, it is also gratifying to the managed individual” (Gimlin, 2007:356). In unpacking this passage and relating it to the social context of the brothel manager–sex worker relationship, it can be found that not only are physical or mental abilities sold to employers, but bodies, bodywork and sexuality are sold too, particularly to clients. Participants refer to this in the following manner:

*“...we have place cards that says, my body, my business”* (Max, 17 July 2023).

Sex workers thus perform body labour; however, it is interactive bodywork as it incorporates the physical and emotional aspects of work performed on the bodies of others. Body labour is characterised by its association with sensual pleasure and intimacy; its therapies and techniques create a zone that provides physical enjoyment and well-being for others. The style of body labour carries rules established between the service providers and clients. Gimlin (2007:359) argued that body labourers employ various techniques to distance themselves from the physical intimacy associated with their jobs. This argument is particularly interesting when thinking about sex work; it begs the question: How can sex workers distance themselves physically when their job and the service rendered are purely physical? Nevertheless, in the passages dictated above and below by participants, it is evident that they employ strategies to distance themselves emotionally and physically from clients. The rules of the interaction are set at the start of the service, in which it is made clear to clients that they will not be engaging in any acts of intimacy and that the service rendered is purely transactional and business-related, as Max points out when he says,

*“I think about my body differently. Also, in your mental state, you know that I am not here for a relationship; I will say that to a client. Yes, this is me rendering a service to you, and that's it. But there are times you will meet a person that you feel like, okay, it's fine, then you will feel*

*some connection. Where your body will be relaxed to that one person more than other clients. It is all, everything; it is psychological. When you are there doing the service, you like I know, I'm here for business” (Pam, 17 July 2023).*

The techniques employed to distance themselves from clients encompass no kissing, no oral sex, no conversational chit-chat with the aim of getting to know each other, and implicit within the practice of sex work, having clients wear a condom. The distancing techniques differ in relation to the sex worker and what they consider intimate. As a result, sex work makes for a form of interactive bodywork, yet the public considers sex work to be morally demeaning, given the contact with others' bodies. Along with claiming sex work as interactive bodywork, it simultaneously should be considered a legitimate form of employment (Gimlin, 2007:359-360). The politics of not referring to sex work as work stems from moral judgement and debate about the sale of sex. Other professions, such as dentistry and medicine, involve coming into contact with the bodies of others and performing bodily labour. Yet, sex work is considered to be demeaning and degrading, although the concept is the same. In thinking further about why sex work is frowned upon, participants' opinions on their bodies should matter.

*“Society needs to understand that this is my body or our bodies as a sex worker. I can do whatever I want even if you pay me; it is still my choice to do with my body what I want to” (Max, 17 July 2023).*

*“That's why we are saying we are not selling our bodies. We are just selling sex.”<sup>45</sup> (Pam, 17 July 2023).*

At first glance, the interaction between clients and sex workers appears to be purely physical; however, it was found that sex workers employ emotional management strategies. In which they take the liberty to display and experience emotions deemed socially appropriate for the interaction. By employing Hochschild's (1979) concept of emotional labour, it is noticeable how and why sex work can be considered a form of emotional labour. Sex work fits in the theoretical conceptualisation of emotional labour whereby sex workers have face-to-face contact with clients; they are required to evoke particular emotions, such as being carefree and up for anything. Additionally, sex workers evoke a particular emotional state within clients, such as calmness and satisfaction (Gimlin, 2007:361; Hochschild, 1979:1983). Sex workers elevate and constantly manage their emotions when interacting with clients. Emotional labour

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<sup>45</sup> This debunks the notion of the radical feminist argument that classifies sex work to be degrading because “it enforces sex workers to sell their bodies”, but sex workers deem it as the sale of sex or a sexual service.

encompasses the intricate process through which workers suppress, conceal, and manage their genuine emotions while simultaneously fabricating and projecting a desired emotional response within a specific context. The management of emotions within one's workspace is often undertaken to safeguard the personal identity of the worker.

The emotions of sex workers are thus regulated by themselves and their clients within the context of cultural and social structures that surround the sex worker-client relationship. Sex workers take the role of a service provider, required to provide the best service possible in accordance with "*whatever makes the client happy*" (Wharton, 2009:149). Sex workers, in doing emotional labour, exchange a portion of their authentic selves to stimulate and satisfy clients in return for job security and financial compensation (Hochschild, 1983). The distancing mechanisms employed to distance themselves emotionally and mentally form part of what Hochschild calls emotional rules<sup>46</sup>. Emotional rules offer guidance to emotional labourers about the extent to which they should engage with clients during interactions (Hochschild, 1979,1983, 2003, 2011). Emotional rules are essentially social guidelines that govern how individuals strive to feel, representing a set of collectively recognised norms (Hochschild, 1979: 561-563).

While performing emotional labour, the service provided by sex workers to clients extends to emotional work. Emotional work is facilitated by the emotional rules employed to distance oneself from clients, encompassing reproductive labour and tasks. As a related concept to emotional labour, emotional work involves the efforts taken to engage and maintain relations and meet clients' emotional expectations. While rendering the service, sex workers need to make clients feel feelings of care, love, and comfort, but also listen and be a life adviser. In lieu of the productive work already done, the emotional work done is reproductive, unpaid, and invisible. In support of the arguments made, I draw on the following statements by participants:

*"And you know what, it is not all about sex; sometimes they just want a person to talk to them about their problems. Some they just want you to just be allowed to massage the body or their body, some kind of cuddles"* (Max, 17 July 2023).

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<sup>46</sup> Emotional rules also referred to as feelings rules, incorporates the following, 1) surface acting refers to when people display the outer signs of emotions that they do not generally feel such as smiling when feeling unhappy, and 2) deep acting refers the constant altering of our emotions such as when being aggressive coming up with excuses for the behaviour in search for sympathy.



*“It's not all about penetration, the client you meet - they sometimes just want you to walk naked around them. Some of them just want to take off your bra to smell it, even your underwear”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

*“It is a transaction, right? I am not giving you my body, so obviously, I have to distance myself emotionally. It's something that also what me myself, I try not to do when I'm with a client. Example, not to have too much eye contact. Because I know once you start by looking at each other in a way, that or something might happen. For me, I know once I have eye contact with the person, I know that our spirits have communicated. I try all the time to break the eye contact. So, for me that is the way I emotionally the distance myself”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

When considering the emotional management strategies employed and the emotional work done, it is evident that this leads to a sense of estrangement from the bodily demeanour and emotions due to constantly interrupting one's usual reaction to events. This creates reference back to self-alienation, and how workers are alienated from the process and product of their labour. Hochschild's conceptualisation of emotional labour, linking it to emotional rules and work, shows a complex link between emotional performances and experiences and the labour process. She argues that this is how feelings become commodities to be bought and sold. Implicit within Hochschild's view, she notes that while both men and women do emotional labour, there is a division of labour that differentiates the type of emotional labour done by women and men (1979:569). However, in relation to the sex workers of this study, it can be found that the emotional labour engaged by both male and female sex workers is the same. The first participant's statement highlighted above was said by a male sex worker. Moreover, Hochschild focuses on emotional labour's negative personal and social aspects. However, regarding sex work, the workers benefit well from their affective, emotional displays in pleasing clients, in which they receive more money than originally agreed upon as they receive extra tips for their emotional work (Gimlin, 2007:362). Sex workers, therefore, retain the choice of how to react in a specific context, which intimately intertwines with their personal and social identities. They have voiced that they keep their personal and social identities separate from sex work; however, every now and then, they do meet long-term partners through sex work, *“I've met, like, boyfriends through sex work. And it lasted with them for a very long time”* (Pam, 17 July 2023).

Each of the types of body works discussed speaks to the ways in which the work environment is literally written on the body, more so on workers who attend to the bodies of others. The

body is enmeshed with, receptive to, and affected by social relations and events that happen both within and outside the workplace. The term bodywork thus employed within this study refers to the work that individuals undertake on their own bodies, the paid work performed on the bodies of others and the emotional labour that bodywork requires. Each of the facets described demonstrates and highlights how bodies are produced within the workplace in terms of appearance, and physical and emotional beings. For sex workers particularly, it is dependent on how they interpret their situations, negotiate workplace relations, and define their experiences. (Gimlin, 2007:363-365). Examining the bodywork nexus in this study and in relation to sex work provides valuable and considerable insight into how the sex industry is constructed and the experiences of sex work in relation to its working conditions.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

The primary focus of this thesis has been to contextualise the working conditions of sex work and map the landscape of the sex industry in Cape Town and within the broader context of South Africa. The experiences of sex workers have proven, through other studies and my own, to be complex in relation to various systematic and structural factors. Sex work is considered to be inherently immoral and sinful, and this promotes stigma as moral biases overshadow the diverse reasons individuals choose to do sex work, such as economic necessity, agency, and personal empowerment. The status of sex workers relies heavily on public opinion, media sensation, and institutional construction, which I consider to be unfair, and this adds to their misrepresentation. This thesis thus examines and addresses these issues with the aim of fostering an open discussion about sex work, one that is accurate and from the perspectives of sex workers themselves. One of the broader objectives of this study has been to challenge the stereotypes and advocate for the rights and well-being of sex workers. This thesis should be read to inform an understanding of sex work without moral judgment and political bias. It highlights not only the complexity of the lives of sex workers in South Africa but also the complexity of issues involved in what it means to participate in sex work. The sex work community is extremely diverse, and each of them experiences the industry differently. The failure of the public, institutions, and media to recognise this diversity made this research study come to life. Through analysing the perceptions of the sex workers who partook in this study, I unveiled several key findings that contribute to understanding the composition of the sex industry and the diversity of the sex work community.

Returning to the initial research questions of this study, my investigation has shed light on the perspectives of retired sex workers on the working conditions of sex work and the nature of the sex trade industry. This thesis demonstrates how sex workers describe sex work, the use of their bodies in sex work, the type of relationships they have with other sex workers and the different sex work organisations, and lastly, it highlights how much control sex workers have over the transaction and negotiation of services; however, this differs in relation to which space they work or conduct their service in, and the rules explicit and implicit within that space. It is important to note and stress that while the working conditions of sex work are found to be exploitative, as described by the participants of this study, I am not stating that sex workers do not possess agency or are incapable of making their own choices regarding this type of work. In using a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective to inform the entirety of this study, I was able to go beyond individual-level explanations and moral judgments and focus on the structural

and systematic factors which influence the experiences of sex workers (Wondimu, 2021). The fundamental purpose of employing this perspective, amongst its other functions, is to promote social respect for sex workers and the work they do, as it facilitates an understanding that all jobs can be made socially significant. Therefore, the classification of sex work as an unlawful means of work denies them basic workers' rights, such as access to healthcare, legal protection, and, most importantly, fair working conditions. The treatment of sex work as a criminal activity rather than acknowledging it as a form of labour exacerbates the stigma and discrimination attached to their identity, contributing to their misrepresentation within society (Weitzer, 2009). This thesis, therefore, asserts that intersectionality enables recognition of the diverse experiences of sex workers, as it is useful in working towards dismantling systematic oppression and promoting inclusivity. For sex work, this could lead to more effective campaigning around decriminalisation, labour rights, and better-quality working conditions (Collins, 2015).

This thesis has shown that sex workers choose to enter sex work, the choice to enter, as described by participants, stems from various socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of access to other forms of employment and education, and the role of systematic factors related to race, class, and gender in South Africa. Through exploring Bourdieu (1998), Standing (2011), and Butler (2004, 2009), I discovered that this manifests as economic and social precarity. Sex work as a form of work, I argue, makes for a form of precarious work, and sex workers experience precarity within various domains of their lives (Millar, 2017). Sex work within the social context of South Africa rises from high levels of unemployment, further exacerbated by Neoliberalism. Sex work, for the participants of this study and many other sex workers, has become a livelihood strategy and means to feed their families (Decoteau, 2016). All participants come from the township or rural area; hence, sex work as an employment option rises from elevated levels of economic precarity. Conversely, through data collection – sex work emerges as a liberatory practice, particularly for those who are fleeing from the conditions of township living and others from precarious jobs, prejudice, danger, or non-supportive families. Yet, for others, it is not a liberatory terrain, as they experience violence from clients and police, work in abysmal working conditions and have highly negative experiences. Through exploring the working conditions and experiences described by participants within the spaces engaged in, notably the brothel space, street space, and organisational space, it is evident that the working conditions within each of the spaces differ

but are similar on the basis of precarity, alienation, and the experience of exploitative working conditions.

All aspects of sex work are illegal, and it is criminalised by the Sexual Offences Act (No. 23 of 1957) and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act (No. 32 of 2007). The results of this study indicate that sex workers experience exploitation and violence due to the criminal status of sex work in South Africa. This leads to experiences of exploitation and violence not only at the hands of clients but police, brothel managers, and other sex workers as well. This study aimed to demonstrate why sex work should be decriminalised; as a researcher and citizen – I advocate that the safety of sex workers can only be guaranteed through decriminalisation, as it would enable sex workers to have greater control over their working conditions, reduce stigma, and improve access to health care, civil services, and other support services (Nyembe et al., 2014). The criminal status of sex workers further subjects the population to societal stereotypes, which only reinforces negative perceptions about the community.

A popular misconception that this thesis confronts is the argument that sex work makes for the sale of bodies. However, participants noted that they do not sell their bodies; they sell sex. This dispute is largely taken up when placing sex work within the feminist debate. This study addresses that it is such positions that dominate discussions of sex work. Thus, I sought to investigate sex work from the perspectives of sex workers themselves. Bodies, particularly female bodies, have been exposed to various economic, political, and historical processes through which bodies are argued to be turned into commodities that are utilised. The sex workers of this study, however, stress that they are very much in control of their bodies, which they own, although it is used for various purposes dependent on the demand of that time and that their bodies have meaning away from sex work. Sex work, therefore, is not women's subordination, nor are sex workers victims of male lust or coercion.

Through incorporating threads of the liberal feminist argument into a Marxist-Socialist feminist perspective, this study aimed to highlight that if sex workers are denied the right to enter sex work freely, they are denied their human rights of equality, non-discrimination, liberty, and autonomy. Thus, throughout, I have argued that sex work should be considered equivalent to other forms of work (Jaggar, 2018). Permitting sex work and decriminalising it, as per Marxist-Socialist feminism, is a step toward empowerment, as it would equalise opportunities and broaden the choices of sex workers. The results of this study indicate that the

choice to enter sex work is personal. Although it is considered not to be a desirable choice according to the social norms of society, it is legitimate because it is simply their choice (Cooper, 1989; Wondimu, 2021). Furthermore, sex work is frowned upon because it involves sex and coming into contact with others' bodies. However, other professions, such as physicians, involve coming into contact with the bodies of others and performing bodily labour, but it is not stigmatised nor discriminated against. The concept of bodywork is therefore employed within this study to demonstrate the paid work performed on the bodies of others, the work undertaken on the bodies of sex workers, and the emotional labour required to do body work (Gimlin, 2007). This thesis, therefore, is aimed at adding to the discussion about why sex work should be considered any different to other forms of bodily labour. The classification of sex work as an illegitimate form of work, and in taking into consideration the working conditions described throughout this thesis, has proven that sex work as a form of work - due to its legal status is marked by job insecurity, low wages, no social protection, no labour rights, exploitative conditions, and income insecurity (Han, 2018).

The working conditions of sex work as described within each space were found to be highly diverse; I was able to connect it to various sociological literature and theories, in which each justification fed into each other, resulting in one big puzzle piece that needs to be read in unison to understand the levels of exploitation and oppression experienced by sex workers. In relating the working conditions to Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (1994), this study demonstrates that the brothel space is marked by exploitative conditions, a falsehood of protection, and power dynamics between the brothel manager and sex worker. However, sex workers have found a safe space which builds community and solidarity among the sex work population. The sex work organisations within Cape Town and broader South Africa play a crucial role in the lives of sex workers, as it has been found to not only be an educational space, but these organisations go beyond to protect sex workers and teach different skills such as computer literacy. Therefore, compensating for the lack of opportunities provided to sex workers, their lack of access to healthcare, and social protection by the state. Yet, sex workers within the brothel and street space experience feelings of estrangement, vulnerability, and alienation whereby they endure exploitative and violent conditions from clients, police, third parties, and other sex workers. While they perform paid productive work, this study found that their labour extends to emotional labour and emotional work. In rendering a sexual service to clients, sex workers perform reproductive unpaid labour as well, and within performing reproductive tasks, the feelings of estrangement and detachment further to the extent that they employ emotional

management strategies to maintain emotional distance and avoid emotional intimacy (Hochschild 1979, 1983; Gimlin, 2007).

Despite the contributions of this thesis to sex work as a topic of inquiry, I acknowledge its limitations. This study involves a small sample of sex workers and speaks to the experiences of a specific group, and due to the space constraints of this thesis, I do think that a larger sample and study are needed. The experiences discussed and demonstrated in this study make up a small portion of the larger landscape and population of sex work. This study is not a representation of South Africa as a whole, nor highlights the experience of sex workers in the entire Western Cape. It provides insight into a small unit of study based on the particular case used in the making of this thesis. It demonstrates participant's experiences of sex work operating in a specific context and geographical location. A more extensive study, therefore, needs to be done to unravel the true complexity of the systematic and structural factors inherent to sex work. It would produce results that are more likely to represent the larger sex work population. This thesis not only expanded my understanding of sex work but has also been a journey of personal and academic growth. Through the challenges I faced and the lessons I learned, I have developed valuable skills in research, policy analysis, and advocacy, which I will undoubtedly use in my future endeavours within the field of sociology.

As I conclude this thesis, it is clear that sex workers experience exploitative working conditions as a result of being criminalised in South Africa. This research not only answers important questions about sex work, but I hope that the insights provided through the exploration of sex work as a form of precarity, alienation, emotional labour, and interactive bodywork contribute to broader conversations of law reform, ultimately striving for the decriminalisation of sex work. Future research endeavours are crucial in advancing our understanding of sex work, particularly within the context of South Africa. As many still hold essentialist and moral notions and for meaningful contributing to public policy and reform on sex work. This study has policy implications whereby it could possibly help draft or amend a new bill on sex work. Numerous studies, including mine, suggest that the sex work policy is misguided and does not consider the way in which the legal status of sex workers exacerbates their conditions. The findings of this thesis suggest that the violence and exploitation experienced by sex workers within the various spaces they engaged in is as a result of their criminalisation - which leads to unsafe working conditions. Therefore, this thesis is premised on the belief that proposed changes to policy and law would make the sex industry safer. This study, along with sex work movements in South Africa, calls for the decriminalisation of sex work. Viewing participants'

experiences as described within this thesis could add to the repeal of laws. Firstly, the Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957; this research could possibly aid to the body of research that supports full decriminalisation, as it recognises and asserts that criminalisation prevents sex workers from accessing the rights enshrined in the South African Constitution and protection in different sectors such as law enforcement and the South African Police Service (SAPS). This thesis demonstrates that sex workers have prominent levels of engagement with police officials, who witness the challenges and risks they face. However, they are found to aggravate their already strenuous conditions further, leading to an acrimonious relationship. The study further highlights that the consequence of criminalisation results from an imbalance of power between sex workers, police officers, clients, and other sex industry staff (Sonke Gender Justice, 2023:2-3).

The results of this study could be used to come up with some form of partnership between said parties, particularly police officers who are legally entitled to arrest sex workers. It was found that police officers abuse their power, which results in violence and other human rights violations. This places sex workers in an ambiguous position of victim and offender, as they are unlikely to report crimes perpetrated by police to police- thus making them more vulnerable to abuse. Additionally, this research could be used to add to the repeal of Section 11 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007 (Act No.32 of 2007). Repealing Section 11 would decriminalise clients of sex workers; the criminalisation of clients places sex workers at an even greater risk as it forces the negotiation and transaction of sexual services underground. This thesis highlights that the transactions and negotiations between sex workers and clients are unsafe and difficult, which leads to exploitative and violent experiences (Sonke Gender Justice, 2023:3-4). The Act, in its entirety, maintains the position that all persons involved in the selling and buying of sex are being sexually exploited and in need of rescue and rehabilitation. Such a position asserts that sex workers do not possess agency nor are capable of making choices regarding the work they do. This thesis, therefore, stands in opposition to such positions and advocates for sex workers' rights to dignity, bodily autonomy, and the right to fair labour practices. It illuminates the bad working conditions of sex work; the violence experienced at the hands of clients, police, brothel managers, and the public, and most notably, the need for decriminalisation—which, as the reader, one should reflect upon when thinking about sex work in South Africa and as a South African citizen use this thesis as in initiative when the Bill for decriminalisation opens again for public comment and campaigning.



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