



Resilient Resistances

The Self-Organization of Sex Workers Against the German Prostitute Protection Act

PhD Dissertation

submitted by

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Extended Abstract

In 2013, sex workers in Germany began to organize collectively. Through the foundation of the Professional Association for Erotic and Sexual Service Providers, these activists sought to refute victimizing discourses and prevent the introduction of controlling and repressive legislation. Sex worker activists built on the institutionalized structures of the former German whore movement and aimed at preserving the political gains it had achieved through prostitution law reform in 2001. At the same time, sex worker activists established a form of self-organization and self-representation hitherto unknown in Germany. Despite their mobilizations, the Prostitute Protection Act was adopted in 2016 and largely ignored the political demands of sex worker activists.

Scholarship examining the collective mobilizations of sex workers is still scarce, and existing works are predominantly pessimistic about their probability, durability, and impact. Scholars furthermore contend that effective policy-making on prostitution is impeded by heavy political contestations and moralization. Moreover, Europe has been the site of a profound shift towards the repression and criminalization of sex work since the turn of the century, and Germany plays a unique role within these processes due to its comparably liberal legal framework on prostitution. In spite of these challenging conditions, the self-organization of sex workers against the German Prostitute Protection Act illustrates that sex workers do operate as collective political actors. However, they remain underexplored as such in the fields of sex work research and social movement studies.

Filling this gap in research, this thesis analyse the emergence, development, and outcomes of sex workers' collective self-organization against the German Prostitute Protection Act. In doing so, I adopt a relational approach which traces the interactions between sex worker activists, their institutional context, and other political actors mobilizing in the field of prostitution politics, and show their relevance to sex workers' political self-organization. My conceptual framework brings feminist theory into conversation with social movement scholarship. Building on a Foucauldian understanding of power, resistance, and their intimate interrelation, I flesh out the political subjectivities and agency expressed by sex worker activists, while feminist theories of democracy permit me to uncover dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within social movement processes.

In order to challenge hierarchical research settings and centre sex worker activists as producers of situated knowledges, my methodological approach departs from feminist epistemologies, complicates the standardization of Participatory Action Research in sex work studies, and instead merges feminist constructivist Grounded Theory with participatory elements. I draw on ethnographic field work mainly conducted between September 2018 and August 2020, and my rich data set triangulates in-depth interviews with participant observation and document analysis. Transporting the reflexive praxis of sex work research into social movement research, I discuss ethical dilemmas I encountered throughout the project.

By reconstructing the political process at the micro- and meso-level from the perspective of sex worker activists, my analysis yields crucial results. I first demonstrate how power relations inherent in German prostitution politics produced sex workers as political subjects and agents who resisted victimization and strategically reacted to the political threat presented by the Prostitute Protection Act. While sex worker activists failed in their declared goal of preventing the law, I contend that they succeeded in establishing themselves as political actors, and in building a sustained and diversifying social movement in the face of continued adversities. I then draw attention to the antagonistic dynamic between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners, and argue that contestation between a marginalized and a hegemonic political actor first spurred the former's access to the public sphere, and eventually aggravated its political exclusion.

Sex worker movements are heterogenous political actors in themselves, and activists' social locations are shaped by intersecting power relations. I thus direct two intersectional lenses onto the German sex worker movement. First, I examine cooperative and conflictual relations within the sex worker movement, and show how sex worker activists seek to dismantle internal hierarchies by grappling with intersectional political analyses. As part of this, I expand scholarship on protest repertoires by identifying care work as an essentially political practice which ensures both the survival of marginalized communities and the social movements emerging from them. Then, I delineate the manifold and unpredictable coalition building activities which sex worker activist engage in. Here, I indicate that sex worker activists still lack durable political alliances, but show the recent progress made with respect to union organizing. Finally, sex worker activists' efforts to forge both community and coalitions attest to a growth in intersectional consciousness and practices among them.

Contrary to previous academic assessments of sex worker movements, my findings reveal sex worker activists as complex political actors whose collective mobilizations are resilient rather than fragile. In scrutinizing the transforming resistances exerted by sex worker activists, my analysis uncovers historically contingent power formations between state, feminist, and conservative actors in the field of prostitution politics, and stresses the need for relations of solidarity which bridge across the differences within the sex worker movement, as well as those between sex worker activists and other political actors. As such, my findings have further implications for the study of marginalized social movements and contemporary political contestations at the intersection of gender, sexuality, migration, and labour.

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As individualizing as doctoral work is, it is always the product of collective labour. Over the course of this project, I engaged with many individuals and institutions, and I am grateful for the contributions they each made to this thesis.

My academic journey into sex work starts and ends with sex worker activists. I performed my very first research into the topic during my master's programme in Global Studies, in a seminar on social deviance which I took at the University of Cape Town in 2014. At that time, the new legislative process and the public debates around prostitution in Germany were in full swing. In the midst of these were sex worker activists, who had just collectively entered into the public eye. The other half of my course work dealt with social movements and workers. It is therefore not surprising that sex worker movements captured my academic interest and have held it ever since, spanning both a master's and a PhD programme. Sex worker movements connect all the themes which fascinated me as a sociology student and continue to be central to my professional, political, and private worlds: sex work touches on gender, sexuality, labour, migration, and global inequality like few other subjects do. It goes through phases of intense politicization, contestation, and resignification, and is the site of power relations and collective resistances. It can stir very personal and emotional reactions in each of us, which influence any knowledge formation on the issue. Researching sex work and the social movements built around it is thus a complex, as well as deeply political and feminist endeavour. In this endeavour, sex worker activists have been my teachers, colleagues, and companions. I hope that I did their stories justice and am deeply grateful for everything they shared with me. A special thank you goes to Kathy, for the time spent with conversation, delicacies, and Brandenburg walks.

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Abbreviations

ACT UP	AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
BDSM	Sexual practices of bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism
BesD	<i>Berufsverband erotische und sexuelle Dienstleistungen</i> – Professional Association for Erotic and Sexual Service Providers
BSC	Berlin Strippers Collective
BSD	<i>Bundesverband sexuelle Dienstleistungen</i> – Federal Association for Sexual Services
BMFSFJ	<i>Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend</i> – Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth
bufas	<i>Bündnis der Fachberatungsstellen für Sexarbeiterinnen und Sexarbeiter</i> – Alliance of the Counselling Centres for Sex Workers in Germany
CATW	Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW)
CDU	<i>Christlich Demokratische Union</i> – Christian Democratic Union
cis	cisgender (adj.), describes a person whose gender identity concurs with the one assigned at birth
CSU	<i>Christlich-Soziale Union</i> – Christian Social Union
ESWA	European Sex Worker Rights Alliance (formerly ICRSE – International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe)
EU	European Union
EWL	European Women’s Lobby
FDP	<i>Freie Demokratische Partei</i> – Free Democratic Party
GT	Grounded Theory
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSWP	Global Network of Sex Work Projects
PAR	Participatory Action Research

SESTA/FOSTA	Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act/Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> – Social Democratic Party of Germany
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
SWAG	Sex Worker Action Group
SWERF	Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminism/Feminist
TERF	Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism/Feminist
trans	transgender (adj.), inclusive umbrella terms that describes a person whose gender identity is different from the one assigned at birth
UEGD	<i>Unternehmerverband Erotikgewerbe Deutschland</i> – Association of Erotic Industry Entrepreneurs Germany
ver.di	<i>Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft</i> – United Services Trade Union

1 Introduction

Political self-organization is often arduous, unpredictable, and ephemeral. Scholars have found this to be particularly true for stigmatized, marginalized, and criminalized social groups such as sex workers. Their collective mobilizations have been termed “unlikely” (Mathieu, 2001), seen as marred by numerous “challenges” and “obstacles” (Gall, 2007, 2016), or been designated as “failures” (Weitzer, 1991). Moreover, sex workers have been facing an increasingly challenging political context since the turn of the century: international political discourses which lump sex work together with human trafficking frame sex workers as passive victims rather than agentic subjects (B. Anderson & Andrijasevic, 2008; Jacobsen & Stenvoll, 2010; Milivojević & Pickering, 2013), and the discursive polarization, emotionalization, and moralization of sex work render its politicisation and translation into effective policies difficult (Foret & Rubio Grundell, 2020; Wagenaar & Altink, 2012). Europe has been the site of particularly pronounced political shifts towards the repression and criminalization of sex work, regardless of divergences in national legal frameworks (FitzGerald & Skilbrei, 2022; Jahnsen & Wagenaar, 2017; Mattson, 2016; Scoular & Carline, 2014; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011, 2013). The policy of client criminalization has become particularly prevalent within the region, despite health experts, scholars, and human rights advocates issuing warnings over its harmful effects on sex workers (e.g. Amnesty International, 2016; Chu & Glass, 2013; Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe, 2019; Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Kingston & Thomas, 2019; Levy & Jakobsson, 2014; Vuolajärvi, 2018).

In light of these interplaying impediments, the political self-organization of sex workers appears as a rare phenomenon which is bound to founder. Other scholars have again highlighted the manifold ways in which sex workers participate in politics “despite the odds” (Majic, 2014) by drawing attention to their informal grassroots activities, or by indicating how pessimistic assessments of sex worker movements do not apply outside the North American and European context (Hardy, 2010). However, the recent collective mobilizations which sex workers across Europe have undertaken at the local, national, and transnational level contest their improbability, as well as the victimization of their participants (Garofalo Geymonat & Maciotti, 2016; Hofstetter, 2018; Stevenson & Dziuban, 2017).

Germany presents one of the cases which has seen a recent self-organization of sex workers. Here, sex workers began to mobilize collectively in response to plans for prostitution law reform which the governing coalition of CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) and SPD (Social Democratic Party) initiated after the German parliamentary election in 2013. Most notably, these sex worker activists opposed a law which claimed to serve sex workers' protection: the Act Regulating the Prostitution Industry and Protecting the People Working in Prostitution (*Gesetz zur Regulierung des Prostitutionsgewerbes sowie zum Schutz von in der Prostitution tätigen Personen*), or Prostitute Protection Act (*Prostituiertenschutzgesetz*) in short. To sex worker activists, the envisioned controlling and repressive legal provisions violated their basic rights, threatened their livelihoods, and promoted discrimination and stigmatization. At the same time, sex worker activists saw their working and living realities distorted within victimizing public discourses, and found they lacked representation within the legislative process. In order to prevent the Prostitute Protection Act from passing, sex worker activists founded the Professional Association for Erotic and Sexual Service Providers (*Berufsverband erotische und sexuelle Dienstleistungen*, short *BesD*) in 2013, which represents the formal starting point of an unprecedented self-organization and political self-representation of only former and active sex workers in Germany. Despite their countering mobilizations, the Prostitute Protection Act was adopted in 2016 stipulating most of the criticized provisions. The self-organization of sex workers against the German Prostitute Protection Act attests to the fact that sex workers operate as collective political actors, and do so in opposition to an institutional context which purports to increase their well-being, yet disregards their political subjectivities and agency.

The self-organization of sex workers against the German Prostitute Protection Act is of interest for several reasons. First of all, scholars and practitioners have found the involvement of sex workers in prostitution politics to be paramount to the development of policies which respect their human rights, improve their living and working conditions, and promote their safety and well-being (e.g. Fassi, 2015; Wagenaar, 2017; Wagenaar & Altink, 2012). It is therefore particularly contradictory and striking that sex workers were politically excluded in the face of their collective mobilizations, and from the development of a law which was intended to serve their protection.

Second, the self-organization of sex workers in Germany emerged in a context which seemed to be fairly favourable to their political inclusion and success. Although strictly

regulated and discriminated against in comparison to other professional activities, prostitution has always been legal in the Federal Republic of Germany. Sex workers in Germany have thus not had to operate under the severe criminalized conditions faced in most other country contexts, which also impede sex workers' political self-organization. Scholars studying sex workers' collective mobilizations in the early 2000s indeed found Germany to be one of the most successful and promising cases: not only had prostitutes and social workers spawned the German whore movement in the 1980s, they had also managed to successfully push for and influence prostitution law reform (Heying, 2019). With the adoption of the Prostitution Act (Act Regulating the Legal Situation of Prostitutes – *Gesetz zur Regelung der Rechtsverhältnisse der Prostituierten*) in 2001, sex workers in Germany had gained fundamental legal and social rights. As a result of these changes, sex workers' organization in labour unions became possible. To Gall (2007), Germany presented one of the "Western countries where the developments in sex worker unionization were the most advanced to date" (p.73), and identified them as signs of a promising political shift within sex worker movements, away from a focus on civil and political rights towards economic and workers' rights. Yet, in Germany, these developments stagnated or underwent changes since: the Prostitution Act of 2001 failed to create comprehensive improvements in the German sex industry (Kavemann & Rabe, 2007), sex worker unionization did not progress beyond its initial efforts, and the German whore movement disbanded after 2001 and institutionalized itself into state-funded counselling centres which focused on service provision rather than political struggles (Heying, 2019). The self-organization of sex workers which then emerged in 2013 is distinct from the whore movement in organizational form and activist composition, and engaged in reactive rather than proactive mobilizations. This necessitates a reassessment of the collective mobilizations of sex workers in Germany which takes recent political developments into account.

Third, Germany has occupied a pronounced role in international political discourses on sex work since the adoption of the Prostitution Act in 2001 made the German legal framework into one of the most liberal in international comparison. In these debates, the country came to symbolize the supposedly general failure of legalized prostitution regimes. Moral panics around sex and migration, and the intensified mobilizations by anti-prostitution actors who equate prostitution with gender-based and sexualized violence created renewed political pressure to act on the issue of prostitution. Little more than 15 years after the adoption of

the Prostitution Act, Germany thus legislated again and diverted from its previous rights-based approach to prostitution through the repressive provisions stipulated by the Prostitute Protection Act of 2016. This illustrates that sex worker activists operate in a highly conflictual and volatile political field, and that their mobilizations reflect wider political contestations and transformations at the intersection of gender, sexuality, labour, and migration.

Finally, the inability of sex worker activists to prevent the Prostitute Protection Act seems to substantiate pessimistic conclusions on the political potentials of sex worker movements. By focusing on the micro- and meso-level of political interaction, my analysis reveals sex workers as complex political actors whose persistence and diversification generated a sustained social movement, and whose resistances to a challenging political context are resilient rather than fragile. In the following, this introduction sketches out my research questions, contributions to the literature, the thesis structure, as well as notes on terminology.

1.1 Research Questions

In this thesis, I examine the collective self-organization of sex workers in Germany starting from the foundation of BesD in 2013 to the passing of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016 and its aftermath. My research focuses on sex workers as political actors in the field of prostitution politics and is guided by the following broad research questions:

1. How do sex workers in Germany currently appear and operate as political actors? Which forms of political agency and subjectivity do sex worker activists develop and express in their mobilisations?
2. How do they relate to their institutional environment? Which relationships do they form with other political actors operating within the field of prostitution politics?
3. Which movement internal contentions arise in the course of these mobilisations? Which transformations is the wider movement undergoing as a result of this?

In order to pursue these research questions, my conceptual framework merges social movement theory and feminist theory. In particular feminist scholarship advancing a Foucauldian understanding of power, resistance, and their intimate interrelation (e.g. Abu-

Lughod, 1990; Butler, 1988, 1990; Mahmood, 2011) constitutes a theoretical starting point. These conceptualizations permit me to scrutinize how political subjectivities form in negotiation between the subject and its context, how political agency is produced and contained within these processes, and how resistance both pushes the boundaries of power relations and accommodates them. Social movement scholarship is equally useful in illuminating manifestations of agency and resistance among socially and politically marginalized groups (e.g. Cress & Snow, 1996; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Scott, 1985), and in drawing further attention to their collective dimension. Concepts I employ from this strand of literature allow me to trace the emergence, development, and outcomes of sex workers' self-organization (e.g. Almeida, 2018; Bosi & Uba, 2009; della Porta, 2013; D. A. Snow, 2013; van Dyke, 2013), as well as their strategic interactions with other political actors in the field of prostitution politics (e.g. Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015; Fligstein & McAdam, 2015; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). The social locations of sex workers are shaped by intersection power relations and a vast stratification within the sex industry (Mauer, 2020). Because these also inform sex workers' political self-organization, I pay particular attention to the heterogeneity within the sex worker movement and to the intersectional political practices expressed in internal and external coalition building efforts (e.g. Ayoub, 2019; Montoya, 2021). Finally, feminist theories of democracy highlight processes of political exclusion (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Krook, 2020; Marx Ferree et al., 2002; I. M. Young, 2002) and provide crucial normative insights into the effects of power asymmetries within the field of prostitution politics.

Sex workers have frequently criticized their exclusion from academic research into their lives, and deplored its unintended and potentially harmful consequences (Jeffreys, 2009; Maggie's Toronto, 2013; NSWP, 2020). In order to recognize and centre sex worker activists as experts and producers of plural and contingent situated knowledges, I base my methodological framework on feminist epistemologies (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986, 2008; Hartsock, 1983). Participatory Action Research (PAR) has experienced particular popularity among both sex workers and researchers as a means to mitigate power asymmetries within research (e.g. Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014; O'Neill, 2010; Wahab, 2003). My exploration of PAR within this PhD project reveals the continued practical and ethical dilemmas of this approach. I therefore propose an alternative qualitative research design which is better adjusted to the availabilities of sex worker activists within a challenging political context and to the

institutional constraints under which doctoral work is performed. My feminist constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) approach (e.g. Charmaz, 2006; Olesen, 2007; Plummer & Young, 2010; Wuest, 1995) ensures academic rigour while allowing me to explore the diversity in sex worker activists' political subjectivities and agency through a rich data set triangulating in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. By incorporating participatory elements at different stages of the research process, I am still able to harness the strengths of PAR in challenging established academic research practices and to involve participants in the process of knowledge production. While my methodological framework addresses some shortcomings of sex work research, it reproduces others. A transparent reflection on the epistemological, practical, and ethical challenges I encountered throughout the research project is thus paramount.

Through this relational and exploratory research design, I intend to acknowledge and study sex workers as the diverse political actors they are, uncover the advancements, ambivalences, and contradictions of their struggles within their given context, and account for the fact that any research into sex worker movements constitutes a part of the contested and shifting field of prostitution politics in itself.

1.2 Contributions

Collective mobilizations by sex workers remain underexplored in both the field of sex work studies and social movement studies. An extensive body of scholarship examines the recent changes prostitution politics have undergone especially in Europe, and highlights the detrimental effects this has had on sex workers' living and working conditions (e.g. Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Jahnsen & Wagenaar, 2017, 2017; Scoular & Carline, 2014; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011; Ward & Wylie, 2017). Yet, this literature does not address which consequences these developments have for the political participation of sex workers in processes which directly concern them. Only few scholarly contributions scrutinize the collective mobilizations of sex workers in Europe so far (e.g. Gall, 2007, 2016; Mathieu, 2001, 2003b; van der Poel, 1995) and even fewer have dealt with its relation to the contemporary political context (e.g. Garofalo Geymonat & Macioti, 2016; Mac & Smith, 2018; Stevenson & Dziuban, 2017).

Overall, scholarship on sex worker organizing is rather thinly scattered across the past five decades and other geographical and political contexts. The earliest scholarly works give insights into the development and milestones of the global sex worker movement (Kempadoo, 2003; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Pheterson, 1989), while other studies detail the development and outcomes of sex workers' collective mobilizations in North America (e.g. Beer, 2011; Chateauvert, 2015; Jenness, 1990, 1993; van der Meulen, 2012; Weitzer, 1991), Latin America and the Caribbean (e.g. Cabezas, 2019; Hardy, 2010), Africa (e.g. Mgbako, 2016), Asia (e.g. Gothoskar & Kaiwar, 2014; Parmanand, 2019; Vijayakumar et al., 2015), or New Zealand (e.g. Abel et al., 2010; Armstrong, 2018). Sex worker organizing for labour rights and their affiliation with labour unions have received fairly substantial attention within this body of literature (e.g. Gall, 2007, 2016; Hardy, 2010; Vijayakumar et al., 2015).

The paucity of research on the collective mobilizations of sex workers applies in particular to the German case, where the only published scholarly works are a historical examination of the German whore movement by Heying (2019) and an overview of the organizational activities of BesD by Gloss (2020). We therefore know very little about the collective practices of a political actor which a) plays a crucial, if not *the* most crucial, role in prostitution politics, b) operates in a national framework which features prominently within international political discourses on sex work, and c) forms part of wider political contestations and transformations at the intersection of gender, sexuality, migration, and labour in Europe.

My research into the self-organization of sex workers against the German Prostitute Protection Act thus expands the existing scholarship on sex worker movements and German prostitution politics. I centre sex worker activists in my analysis by scrutinizing political interactions at the micro- and meso-level from their perspectives. In doing so, I trace how the power relations inherent in German prostitution politics produce sex workers as political subjects with agentic capacities who resist victimization and strategically respond to the threat of repressive legislation. My analysis hence complicates and complements scholarship on sex worker movement outcomes by showing that sex worker activists failed in preventing the Prostitute Protection Act, yet achieved an unprecedented form of self-organization and self-representation, and built a diverse and sustained social movement.

In addition, my relational approach delineates the political significance of the relationships between sex worker activists and other political actors in the field of prostitution politics. On the one hand, I show that antagonistic encounters between sex worker activists and anti-

prostitution campaigners first aided in the former's political establishment, and eventually exacerbated their political marginalization. By drawing attention to the power dynamics and exclusionary effects of these contestations, I reject scholarship which normalizes them as "part of the political game" (Krook, 2020, p. 76) or simply reads them as echoes of long-standing feminist polarizations on sex work. In tracing sex workers' resistances, my analysis also reveals changing power formations between state, feminist, and conservative actors in the field of prostitution politics. On the other hand, I provide novel insights into the manifold coalition building efforts undertaken by sex worker activists who could not rely on any robust political alliances so far. While these relationships remain marred by unpredictability, they are manifestations of a budding intersectional praxis between the sex worker movement and its potential coalition partners. Beyond coalition building, I demonstrate that "times of crisis" (Ayoub, 2019) promote intersectional consciousness and practices among sex worker activists who seek to overcome movement internal hierarchies and conflicts, and grapple with intersectional political analyses. Finally, I expand scholarship on protest repertoires by drawing attention to the political significance of care practices in ensuring the resilience of both sex worker communities and the social movements emerging from them. By analysing internal and external processes of collaboration and contestation, I moreover identify the need for "transformative solidarity" (Ciccia & Roggeband, 2021) which bridges across differences within the sex worker movement, as well as between sex worker activists and other political actors.

Because sex work is a focal point which bundles various socio-political issues and inequalities, the German sex worker movement is an example of the intersecting power dynamics within and between social movements. Beyond contributing to the fields of sex work research and social movement scholarship, my findings have further implications for the study of contemporary political contestations at the intersection of gender, sexuality, migration, and labour. Ultimately, my research portrays and examines the collective mobilizations of a marginalized political actor who is neither "innocent" (Haraway, 1988) nor homogenous, yet demands and requires political and academic recognition.

1.3 Structure

The thesis is structured as follows: this introduction (chapter 1) is followed by the theoretical part of my thesis which spans three chapters. In chapter 2, I first introduce my conceptual framework and draw attention to the complementary strengths of social movement theory and feminist theory. Chapter 3 outlines my methodological framework which fuses a feminist constructivist Grounded Theory approach with participatory elements and dedicates particular attention to ethical challenges within sex work research. In chapter 4, I present the political governance and legal regulation of prostitution in Germany, the involvement of different political actors within the field of prostitution politics, and the national manifestations of international political developments. After this, I turn to the empirical part of my thesis, which encompasses four chapters: in chapter 5, I trace the emergence, development, and outcomes of sex workers' self-organization against the Prostitute Protection Act and illustrate its diversification into a sustained social movement after the law's adoption. Chapter 6 addresses the antagonistic relationship between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners and highlights how this dynamic exacerbates the former's political exclusion. The final two empirical chapters present two ways to study social movements intersectionally: in chapter 7, I examine the heterogeneity of the sex worker movement and its internal dynamics of cooperation and contestation. Chapter 8 then addresses coalition building efforts between sex worker activists and other political actors. In chapter 9, I summarize my findings and discuss new formations of power and resistance within the field of prostitution politics, as well as the challenge of transformative solidarity within social movements, before ending with a brief outlook including the most recent political developments.

1.4 Notes on Terminology

Research itself is not neutral. Whether researchers use "prostitution" or "sex work" often entails a positioning, and these terms remain contested within academia and public discourses. Every writing on these subjects inevitably has to start with a clarification of terminology. Within this thesis, I use "sex work" as an umbrella term to refer to any "consensual sexual or sexualized service exchanged between adult business partners in return

for payment or other material goods”¹ (Küppers, 2016, para. 1). This includes services involving physical contact between a worker and a client, as well as performative sexual acts (e.g. stripping, erotic dancing, phone sex, chatting, webcamming, porn). Here, I depart from the definition given in German law, which does not define and regulate performative sexual acts as prostitution. In international, English-speaking policy discourses and scholarship, the term “sex work” has become prevalent and is considered neutral. In the German context, the terms “Sexarbeit” (sex work) and “Prostitution” (prostitution) are sometimes used as synonyms, even though the development increasingly follows the international one. In some cases, scholars have employed the term “prostitution” to denote a seemingly distinct form of sexual labour involving penetrative sex – unlike other practices subsumed under the label “sex work”. This distinction reflects particular understandings of sexuality rather than industry realities, although different forms of embodiment in sex work can present a fault line within political contestations. “Sex work” is the preferred term for the activists my research focuses on. I only employ the term “prostitution” if I reference legal texts, historical contexts, and anti-prostitution perspectives, or the contested public arenas of prostitution politics, policies, and discourses. For the purpose of this work, I furthermore use “sex worker” to refer to all individuals engaging in sex work as per Küpper’s (2016) definition, while remaining cognizant of the diversity among them and the fact that some might not self-identify as such. “Prostitute” (*Prostituierte*) is considered outdated or derogatory by most activists, even though some retain the terminology. Some activists also refer to themselves as “whore” (*Hure*), linking themselves to the German whore movement (*Hurenbewegung*) which proudly re-appropriated the pejorative term. I maintain “prostitute” and “whore” wherever it is a self-designation. I use the terms “sex worker activist” and “activist” interchangeably. Where non-sex working activists are concerned, I make this explicit (e.g. “feminist activist”). This serves not to disregard the overlapping of subjectivities, but to signify in which role the referenced person spoke to me.

I furthermore employ a broad understanding of the terms “activism” and “activist”, using them to denote any activity of collective self-organization among sex workers and any sex worker engaging in such. I adopted this approach prior to data collection to allow for maximum variety of research participants, and to fill the concept of “activism” with meaning

¹ All translations made from German original text into English are mine.

generated from their perspectives. Not every interviewee used these terms: in a few cases, interviewees hesitated to claim the label “activist” for themselves, or “activism” for the political work they were doing. While the distinction between “sex worker activists” and “sex workers” is useful to emphasize that my analysis centres on political actors and is not generalized to all individuals engaging in sex work, these groups and designations blur in the subchapters on community building (7.1) and the role of sex worker only spaces (7.2) which are arenas of encounter and transition between non-politicized and politicized participants.

In order to distinguish between two distinct periods of political mobilizations by sex workers in Germany, I use “whore movement” (*Hurenbewegung*) to denote the movement of self-ascribed “whores” and prostitutes that emerged in Germany in the 1980s and dissipated after the adoption of the Prostitution Act in 2001, as examined by Heying (2019). This movement forms the historical predecessor of the self-organization of sex workers from 2013 on, which I term “sex worker movement” since it developed into a sustained social movement following the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016. Interviewees at times use these terms interchangeably.

In addition, I employ specific terminology for other political actors engaging in prostitution politics. I employ the term “anti-prostitution campaigners” to describe political actors mobilizing for the eradication of prostitution.² I find this term to adequately describe the ideological goals and political strategies they pursue in the German context, and to be the best approximation of the commonly used German term *Prostitutionsgegnerinnen* (female form of “prostitution opponents”). The female form indicates that this group predominantly consists of women informed by a radical feminist understanding of prostitution as violence against women, sexual exploitation, and as the ultimate expression of gender inequality (e.g. Barry, 1995; Dworkin, 1993; MacKinnon, 2011). I use “anti-prostitution campaigners” to denote that this group also encompasses, although in smaller numbers, conservative Christian actors, male individuals, and women who consider themselves “survivors” (*Überlebende*) of prostitution. Where I seek to only address feminist anti-prostitution campaigners, I use “anti-prostitution feminists”. The term “anti-prostitution campaigners” stresses that these actors predominantly mobilize from socially hegemonic positions and

² Other scholars have termed these or similar actors operating in other country contexts “anti-sex work movements” (Sauer, 2019), “sex work prohibitionists” (Nagel, 2015), or “carceral feminists” (Bernstein, 2010).

through institutionally backed political campaigns. This distinguishes them from the grassroots-based self-organization of sex worker activists my work focuses on.

Within sex work scholarship and discourses, anti-prostitution campaigners are frequently referred to as “abolitionists” (*Abolitionistinnen*) or “neo-abolitionists” (*Neo-Abolitionistinnen*). I refrain from using these terms for several reasons: first, anti-prostitution campaigners self-ascribe as abolitionists to create a historical continuity to bourgeois abolitionist feminist movements of the late 19th and early 20th century (De Vries, 2008). Unlike these movements, which protested state-regulation of prostitution and aimed at “freeing prostitutes from the discriminatory treatment of the police and other state actors” (Dolinsek, 2022, p. 223), anti-prostitution campaigners today specifically rely on state intervention through criminal law and policing to curb and eradicate prostitution. This also sets them apart from historical abolitionist movements against chattel slavery and from contemporary abolitionist movements against police violence and mass incarceration (Nagel, 2015), both of which emerged out of the self-organization of those most affected by these systems, i.e. Black and other racialized people. Moreover, the term “abolitionism” draws a problematic parallel between slavery and sex work, also referring to the latter as “sexual slavery” or “white slavery”³ (see e.g. EMMA, 2020d). Finally, I avoid using “abolitionism” (*Abolitionismus*) or “neo-abolitionism” (*Neo-Abolitionismus*) for legal frameworks since it muddies the existing diversity in states’ political governance of sex work (see also chapter 4.1). Because political debates on “(neo-)abolitionism” mostly centre around the policy of client criminalization, I specifically name this policy where relevant.

³ Ideas of “white slavery” first emerged out of moral panics over the mass emigration of European working class women at the turn of the 20th century, and build on racist ideas of White women trafficked and (sexually and economically) exploited by racialized perpetrators (Doezema, 1999). Used in today’s context, the terms “sexual slavery” or “white slavery” not only negate women’s agency in migration and sex work, but also invisibilize racialized sex workers.

2 Theoretical Framework

Over the course of my research, my theoretical framework and methodological approach remained in constant conversation. Due to the inductive nature of Grounded Theory (GT) which I adopt in my research design, the presented thesis is empirically driven and aims at the development of original theory. Rather than departing from theoretical hypotheses, I thus derived “sensitizing concepts” (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2009) from a first body of literature which provided my research with starting points and direction. I later expanded this framework by adding theoretical concepts which provide understanding to themes which emerged from the data. Overall, my theoretical framework combines two broad strands of literature: social movement theory and feminist theory.

My theoretical approach first originated in feminist and postcolonial scholarship building on Foucauldian conceptualizations of power, resistance, and subjectivity (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1990; Butler, 1988, 1990; Mahmood, 2011). These perspectives show that even socially and politically marginalized groups can exert agency and resistance, yet in doing so remain inextricably linked to power relations which shape their subjectivities. By drawing in additional sex work scholarship (Berg, 2021; Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021; Jacobsen & Stenvoll, 2010), I direct this theoretical lens onto sex workers as political actors, and highlight some of the existing literature in this field.

In addition to this, my theoretical approach is informed by social movement literature. The field of social movements studies stresses the collective dimension of resistance and has amply illustrated the political agency of marginalized populations through empirical studies. These address, for instance, everyday resistances and poor people’s movements (Cress & Snow, 1996; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Scott, 1985). Among the literature detailing sex workers’ political engagement in diverse legal and geographical contexts (e.g. Cabezas, 2019; Gall, 2007, 2016; Garofalo Geymonat & Macioti, 2016; Hardy, 2010; Jenness, 1993; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Majic, 2013, 2014; Mgbako, 2016), only few scholars have explicitly employed social movement concepts to examine these collective mobilizations (e.g. Aroney, 2020; Heying, 2019; Mathieu, 2003b, 2003a).

Concepts I have found useful in tracing the emergence, development, and outcomes of sex workers’ self-organization in Germany are derived from various theoretical traditions within social movement scholarship. While political process theory (e.g. Almeida, 2018; D. A.

Snow, 2013; van Dyke, 2013) accounts for social movement context, resource mobilization theory (e.g. McCarthy & Zald, 1977, 2001) stresses the agency of political actors. Affective perspectives (Jasper, 2008, 2011) as well as analyses of the specifics of morality politics (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012) hold explanatory value for social movement processes surrounding an emotionalized and morally charged issue. Because various political actors vie for advantage in prostitution politics, I examine interactionist perspectives on contentious politics such as Duyvendak and Jasper's (2015) work on "players and arenas" as well as Fligstein and McAdam's (2015) theory of fields. These conceptualize social movements as goal-oriented and strategic actors operating within various sites of political interaction. Whereas theorizations on movement-counter-movement dynamics (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, 2008) address the contentious interactions between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners, the literature on coalition building (van Dyke & Amos, 2017; van Dyke & McCammon, 2010) bolsters my analysis of the collaborative efforts between sex worker activists and other political actors.

Coalition building also presents social movements with opportunities for intersectional political praxis (Ayoub, 2019; Montoya, 2021). The concept of intersectionality provides an essential lens through which to examine processes of exclusion and marginalization between and within social movements, and raises questions of their transformation (e.g. Ciccio et al., 2021; Einwohner et al., 2021; Leinius, 2020; Mohanty, 2003; Tormos, 2017). By incorporating these, my framework circles back to feminist scholarship on power relations. In order to make sense of my findings, I later added feminist theories of democracy to my theoretical framework (Fraser, 1990; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Krook, 2020; Marx Ferree et al., 2002; I. M. Young, 2002). By centring the ideal of inclusive democratic practice, these theories provide the normative insights missing in many social movement approaches, and highlight how processes of political exclusion are reproduced and exacerbated within liberal democracies, which puts the legitimacy of democratic decision-making into question.

Overall, this theoretical framework permits me to analyze sex worker activists as agentive and strategic political actors situated within a specific institutional context, and to illustrate their self-organization in its complexity and contradictions. Using conceptualizations of power to think through social movement processes, I show how processes of self-organization, contentious interaction, and coalition building are in themselves permeated by power

relations, and demonstrate how marginalized political actors such as sex worker activists resist and are shaped by historically contingent power constellations.

2.1 Power, Resistance and Agency

My first theoretical avenue into sex workers' self-organization originated in feminist and postcolonial scholarship building on Foucauldian understandings of power, resistance, and subjectivity. In the social sciences, especially in analyses of the governance of sexuality, bodies, and sex work, this approach has proliferated (e.g. Beloso, 2017; Mauer, 2020; Sauer, 2013; Schrader, 2014; Schrader & Künkel, 2020; Spanger & Skilbrei, 2017). In a Foucauldian understanding, power is an omnipresent relationship that represses as well as forms the political subject and its subversive capabilities (Foucault, 1978). Power is not a quantity which subjects can possess more, less or none at all of, but a productive force that permeates and constitutes all of social reality. From a Foucauldian point of view, no individual is ever entirely "powerless" or oppressed, but, as a consequence of subjection to power relations, has the ability to act and exert agency. Yet, power and resistance remain inextricably linked, as Foucault has famously claimed: "where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Resistance, therefore, always exists within power relations. Butler (1988) has further developed Foucauldian ideas on subject formation and social transformation through acts of resistance. To her, subjectivity is not a fixed, only material condition, but instead constructed, contingent on power constellations, and continuously materializing in negotiation between the individual and its environment. Power relations inherent in legislation, for instance, constitute the very subjects they apply to (Butler, 1990). Studying sex workers' involvement in health campaigns in India, Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay (2007) show how participants re-envisioned themselves from social pariahs to right-bearing and competent political agents, and formed subjectivities which were fundamental to their politicization into sex work activism.

According to Butler, individual and mundane performative acts accommodate and reconstitute power relations, but can also push their boundaries. Resistance, then, is expressed through reiterated emancipatory acts which subvert or rupture established performance scripts. These acts are collective as they relate to an existing social script, are

shared through experience, and publicly performed. Consequentially, Butler asserts that the “transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions” (Butler, 1988, p. 525). She also notes that “clearly punitive consequences” (Butler, 1988, p. 522) in the form of social marginalization fall on those who “fail” or reject established performance scripts. Like Foucault, who identifies sexuality as a central access point of social control, Butler’s work examines how performance scripts around binary sex and gender, as well as around heterosexuality and reproduction, pertain to historically specific power relations.

That even the most marginalized individuals can engage in acts of resistance is sufficiently illustrated by social movement scholarship (Cress & Snow, 1996; Fassi, 2010; Lorway et al., 2018; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Scott, 1985). Studying porn workers in the US, Berg emphasizes the significance of individual, everyday acts of resistance⁴ for people who are commonly regarded to be “powerless”:

Taking workers seriously as agents of struggle (and taking everyday acts seriously as evidence of that struggle) is particularly crucial in making sense of porn, a site in which workers exercise significant power and one in which both pitying and disdainful (...) outsiders are committed to imagining that they have none. (Berg, 2021, p. 6)

Like in porn, the recognition of sex workers as political agents rejects dominant stereotypes and is fundamental to understanding the politics of this field. To Berg, the particular precariousness of these workers constitutes both a vulnerability and a “source of craftiness and alternative vision” (Berg, 2021, p. 3). Moreover, their individual acts of resistance always exist in relation to the collective: “Informal struggle is often collective work, and (...) creative strategies (...) depend on networks of mutual aid, information sharing, and trade labor” (Berg, 2021, p. 7). Hardy and Barbagallo (2021) detail how sex workers express resistance in the highly individualized, controlling and competitive environment of digital sex work. Here, they “hack”, “hustle” and circumvent platform regulations that mediate sex work, develop alternative solidarity economies, and use digital spaces for mutual aid and collective organizing. The precariousness of platform work has always characterized sex work, the

⁴ Berg utilizes “struggle” instead of “resistance” to emphasize porn workers’ active rather than reactive political engagement. She finds that “workers are often one step ahead” (Berg, 2021, p. 6) in their fight for labour rights and better working conditions. As I examine a case of mostly reactive mobilization against legislation and victimization, I retain the terminology “resistance”.

authors argue, and as such, sex workers' resistance strategies can inspire wider labour struggles.

Postcolonial feminist scholars have made valuable contributions to the possibility of agency within relations of dominance, and have troubled romanticized, monolithic ideas of resistance which remain normatively tied to Western liberalism (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Mahmood, 2011). These, Mahmood (2011) finds, "conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms [and] locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power" (p. 35). Her study of women's piety movements in Egypt shows that "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 36). While the women participating in piety movements make inroads into traditionally male-dominated spaces and practices, they also reinforce traditional power relations by intentionally cultivating modesty and female subordination to divine and patriarchal power. Mahmood maintains that the women's self-realization and intervention in social life is deeply agentive and political. Rather than being passive, oppressed, or suffering from false consciousness, the women exhibit agency through acts which uphold social norms, thereby contesting conceptualizations which tie agency solely to freedom, autonomy, and subversion. Thus, Mahmood concludes, it is "crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics" (Mahmood, 2011, p. 35) – an assertion that is deeply at odds with liberal-secular feminism. Working with a Foucauldian approach in the German context, Schrader (2014) has studied subject formation and agency of sex workers at the micro level. She scrutinizes how drug-using sex workers in Hamburg, Germany, navigate interventionist urban and drug policies, violence, homelessness, and police repression, and shows how they not only engage in acts of resistance, but also express agency by strategically submitting to certain power relations in a severely constrained context.

Transporting Mahmood's ideas to a European context, Jacobsen (2011) demonstrates how power relations intersect in subject formation: both religious and liberal-secular norms co-constitute subjectivity and modes of agency among women organized in Islamic youth groups in Norway. In another work, Jacobsen and Stenvoll (2010) flesh out parallels in the discursive victimization of Muslim women and migrant sex workers. This victimization, the authors argue, serves to uphold the convergence of Western feminist norms with state power within the "Norwegian state feminist project" (p. 288). Positioning certain groups as "powerless"

and in need of protection legitimizes state intervention, individualizes political responsibility, and externalizes underlying structural inequalities. In doing so, it “casts the liberal state and its various modes of government as protectors and as neutral arbiters of national and global inequalities, marginalization, and social conflict” (Jacobsen & Stenvoll, 2010, p. 288). Victimization also contains moralizing elements: those accepting the terms of their victimization are labelled as “deserving” and integrated into hegemonic power structures, whereas those rejecting hegemonic norms are “undeserving” victims to be expelled. Furthermore, agentive “helpers” are positioned as altruistic and neutral, while perpetrators’ agency is framed as self-serving and malicious. Importantly, Jacobsen and Stenvoll argue that resistance to victimization remains fraught if it centres individual autonomy, such as in the figure of the freely choosing hijab-wearer or sex worker:

Although challenging some aspects of victim discourse, such counter representations reproduce dominant ideas about autonomy in maintaining the distinction between the autonomous individual and those who are driven by social pressures and culture. In order to be conceived as active agents, the women must be represented as (relatively) free from social pressures and structural conditions. (Jacobsen & Stenvoll, 2010, p. 284)

These resistance strategies thus remain inextricably linked to the power relations they seek to contest. Lastly, in examining resistance against victimization within the specific power constellation of Western state feminism, Jacobsen and Stenvoll’s work also demonstrates how resistance serves as a “diagnostic of power” as conceptualized by Abu-Lughod (1990). In scholarship on marginalized groups’ resistances, Abu-Lughod found a “tendency to romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated” (p. 42). Rather than signs of transcendence of power structures, she asserts, these resistances “teach us about complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power” (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 53). Inverting the perspective, Abu-Lughod’s work thus enables us to identify transforming power relations by tracing marginalized forms of resistance. Muslim women’s and migrant sex workers’ resistance to victimization and state control brings these power relations to light.

Overall, these Foucauldian approaches show that being subjected to power relations is not a negation of agency and subjectivity, but a formative precondition to those. Furthermore, they emphasize that agentive capacity exists among even the most

marginalized groups of society (and those commonly victimized in the secular-liberal understanding), that power and resistance are inextricably interwoven, and that agency is contained not only in acts that subvert and resist hegemonic norms, but also in those that accommodate and reinforce them. Most importantly, marginalized forms of resistance point us to historically changing power relations.

2.2 Explaining the Emergence, Development & Outcomes of Sex Worker Movements

How, why and to what end individual acts of resistance then turn into sustained collective action has been the main focus of social movement studies (e.g. Bosi & Uba, 2009; della Porta & Diani, 2020; Goodwin & Jasper, 2014; Tarrow, 2011). So far, this growing scholarship on movement emergence, development and outcomes has rarely addressed sex workers' collective organizing. Scholars who have done so have mainly noted obstacles to political engagement faced by sex workers (Gall, 2007; Majic, 2014; Weitzer, 1991). Among these are social stigmatization and its internalization, criminalization and police repression, a lacking awareness of rights or identification with sex work, hierarchical industry structures⁵ that obstruct community building and solidarity, the self-employed, flexibilized and mobile working-conditions which cause workers' individualization and personal responsabilization, high economic competition, as well as the persistence of negative attitudes among the public, authorities, and other political actors.

Despite these impediments, sex workers have engaged in collective action at different points in time and in diverse contexts. Well documented are sex worker organizations that developed in the US and Europe in the 1970s as part of other "deviance liberation movements" (Jenness, 1990). These launched sustained sex worker movements which had spread globally by the 1990s (Chateauvert, 2015; Kempadoo, 2003; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Mgbako, 2016; Pheterson, 1989). Recent scholarship also uncovers much earlier collective mobilizations in the Caribbean, which contest the common narrative of sex worker movements' emergence in the Global North (Cabezas, 2019). Among the authors detailing and examining these mobilizations are not only scholars but also sex workers themselves (Garofalo Geymonat & Macioti, 2016; Mac & Smith, 2018). The Global Network of Sex Work

⁵ Commonly termed "whorearchy" among sex workers (see e.g. Fuentes, 2022; Knox, 2014; Lynn, 2019).

Projects (NSWP), the international umbrella organization of sex worker-led projects, comprises regional networks, labour unions, professional associations, community centres, and grassroots organizations. Currently, it includes 314 members in 101 countries spread over five world regions.⁶ Sex workers organize within a diversity of socio-political, legal, and historical contexts, and draw from work experiences in different sectors of the sex industry (e.g. street-based, brothel, bar and studio work, stripping, webcamming, escorting, or porn). They have established international political action days (e.g. International Sex Worker Rights Day on the 3rd of March, International Whores' Day on the 2nd of June, or International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers on the 17th of December), consolidated their political demands in documents such as the World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights (Kempadoo, 2003), and enshrined them within international institutions (Mgbako, 2020). Their political struggles centre around fighting social stigma, marginalization, criminalization, and violence, and around the demand for fundamental rights, recognition, law reform, and better working and living conditions. These mobilizations not only attest to sex workers' individual political agency, but to their long-standing collective organization as social movements. Following Diani's (1992) definition, these are not single, fixed entities but instead "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities" (Diani, 1992, p. 1).

Grievances, Threats and Opportunities

Hardy (2010) systematizes sex workers' collective organizing into three waves⁷: a first occurring in the 1970s against police repression, a second wave of movement expansion in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the late 1980s, and a third of sex worker affiliation with trade unions in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Adding to this, Geymonat and Macioti (2016) see a fourth phase beginning in the 2000s in the context of growing anti-trafficking campaigns and laws. This scholarship suggests that sex workers' political mobilizations emerge significantly in response to *grievances* and *threats* presented by police violence, stigmatization as vectors of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and by victimization and

⁶ Figures taken on the 23rd of October 2022, see <https://www.nswp.org/>.

⁷ The concept of movement waves is contested as too monolithic in feminist scholarship. Critics claim it privileges visible forms of political action such as public protest (Gilmore, 2010; Hewitt, 2012), thus ignoring less visible political action undertaken by more marginalized sections of social movements (Gutierrez-Rodriguez & Tuzcu, 2021) during so-called phases of movement abeyance (Taylor, 1989).

criminalization. Political process theory identifies grievances and threats as powerful motivators to collective action (Almeida, 2018; van Dyke, 2013). While often used synonymously in social movement literature, I understand grievances as “troublesome matters or conditions, and the feelings associated with them – such as dissatisfaction, fear, indignation, resentment, and moral shock” (D. A. Snow, 2013, p. 288) and threats as “social conditions which may result in the loss of a group’s power or resources” (van Dyke, 2013, p. 662). While grievances often exist without triggering action, they can be aggravated by threats “making current conditions worse if defensive action is not undertaken” (Almeida, 2018, p. 44). Especially when a “taken for granted way of life is disrupted, when the quotidian is disturbed” (van Dyke, 2013, p. 662), mobilizations serve to defend a status quo. According to van Dyke (2013), such “reactive” mobilizations stand in contrast to “proactive” ones that “involve efforts to gain additional rights” (p. 662). Ultimately, not all sex worker organizing is reactive: in addition to mobilizations against grievances and threats, sex workers have organized proactively for labour rights and protections by joining labour unions (Gall, 2007, 2010, 2016; Gothoskar & Kaiwar, 2014; Hardy, 2010; Jackson, 2013; van der Meulen, 2012; Vijayakumar et al., 2015) or lobbied for prostitution law reforms (Abel et al., 2010; Beer, 2011; Heying, 2019). Sex workers thus also exploit *political opportunities* present in the institutional context which enable actors to intervene in an otherwise closed political system (Tarrow, 2011).

Resources

Yet, the existence of adverse or beneficial conditions in themselves cannot fully explain the rise and unfolding of protest, and political process theory has been accused of suffering from a “structural bias” (Giugni, 2011; Goodwin & Jasper, 1999). Resource mobilization theory sought to improve structuralist explanations by centring the role of actors who rationally and strategically calculate the costs and benefits of engaging in collective action (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, 2001). According to this perspective, the “capacity for mobilization depends on the material resources (work, money, concrete benefits, services) and/or nonmaterial resources (authority, moral engagement, faith, friendship) available to the group” (della Porta & Diani, 2020, p. 26) which also impact movement tactics and outcomes. Other scholars have again found this approach to ignore mobilizations by groups that are particularly resource-weak,

economically disadvantaged, or vulnerable (Piven & Cloward, 1977). As Majic (2014) points out, “sex workers constitute one of the most politically marginalized and resource-poor groups” (p. 76), yet engage in a variety of political activities. Moreover, due to the diversity and stratification of the sex industry, there is a great spectrum of resource endowment, vulnerability, and marginalization among sex workers, which might cause differences in mobilization. Mathieu (2001), who applies resource mobilization theory to French sex workers’ self-organization in 1975, identifies how the combination of resources internal to the movement (solidarity, group identity, in-group hierarchies, and networks) and external resources (coalitions with church, feminist, and leftists organizations who provided action repertoires) facilitated its emergence and influenced its tactics and outcome. Conversely, according to Weitzer (1991), the US prostitutes’ rights movements could not alleviate its lack of moral capital through material and human resources, and thus failed to achieve its goals. Working on the same case, Majic (2013) finds that non-profit organizations doing service provision for sex workers provided vital space and resources for sex workers’ political mobilizations, yet were also politically limited as they themselves depended on government resources.

Repertoires of Contention

The tactics activists chose to forward their claims constitute movements’ “repertoire of contention” (della Porta, 2013; D. B. Gould, 2009; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Tactics range from conventional (e.g. petitions, demonstrations, marches, litigation) to disruptive (e.g. strikes, occupations, sit-ins, blockades) or violent (e.g. property destruction, sabotage, attacks, police clashes) and undergo innovation in response to changing political conditions. Sex worker movement tactics have, for instance, included demonstrations, occupations, strikes (Cabezas, 2019; Chateauvert, 2015; Heying, 2019; Mathieu, 2001), litigation (Beer, 2011), lobbying (Mgbako, 2020), and policy-making (Abel et al., 2010; Armstrong, 2018; Armstrong & Abel, 2020). Sex worker movements also engage in strategic framing of sex work as a form of labour, social problem, or human rights issue to appeal to constituencies, policy makers, and other social movements, or to adjust to changing political conditions (Hofstetter, 2018; Jackson, 2016; Jenness, 1990, 1993; Leigh, 2010; Mgbako, 2020; Outshoorn, 2004). Heying (2019) details how the organizations of the German whore movement reappropriated the slur

Hure (whore), published sex worker magazines, hosted congresses, created public marches and provocative actions to create visibility, participated in Labour Day demonstrations on the 1st of May and feminist strike events on the 8th of March, occupied a brothel to avoid its shut down, lobbied politicians of the Green Party, and developed policy suggestions. In the current context, Gloss (2020) describes the BesD's focus on public relations, public speaking, professionalization, networking with other sex worker organizations nationally and internationally, engagement in policy round tables at the municipal level, and online activism. Although neither of these authors analytically contextualize these tactics, Heying (2019) states similarities to tactics of women's and gay and lesbian rights movements.

Finally, political repertoires of marginalized movements often merge with social service activities (Zorn, 2013). As Majic (2014) has shown, a significant part of sex workers' political engagement lies in grassroots organizing and doing care work to sustain their communities (Majic, 2014). These activities may bolster or complement more public and disruptive political actions, as exemplified by the slogan "survival pending revolution" with which the Black Panther Party maintained feeding programs, medical clinics, and educational projects in their communities – at the same time as its activists used armed forms of action and sought wider social transformation (Alkebulan, 2007). Black Feminist thought and politics in particular have emphasized the political relevance and radicality of self-care for people subjected to severe violence and oppression (Davis, 2018; Hill Collins, 1990; Hobart & Kneese, 2020; hooks, 2018; Lorde, 2017; Nicol & Yee, 2017). As Audre Lorde (2017) famously claimed, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p.146), thus expanding conceptualizations of political action. Contrary to the concept's distortion as an individualized consumerist practice, radical self-care for mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing is collective, intersectional, and aimed at structural transformation and movement survival (Davis, 2018). Increasingly, this "traditionally undervalued labor of caring becomes recognized as a key element of individual and community resilience" and as a political practice which "provides spaces of hope in precarious times" (Hobart & Kneese, 2020, p. 1). Engaging in community care thus forms part of social movements' strategic political repertoire.

Outcomes

Given the plurality of obstacles and intersecting marginalizations sex workers face, any political self-organization constitutes a notable achievement. Nevertheless, a considerable part of the existing scholarship on sex worker movements has attested their failure and fragility (Gall, 2007; Mathieu, 2003b; van der Poel, 1995; Weitzer, 1991). Reasons found are scarcity of human, financial, and moral resources, lack of broad membership bases and collective identification with sex work, absence of coalitions with other social movements and political influence, the persistence of negative social perceptions, or “ignorance of, disagreement with, or hostility to the ‘sex work’ discourse” (Gall, 2007, p. 82).

Attesting these movements’ failure may be conclusive if outcomes are measured in terms of whether or not activists achieve their declared goals (e.g. legal change, unionization, coalition-building). However, according to Hardy (2010), these conclusions suffer from a Western bias: sex worker activists in the Global South have successfully developed a sex work subjectivity and class consciousness, formed mass-based organizations, unionized, built alliances with other movements, and impacted wider feminist and labour struggles (Gooptu & Bandyopadhyay, 2007; Hardy, 2010; Mgbako, 2016; Shah, 2011). Even scholars attesting sex worker movements’ failure and dissipation find impacts in increased collective bargaining power, access to political representation, strategic transformations, or conclude that some hampering aspects can be beneficial to organizing in other cases (Gall, 2007; Mathieu, 2003b).

These conclusions are in line with the growing literature on social movement outcomes which identifies generalized judgements and causal explanations of success versus failure as overly simplistic (Bosi et al., 2016). Social movements have a variety of effects on political and social life. Among these are biographical (personal consequences for movement participants), cultural (broader changes to social and cultural norms), political-institutional (changes to the political, economic or legal context such as governments, parties, policies, laws, institutions, corporations, and markets), and internal consequences (changes in the social movement itself). Furthermore, success or failure depends on interpretation or time frame. The institutionalization of sex worker organizations into NGOs which focus on service provision may be interpreted as a negative outcome of movement depoliticization (Heying, 2019), or as a beneficial outcomes, since these organizations remain committed to advocacy and transformative politics after protest dissipates, create safe(r) spaces for community

engagement (Majic, 2013), and present abeyance structures that bridge the movement until the next outbursts of protest (Taylor, 1989).

Sex worker activists themselves may also interpret movement outcomes differently from scholars. For Aroney (2020), a significant social movement outcome of the short-lived church occupation by French sex worker activists in 1975 is the “fortifying myth” it created for sex worker activism. This myth “transcends any failure to achieve institutional goals (...) [and] in itself contributed importantly to building and sustaining a social movement culture” (p. 14) among sex worker activists. More generally, sex worker movements made significant political gains over the last decades. Most famously, the reframing of prostitution as sex work coined by sex worker activists Carol Leigh (Leigh, 2010) has become an established terminology and “enabled prostitutes and others in the sex trade not only to articulate their needs as working peoples, but has brought a legitimacy hitherto unknown” (Kempadoo, 2003, p. 148). Sex worker movements have also achieved legislative change (Abel et al., 2010; Heying, 2019) and successfully anchored sex workers’ claims to human rights in international bodies and NGOs (Mgbako, 2020). Sex worker movements’ outcomes are thus more complex, diverse, and positive than some scholarship suggests.

Affect, Emotions & Morality

With the affective turn starting in the 1990s, social movement scholars began to understand that actors were not purely rational and strategic but that “emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of protest” (Jasper, 2011, p. 286). Emotions are not antithetical to rational choices and politics, but complementary to them and an integral part of why people engage in politics. Many social movement concepts only make sense when their affective side is considered: grievances may be felt as lack, anxiety, attack, loss, or threat, which may compel people into action. Scholars have thus added socio-psychological aspects of collective action to classic concepts (Muliavka, 2021; Portos, 2021; Simmons, 2014; D. A. Snow, 2013). Collective action may also be triggered by feelings of entitlement to rights or confidence in success, while feelings of belonging and the forging of collective solidarities through group interaction can sustain activism (D. B. Gould, 2009; Hemmings, 2012; Jasper, 2011). Emotions “motivate, rationalize, and channel political action” (Jasper, 2011, p. 12) and can present powerful weapons if used strategically (Jasper, 2008, 2011). As Gould (2009) demonstrates,

gay and lesbian activists of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) evoked anger and hope, transformed shame into pride, expressed love and affection, or suppressed despair over political losses and mounting deaths. Affective strategies used by anti-prostitution campaigners (fear, threat, shame, or repulsion) have been studied by Phipps (2017) and Sauer (2019), but mobilization of emotions among sex worker movements have not been studied yet. This is also surprising since emotions are closely tied to morality:

Moral emotions involve feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles, as well as the satisfactions we feel when we do the right (or wrong) thing, but also when we feel the right (or wrong) thing, such as compassion for the unfortunate or indignation over injustice. (Jasper, 2011, p. 287)

Incorporating affective perspectives thus seems crucial to this project, which is occupied with a social movement organizing around a highly emotionalized and moralized issue such as sex work.

Affective perspectives also tie into ideas of political agency and subjectivity: certain emotions like anger or pride are associated with political agency (Jasper, 2011), yet the legitimacy of expressing them is not distributed equally and marked by power relations. Emotional scripts define “how one must act in the public realm in order to be considered rational, adult, reasonable, and normal in a given context, allowing us to observe how power operates through the very ideas of rationality, reasonableness, maturity, and normalcy” (D. B. Gould, 2009, p. 326). Feminists in particular have examined the high burden of emotion work put on women to manage emotions in line with social desirability (Jasper, 2011). Whereas feminist epistemology underlines that knowledge and emotions are complementary (Marx Ferree & Merrill, 2000), emotions deemed socially undesirable are used to disqualify the epistemic authority of women and other marginalized groups (Jaggar, 1989). Especially stigmatized activists whose emotionality is considered inappropriate and illegitimate (e.g. the trope of the “angry Black woman”) may “downplay the emotions of the movement in order to emphasize its rational, professional, even scientific grounding” (Jasper, 2011, p. 293) in order to legitimate themselves as political actors. However, Ahmed (2005) warns feminist actors of suppressing or rationalizing emotions, as this “would accept the very opposition between emotions and rational thought that is crucial to the subordination of femininity as well as feminism” (p. 170). With regards to abortion politics in Germany, scholars conclude that for movements

(...) who are more marginalized from the core of political decision making (...), passionate protest is the best means open to them to make their concerns known. Both symbolic expression and emotional speech are ways of drawing attention to what might otherwise be ignored. (Marx Ferree et al., 2002, p. 300)

This suggests that sex worker movements could benefit from a strategic use of emotions through “passionate protest.” Sex work scholars have instead formulated a more negative outlook on emotions, morality and politics. According to Wagenaar and Altink (2012), prostitution politics constitutes a case of “morality politics”. On the one hand, morality politics deal with fundamental and deeply contested moral principles that defy categorization along the classic political spectrum and often concern gender, sexuality, and bodies, as well as questions of life and death. More importantly than its content, though, are its effects on the policy-making process. “Morality politics”, the authors find, are

(...) ruled by an explicit ideology; experts have limited authority as everyone feels they ‘own’ prostitution policy; it is highly emotionally charged; it is resistant to facts; the symbolism of policy formulation is seen as more important than policy implementation; and it is subject to abrupt changes. (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012, p. 1)

Since this hinders policy making that improves sex worker’s rights, the authors maintain that morality politics should be avoided, and the primacy of the policy process should lie in the meaningful involvement of affected parties. From this perspective, emotionalization and moralization appear as problematic and undesired aspects of political processes.

2.3 Contentious Interactions & Movement-Countermovement Dynamics

Sex work is not only an emotionalized and moralized issue, but a highly contested one. Apart from sex worker movements, there are various other political actors which operate within the field of prostitution politics. Interactionist social movement perspectives such as Duyvendak and Jasper’s (2015) work on “players and arenas” as well as Fligstein and McAdam’s theory of fields (2015) centre actors, their agency, and the dynamic interactions between them and their contexts. These approaches conceptualize social movements as goal-oriented and strategic actors operating within various sites of political interaction. Sites are socially constructed and form when different actors are “attempting to attain ends that are sufficiently similar” and in the process “*routinely* take each other into account in their actions” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015, p. 167, italic in original). Actors may engage in cooperation or

conflict with others, “redefine each other through their interactions” (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015, p. 11), and in themselves constitute internal arenas of interplay. Actors thus need to weigh the risk, costs and benefits of engaging in certain arenas while adjusting to their environment and to internal conditions. Rather than structural conditions, proponents of this perspective claim it is these interactions that shape social movements emergence, development, and outcomes:

The main constraints on what protestors can accomplish are not determined directly by economic and political structures so much as they are imposed by other players with different goals and interests. (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015, p. 9)

This applies in particular to movement-counter movement dynamics. Whereas social movements necessarily enter into contentious relationships with other political actors organizing around the same issues (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015; Fligstein & McAdam, 2015), Meyer and Staggenborg emphasize that “any social movement of potential political significance will generate opposition” (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1630). Meyer and Staggenborg (2008) examined US abortion conflicts to show how the growing success of feminist movements in gaining reproductive rights has sparked a counter movement seeking to reverse these gains. They define counter movements as

(...) networks of individuals and organizations that share many of the same objects of concern as the social movements that they oppose. They make competing claims on the state on matters of policy and politics (...) and vie for attention from the mass media and the broader public. (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1632)

As such, “movement and counter movement engage in sustained interaction with one another” (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1629) during which they strategically adjust and innovate their tactics and political arenas. They also influence one another’s political opportunity structure: threats posed by a counter movement can spur and sustain movement mobilization, but may also dictate its agenda and drain resources (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). As the case of France shows, feminist anti-prostitution actors have shifted from a cooperative or indifferent to an antagonistic relationship with the growing relevance of sex worker movements (Mathieu, 2003a). The concept of movement-counter movement dynamics has been applied in particular to movements organizing at the intersection of gender, reproduction, and sexuality, which further adds to the relevance of this perspective for this study (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020; Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Lavizzari, 2019; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996).

Overall, interactionist social movement perspectives highlight that the playing field for various political actors is not levelled. This condition may be created by “varying resource endowments” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015, p. 10). Whereas *incumbents* are actors who “wield disproportionate influence within a field and whose interests and views tend to be heavily reflected in the dominant organization of the strategic action field” (p. 13), *challengers* “occupy less privileged niches within the field and ordinarily wield little influence over its operation” (p.13). Feminist theories of democracy have further deepened our understanding of shifting power constellations and contestations in the fields of gender, sexuality, and reproduction (Ferree, 2021), how these produce exclusionary dynamics in the political process of liberal democracies, and ultimately reinforce inequalities along gender, class, race or other axes (Fraser, 1990; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Krook, 2020; Marx Ferree et al., 2002; I. M. Young, 2002). Democratic processes thus often serve to maintain hegemonies, as Young explicates:

In actually existing democracies there tends to be a reinforcing circle between social and economic inequality and political inequality that enables the powerful to use formally democratic processes to perpetuate injustice or preserve privilege. (I. M. Young, 2002, p. 28)

This scholarship also notes that formal inclusion of marginalized actors has left these political structures unchanged and political participation and equality remain at best partial in practice, putting the legitimacy of democratic decisions into question.

Political processes similar to the ones observed by the movement-counter movement perspective are described by the literature on backlashes or anti-gender movements which mobilize against gains in women’s or LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) rights (Ayoub & Page, 2020; della Porta, 2020; Faludi, 1991; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Here, countermobilizations indicate new formations of power and resistance: they occur against abortion rights, trans rights, gender equality policies, anti-discrimination policies, or marriage equality, and thus instances where movements have formed coalitions with the state and enshrined their demands in laws and policies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). As such, these countermobilizations threaten democratic processes of inclusion of marginalized groups within these institutions (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021).

2.4 Coalition Building & Intersectionality

Beyond contentious interactions, social movements engage in collaborative efforts, and coalition building forms part and parcel of movements' action repertoires. Coalitions are "strategic alliances" (van Dyke & McCammon, 2010) that social movements form with other political actors in order to mobilize support, increase their influence, and achieve political goals. According to Van Dyke and Amos (2017), coalition building is facilitated by various factors: "social ties; conducive organizational structures; ideology, culture, and identity; institutional environment; and resources" (p. 3). Political threats and economic grievances present "powerful incentives for coalition formation" (van Dyke & Amos, 2017, p. 1). The authors also point to the importance of shared space and technology to facilitate communication and interaction between actors.

Coalitions are especially important for marginalized movements (Zorn, 2013). In various historical and socio-political contexts, sex worker movements have built coalitions with disability rights movements (Garofalo Geymonat, 2019), church organizations (Mathieu, 2001), feminist actors (Mathieu, 2003a; van der Poel, 1995), political parties (Armstrong, 2018; Heying, 2019; van der Poel, 1995), labour movements (Gall, 2010; Hardy, 2010; Vijayakumar et al., 2015) social workers (Heying, 2019), health movements (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998), migrants' rights organizations (ESWA, 2016, 2018a), as well as LGBTQ movements (ESWA, 2015; Kempadoo, 2003). These movements have, for instance, conferred political legitimacy, material resources, and experience in protest tactics to sex worker movements, which contributed significantly to their political self-organization (Mathieu, 2003b).

Moreover, coalition building presents social movements with opportunities for intersectional political praxis (Ayoub, 2019; Montoya, 2021). Social movements tend to largely focus on single-issues and one dimension of marginalization. In doing so, they manage to appeal to specific constituencies, but overlook interconnections with other political issues and "fail to reflect or address the lived experiences of those positioned at the intersections" (Montoya, 2021, p. 3). Social movement research often follows movements' single-axis focus, thereby missing these dynamics. Here, intersectionality provides essential perspectives on power relations to both social movements and researchers. Intersectionality describes how subjects and their experiences are shaped by intersecting and interacting forms of

marginalization and privilege distributed along various axes, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, age, citizenship, or ability (Crenshaw, 1989). Born out of grassroots activism of Black women in the US who strove for social transformation through political struggle (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016), it is increasingly applied as an analytical perspective in international academic contexts and within social movement studies (Ayoub, 2019; Ciccina et al., 2021; Ciccina & Roggeband, 2021; Montoya, 2021; S. Roth, 2021; Verloo, 2013). Studying social movements from an intersectional perspective brings power dynamics between and within social movements into focus (Montoya, 2021; S. Roth, 2021).

Rather than abandoning movements' single issue categorization, Montoya (2021) then advocates for "intercategorical" and "intracategorical" lenses. The intercategorical approach examines relationships and power dynamics between different coalition partners. As Montoya (2021) stresses, "while coalitions can build capacity, they do not always distribute resources equitably" (p. 8), and inequalities between coalition partners can cause conflicts (S. Roth, 2021; van Dyke & Amos, 2017). Heying's (2019) work documents this in the German case: social workers constituted an essential part of the German whore movement, yet, this cooperation produced arguments over political self-representation and the distribution of resources, in particular when paid positions within counselling centres were occupied by trained social workers instead of sex worker activists (Heying, 2019). The intracategorical perspective, then,

(...) looks within ideal-type movements or a particular movement to examine the heterogeneity that exists, the extent to which it is acknowledged and addressed, and its impact on mobilization. This includes identifying exclusions that leave groups at the margins or outside of movements altogether. (Montoya, 2021, p. 4)

Applying this approach highlights how mainstream women's or lesbian and gay movements have often failed to bring about tangible social change for the most vulnerable members of their communities (Ayoub, 2019; Marx Ferree & McClurg Mueller, 2004; B. Roth, 2004).⁸ This has, for instance, worked to the political exclusion of working class, migrant, racialized, or trans people from these social movements. Sex worker organizing is not exempt from such

⁸ The "new social movements" emerging in Europe in the second half on the 20th century have generally been found to have a predominantly privileged bases in the White middle class (Zorn, 2013).

inequalities: it has, for instance, struggled with the inclusion of Global South, migrant, racialized, or queer sex workers (Heying, 2019; Kempadoo, 2003; Panichelli et al., 2015).

Recognizing these dynamics, activists strategically employ intersectional lenses to appeal to other political actors and include diverse constituencies (Chun et al., 2013; ESWA, 2018a; Mayo-Adam, 2020). Pursuing intersectional politics may be particularly challenging for movements under conditions of resource scarcity and in an institutional context that privileges single-issue organizations (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017). Yet, intersectional consciousness defined as the “awareness and responsiveness of movement organizers to differing inequalities and discrepancies of power and privilege in their surroundings” (Ayoub, 2019, p. 3) may also increase under crisis conditions. In the case of the European LGBTQ movement, Ayoub (2019) finds intersectional consciousness and coalition building in particular at a transnational level, thus presenting a chance to address movement-internal power dynamics and exclusions. At the same time, the most privileged groups may still dominate the movement on other political levels. The high costs and risks activism entails for marginalized groups can partially explain this tendency: as Ayoub asserts, “being an activist within highly stigmatized organizations requires privilege in and of itself” (Ayoub, 2019, p. 20).

Furthermore, intersectional awareness needs to be coupled with representation of multiply marginalized groups to avoid tokenism, address underlying structures and achieve an intersectional praxis (Montoya, 2021). Ayoub finds attempts at increasing inclusion and representation within movements in privileged activists’ practice of “making space”, with activists “who occupy power relinquishing some of that power to make room for those at the margins” (Ayoub, 2019, p. 22). Ayoub emphasizes that marginalized activists are “crucial members of movements they represent, though not fully at home among them” (Ayoub, 2019, p. 24). By taking reference to LGBTQ activist Sylvia Rivera who criticised the exclusionary politics of mainstream gay and lesbian movements, Ayoub also highlights the role of an activists who engaged in sex work to fund herself and a shelter for trans street youth. Like LGBTQ activist Martha P. Johnson, Rivera is thus also claimed as a pivotal political figure by sex worker movements (NSWP, n.d.).

With regards to sex work, the intersection of different forms of marginalization produces power relations which also inform sex worker movements’ politics. As I will show, sex worker activists frequently describe movement-internal inequalities through reference to the “whorarchy.” The term “whorarchy” describes a hierarchy among sex workers which is

predominantly established on working realities in the highly stratified sex industry (Weitzer, 2000). Stratification is reflected in differences in stigmatization, income levels, control over working conditions, physical proximity to clients, or work experiences (e.g. job and sexual satisfaction, safety of work environment). Because this segmentation is often associated with industry sectors, street-based sex workers are, for instance, commonly ranked lower in the whorarchy than indoor-based ones, and assigned status varies again between strippers, brothel, escort, BDSM (sexual practices comprising bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism) or porn workers. Within these categories, various intersecting marginalizations exist along class, race, citizenship, gender, ability, or others. However, these distributions are not essentialist: the working experiences of a street-based migrant sex worker are not *per se* worse than those of a brothel worker with citizenship. However, vulnerabilities to violence and exploitation are increased by laws that criminalize migration, drug use, or homelessness, or by socio-economic precarity and oppressive welfare regimes (Schrader & Künkel, 2020). For sex workers, intersecting forms of marginalization thus produce a spectrum of subjectivities and agency which elude essentializing categorizations (Bettio et al., 2017).

The stratification of the sex industry and the translation of its hierarchies into sex worker movement politics posit intersectional consciousness and the bridging of social divides as a crucial component of sex work activism. Feminist scholarship has widely addressed such processes of recognition and connection across national, geo-political, cultural, class, religious, or other divides, and merged intersectionality with conceptualizations of solidarity (e.g. Ciccio et al., 2021; Einwohner et al., 2021; Leinius, 2020; Mohanty, 2003; Tormos, 2017). While Gould (2009) and Hemmings (2012) address affective aspects of solidarity, Ciccio and Roggeband (2021) examine its expression in political practices by analysing discursive and material power relations from an intersectional perspective. From this, the authors develop the concept of “transformative solidarity” to describe an ideal of intersectional politics. According to Ciccio and Roggeband’s definition, political practices between and within movements need to be multi-issue, recognize needs and perspectives of marginalized groups, be grounded in long-term interaction, and seek to eliminate power imbalances in representation and resource distribution. In this way, social movements can work to avoid politics which merely incorporate marginalized groups, pragmatically gear solidarity towards short-term goals, or instrumentalize intersectionality. An intersectional politics of

transformative solidarity thus requires the “deep and sustained engagement with the ‘other’” and the “relentless work of interrogation and transformation of the material and discursive dimensions of power” (Ciccia & Roggeband, 2021, p. 16) between and within social movements.

3 Methodological Framework

In the previous chapter, I employed feminist theories building on Foucault to think through social movement concepts and to highlight power relations within social movement processes. Following a Foucauldian understanding, power relations permeate not only political processes but knowledge production as well (Foucault, 1978). Therefore, an examination of power relations also runs through my methodological framework, which I explicate in this chapter.

Sex workers find that sex work research often replicates hierarchical, extractive dynamics between scholars and participants, and produces results that are one-sided, non-beneficial, or harmful to sex workers (Jeffreys, 2009; Maggie's Toronto, 2013; NSWP, 2020). Consequentially, sex workers demand to be recognized as experts and to be involved in research in a meaningful way. As I demonstrate in subchapter 3.1, the feminist epistemologies I build my methodological framework on make a strong case for recognizing and centring marginalized groups as experts and knowledge producers⁹ (e.g. Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986, 2008; Hartsock, 1983). Based on these epistemologies, I not only centre the plural and contingent forms of situated knowledge produced by sex worker activists within my analysis, but furthermore advocate for their recognition within German prostitution politics in order to improve sex workers' living and working conditions. Following this (3.2), I discuss my explorations of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which has been widely applied as a remedy to exclusionary research processes and lately become a new standard in sex work research (e.g. Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014; O'Neill, 2010; Wahab, 2003). Some scholars maintain that such a standardization is problematic, and that methodological and ethical challenges persist (Nencel, 2017; Oliveira & Vearey, 2020). Within this research project, PAR proved to be irreconcilable with the limited resources on both mine and sex worker activists' side, and the academic requirements of dissertational work.

I therefore developed an alternative research design which is attuned to both the ethical challenges and practical constraints within the field: my research design fuses a feminist

⁹ To be sure, sex workers and researchers are not two distinct categories: sex workers conduct research, researchers do sex work, and there are rising numbers of sex working students (Ernst et al., 2021; ESWA, 2021; Lobo et al., 2021; Stardust, 2020; x:talk, 2010). Within my own research association GSPF, some members have experience in sex work, while others do not. Research done by, for, and with sex workers is not free from power relationships itself, as DeCat and Stardust (2021) analyze. They criticize that the ngo-ization of sex worker organizations and their cooperation with neoliberal state and academic institutions exclude racialized and migrant sex workers and hinder transformative knowledge production and activism.

constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) approach with participatory elements (3.3). Feminist constructivist GT helps me uncover sex worker activists' diverse political perspectives and activities while at the same time guaranteeing academic rigour and relevance. It grounds my findings in rich data derived from a methodological triangulation of interviewing, participant observation, and document analysis. Feminist constructivist GT furthermore enables me to trace activists' continued relation to prostitution politics and permits me to complicate existing narratives on sex worker activists and their political subjectivity and agency. Finally, the strengths of PAR in challenging hierarchical, extractive research relationships and affecting social change are still harnessed within my approach: I show this by incorporating various participatory elements which I adjusted to context, research stage, and participants' interests and needs.

My research approach mitigates some epistemological, practical, and ethical challenges of sex work research, but is not free of shortcomings. It forms not only part of sex work research but of prostitution politics itself and, as all transformative practice, can only chip away at the hegemonic practices within which it is located. In subchapter 3.4, I therefore detail the range of persistent ethical dilemmas ranging from the project's conceptualization through its implementation to its first outputs. As part of this, I discuss questions surrounding anonymity, confidentiality and consent, the issue of remuneration, and the difficulties of research in a politicized context. Finally, I reflect on my own positionality as a non-sex working feminist researcher working at the intersection of academia, sexuality, and politics, and highlight how emotional and embodied experiences have impacted my research.

3.1 Feminist Epistemologies – Centring Sex Workers as Experts and Knowledge Producers

Sex workers find various flaws of sex work research and frequently report negative experiences in their engagement with researchers. According to Jeffreys (2009), individual sex workers are often instrumentalized by researchers seeking to recruit research participants, and silenced, misinterpreted, or misrepresented in the research process. Furthermore, they experience both intended and unintended policy consequences of research that is non-reflexive, moralizing, or motivated by an anti-prostitution agenda. Indeed, as Weitzer (2005a) claims, research into sex work has particularly suffered from ideological bias, poor methodological standards, and ethical violations:

In no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in writings on the sex industry. Too often in this area, the canons of scientific inquiry are suspended and research deliberately skewed to serve a particular political agenda. Much of this work has been done by writers who regard the sex industry as a despicable institution and who are active in campaigns to abolish it. (Weitzer, 2005a, p. 934, italics in original)

Departing from the understanding that prostitution is violence against women per se, such studies are further corrupted by a selection bias. Samples often comprise solely cisgender female sex workers, and those incarcerated, street-based, or seeking out support from social services. Results derived from these samples are then overgeneralized to the entirety of a highly stratified and diverse sex industry. Despite these severe problematics, such studies have repeatedly impacted prostitution laws and policies, and bolstered victimizing and criminalizing measures that harm sex workers. Elsewhere, Weitzer (2000) criticized the “essentialist bias” of research that conversely oversamples high-earning sex workers in e.g. escorting to “celebrate and romanticize prostitution (...) [and] to argue that prostitution is or can be empowering and lucrative” (Weitzer, 2005a, p. 946). Moreover, demanding time, labour, and energy from sex workers to share their knowledge with researchers without compensation constitutes epistemological exploitation, Bee (2020) argues. Researchers failing to reflect on the power dynamics inherent in research have thus “excluded and alienated sex workers from the production of knowledge about their lives and experiences” (Wahab, 2003, p. 626). In particular, “conventional social science research projects and processes have helped to facilitate a relationship of distrust between sex working communities and feminist researchers” (van der Meulen, 2011, p. 371), or one of persistent friction and contention (Holt, 2020). Social movements and marginalized communities have expressed similar critiques towards researchers who perform “extractive research” *on* rather than *with* them (Evans, 2019; Gaudry, 2011). As “few researchers are willing to acknowledge a major responsibility to the communities that they study” (Gaudry, 2011, p. 113), this research one-sidedly serves scholars’ professional advancement instead of movement’s political goals and their communities’ needs.

These power dynamics are at the core of feminist epistemologies, which make a strong case for centring and recognizing marginalized people as experts and knowledge producers (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986, 2008; Hartsock, 1983). The main tenet of feminist epistemologies is that knowledge is never objective but always situated. What we know and

how we know it is influenced by our social location. This social location is constituted by intersecting categories (e.g. gender, class, race, sexuality), embodiment, social relationships, attitudes, interests, emotions, or cognitive structures. By rendering visible the situatedness and particularity of knowledge, feminist epistemology seeks to critique hegemonic practices of knowledge production and its claims to neutrality, universality, and objectivity which ignore the experiences of marginalized groups, exclude them from the research process, deny them epistemic authority, and reproduce social inequalities.

As one feminist epistemological perspective, standpoint theory especially privileges marginalized subjects within knowledge production. From their social location, marginalized groups are considered to not only have a better understanding of their own lived experiences, but also a need to comprehend unequal power relations in order to survive within them. This “double vision” is unavailable to dominant groups, proponents argue, putting marginalized groups in a superior position to grasp socio-political life as a whole (Harding, 1986, 2008). However, as Haraway notes, marginalized subjects are not per se irreproachable or morally more virtuous than dominant subjects:

The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation; that is, from both semiological and hermeneutic modes of critical inquiry. The standpoints of the subjugated are not ‘innocent’. (Haraway, 1988, p. 584)

Furthermore, this standpoint cannot be assumed to be homogenous: postmodernist scholars stressed the constructedness of social categories, and rejected the essentialism of categories such as “woman” and the generalized claims to superior knowledge developed from this position (Butler, 1990). In addition, Black feminist scholars have contested the privileging of particular forms of situated knowledge over others with reference to the complex intersections that constitute all standpoints (Crenshaw, 1989). These approaches emphasize the plurality and contingency of situated knowledges. Within a given situation, situated knowledges by specifically positioned marginalized groups may serve certain purposes, advance understanding of social and political conditions, and contribute to their transformation (Wylie, 2003). In line with the general critiques expressed by sex workers and the feminist epistemologies presented, I argue that such conditions are given in the specific context this thesis examines: since contemporary German prostitution politics seeks to improve sex workers’ living and working conditions, the perspectives of those affected who

moreover self-organize politically should be centred, while acknowledging and accounting for their internal diversity and discrepancies.

3.2 Participatory Action Research – Troubling a New Norm in Sex Work Studies

Taking lessons from the limitations of past sex work research, participatory methods have become favoured among sex work scholars and many sex worker organizations demand them as a precondition to research involvement. Various forms of Participatory Action Research (PAR) have become widely applied in sex work studies (Boontinand, 2015; Bowen & O’Doherty, 2014; Oliveira, 2019; Oliveira & Vearey, 2020; O’Neill, 2010; Wahab, 2003). As per its name, PAR is a research approach comprising two core principles: first, research needs to be participatory, i.e. done collaboratively *with* the people affected instead of *on* or *about* them. In an ideal participatory research process, participants are involved in all stages and occupy the same status of importance as the researcher does.¹⁰ Second, PAR aims at action, i.e. at effecting social change and learning throughout the research project and after.

Besides the sociology of Orlando Fals-Borda (2001) who coined the term, PAR originates in social psychology, critical pedagogy, and practical community development work, and has been shaped further by feminist studies, critical race theory and Marxism (Kindon et al., 2007). Consequentially, PAR comprises multiple variations.¹¹ Despite their differing foci on either core principle, they share an “extended epistemology” which acknowledges multiple ways of knowing and seeks to transcend the conventional and often exclusionary modes of knowledge production within academia (Kindon et al., 2007). Most importantly, PAR is based on collaborative research processes which attempt to level skewed power relations and one-sided benefits since there are no “demarcated boundaries between ‘academics’ and ‘community partners’ in a genuinely co-designed (...) research process” (Gilchrist et al., 2015, p. 459). Some PAR scholars maintain that “those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements” (Kindon et al.,

¹⁰ In fact, even the terminology “researcher” vs. “participant”, or “academic” vs. “practitioner” is contested in PAR, as it implies and locates a separation between theory and practice, and thus contradicts ideals of cooperation and equality (McIntyre, 2007).

¹¹ Alternatively designated e.g. action research (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014), participatory reasearch (Park, 2012), cooperative inquiry (Riley & Reason, 2015), or community-based and community-engaged research (Barinaga & Parker, 2013; Israel et al., 1998). Throughout this thesis, I use the acronym PAR as an umbrella term for these research approaches.

2007, p. 9), thus reflecting the main tenets of feminist standpoint theory. Responding to criticism about lacking scientific standards in PAR, scholars have advocated for the development of autonomous criteria, or claimed the epistemic superiority of PAR, as participant involvement increases data diversity, interpretive accuracy, researcher accountability, and the quality of results (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Hale, 2008). With regards to sex work research, PAR has been said to result in a deeper understanding of the diverse realities of sex work for all parties involved, thus improving prostitution policy recommendations, strengthening political self-organization, and initiating broader social change for sex workers (Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014; van der Meulen, 2011). O'Neill (2010) emphasizes that PAR presents an opportunity to intervene in prostitution politics in a radically democratic way "by creating spaces for dialogue and fostering more integrated horizontal and vertical processes of inclusion around the principles of social justice and cultural citizenship" (p. 210-211). She describes PAR as a "critical theory in practice" and considers it a "potentially powerful tool for resistance and a platform for civic participation" (O'Neill, 2010, p. 231).

PAR has been employed in sex work research of different kinds. Boontinand (2015), for instance, used feminist participatory action research with female sex workers in Cambodia and Vietnam to better understand and address trafficking in women. The author claims that the approach "contributed to the conscientization of women sex workers to demand their rights" (Boontinand, 2015, p. 186) and sees the possibility for positive action outcomes especially at the individual and local level. Working in the fields of social work and criminal sociology, Wahab (2003) and O'Neill et al. (2017) cooperated with small groups of sex workers at the municipal level to understand their personal experiences, which confront "stereotypes and myths about how sex workers perceive themselves and their work" (Wahab, 2003, p. 638). From her experience in a collaborative research project with a Canadian sex worker organization, van der Meulen finds that "participatory research methods can work to build bridges, dismantle barriers, and establish new relationships of trust and support between feminists and sex workers" (van der Meulen, 2011, p. 2). Drawing on research with migrant sex workers in South Africa, Oliveira and Vearey (2020) employed combinations of participatory and arts-based methods such as photovoice to "tackle normative depictions of migrant sex workers by making 'visible' their own visual and narrative representations" (p. 261). Their work highlights the transformative effect the research process can have for all

project parties. Participatory elements also extend to scholarly outputs, as Geymonat and Maciotti (2016) show. To reveal diverse perspectives and counter misrepresentation, the authors used a participatory approach involving sex worker activists and organizations while editing a volume on the sex worker movement. Bowen and O’Doherty (2014), who co-elaborated a research project on violence against off-street sex workers with community members, are convinced that “as oppressed communities increase their capacities and forge new access routes toward social change for their communities, participant-driven collaborations with researchers will soon become the norm” (Bowen & O’Doherty, 2014, p. 70).

Inspired by these works, I initially explored PAR within my research project. I read relevant literature, exchanged emails with scholars who had employed the approach, attended a 2-day PAR course at the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University in July 2018. Together with Alice Mattoni and colleagues, I also co-organized a 2-day workshop on PAR at my own institution in April 2019, where we discussed how the approach could be used within the field of social movement studies.¹² Both workshops brought together scholars and practitioners of local NGOs, seeking to create opportunities to learn from each other. However, prolonged engagement with the ideas and practices of PAR increasingly put the possibilities for its implementation within my PhD project in question. While the scholars and practitioners at Durham University shared their expertise in how to elaborate a research project and pursue a fairly tangible, practical, and short-term goal with local community organizations (e.g. improving accessibility of health services for drug users), the transfer of these learnings from community development and social work to social movement studies seemed more complex. How could PAR be done with social movements, which are disorganized and fluctuating, and which often mobilize for broader and more long-term social and political goals? Moreover, many scholars who pursued PAR together with social movement organizations did so as part of a larger research team embedded in institutional structures and backed by funding. To do so in an individual PhD project and within an institutional context where participatory approaches were only just being explored seemed much more challenging.

¹² For a program, see <http://cosmos.sns.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Workshop-on-PAR-Methods.pdf>.

Commencing field work in Berlin in September 2018, my doubts were further aggravated. Just the year before, the Prostitute Protection Act had entered into force and sex workers as well as counselling centres were dealing with its impacts. This meant that capacities for research collaboration were severely reduced, as the case of the biannual sex work congress showed: BesD, the Alliance of the Counselling Centres for Sex Workers in Germany “bufas” (*Bündnis der Fachberatungsstellen für Sexarbeiterinnen und Sexarbeiter*), and researchers had organized sex worker congresses in both 2014 and 2016, with another one planned to happen in 2018. However, as BesD and bufas were severely challenged with the law’s impact and implementation, the 2018 sex work congress was cancelled for lack of capacities. In the end, BesD independently organized a 2-day whore congress (*Hurenkongress*), with sex work researchers coordinating a research conference in parallel. The events were intentionally scheduled together and located just in different rooms at the department of European Ethnology at the Humboldt University in Berlin to facilitate exchanges between researchers, sex worker activists, and NGOs.

Hoping the event could provide a starting point to a participatory research design, I got in contact with the organizing sex worker activists and researchers, contributed a presentation of my research project, and emailed participating activists and organizations beforehand to recruit interviewees. Although I received positive feedback on my research, most activists declined my interview requests, stating they simply lacked capacities. An activist who had co-founded the Dresden-based initiative “Sex Workers Solidarity” just the year before told me that the group had already disbanded again for lack of resources, and sent me their press releases and evaluation report instead. Another one was willing to miss a “sex worker only” workshop in order to find the time to be interviewed by me, an offer which I turned down with the suggestion to reschedule (I finally conducted this particular interview in April 2020, more than 1.5 years later). In one case, an activist politely declined my request saying she only participated in research which directly benefitted the movement – something she did not find in my research project. Overall, I only had a few very short informal conversations with activists during breaks, and scheduled one interview for the coming weeks. Moreover, most sex workers preferred to use the congress to connect with peers, and among the roughly 20 research workshop participants only two or three were sex workers, who expressed great frustration over their experiences with research. During the final joint panel discussion of the congress, representatives of sex work, research, social work, and public authorities discussed

the current legal and political situation, with palpable tension in the room and frequent grievances voiced by sex worker activists in the audience.

On the one hand, this experience made it clear that while many activists found my research interesting and positive in theory, they lacked time and energy to support it in practice. Even though sex worker activists in Germany champion participatory approaches, they can rarely take time out of their political activism, work, or private life to participate in research – especially if that participation is unpaid. Since I struggled to recruit activists for even a single hour of interviewing, how could I expect them to participate in a PhD research project lasting four years and more? On the other hand, despite the efforts made to network and cooperate, it was apparent that the atmosphere between sex workers, bufas, and researchers was strongly charged, and that interactions surfaced frustrations and disappointments on all sides. Finally, not only did activists lack resources, but so did I: facilitating sex worker activists' participation throughout the PhD would require additional time, space in which to convene regularly, and material resources for remuneration, workshop material, training, and dissemination. My funding, however, consisted only of my university's scholarship and some additional grants for travels. I investigated possibilities for applying for additional funding outside of my own institution, but could not find any available or accessible options. My interest in implementing PAR was thus severely thwarted by practical constraints. I realized that such an endeavour was beyond the scope of an individual PhD project dealing with a resource-poor movement in a challenging political context, and taking place in an academic field where PAR approaches still require exploration and institutionalization. PAR was also at odds with the very structure and institutional requirements of my doctoral work: by that time, I had individually worked on the project proposal, literature review, and the research design for about one and a half years. Yet, PAR projects require early decisions on the level of participation. My PhD programme structure and its preceding phases of project application and preparatory courses already ruled out an "extended" PAR approach that involves participants in the development of research questions and research design (Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014). In addition, I would need to remain in a leading capacity throughout data collection, evaluation, and writing in order to fulfil the requirements of a doctoral programme that is, ultimately, geared towards one individualised outcome: the researcher's achievement of an academic degree. Especially for young researchers, conflicts may thus arise between the participatory and action-oriented

premises of PAR and the need to distinguish and promote themselves as producers of social science knowledge.

After all, I was not alone with these experiences. Practical constraints, dilemmas, and side-effects of PAR have been noted by other sex work scholars (Nencel, 2017; Oliveira & Vearey, 2020). Nencel (2017), for instance, finds that PAR projects neglect non-organized individuals and those who do not adopt the “identity politics” of the sex worker movement. Moreover, she sees a disconnect between researchers deciding to share power, and research subjects who are disinterested in an egalitarian relationship or full involvement (especially as many sex workers are swamped with research requests and their own activities). Finally, the involvement of peer researchers does not necessarily produce better outcomes as intra-group inequalities persist (Nencel, 2017). Oliveira and Vearey (2020) note that public dissemination of research outputs is potentially risky for stigmatized and criminalized groups, hard to replicate for grassroots organizations with limited resources, and participants may be disappointed if research outputs fail to translate into political or social change. From this, Nencel concludes that “sex workers’ all-round participation in research is an epistemological ideal but not necessarily a realistic portrayal of sex workers’ potential to participate” (Nencel, 2017, p. 77). However, these authors also criticise theoretical assumptions behind PAR projects: taking reference to Foucault, Oliveira and Vearey (2020) find that monolithically presuming researchers as “powerful” and participants as “powerless” is patronizing and suffers from a simplified understanding of power. Approaching the researcher-participant relationship from another angle, Nencel (2017) decries that PAR projects reduce the role of the scholar to a mere conduit and facilitator of sex workers’ narratives. Yet, scholars have their own expertise, resources, and essential role in transforming experiential knowledge into scholarship that can impact policy-making and social change. Nencel thus advocates for “the necessity to recognise that the researcher and research subject have different fields of expertise, experiences, knowledge, skills, and, to a certain degree, expectations” (Nencel, 2017, p. 81). Furthermore, objectification throughout the research process is inevitable even in research with long term involvement of sex workers that respects their agency and acquires their informed consent (O’Connell Davidson, 2008). Finally, presuming that all that is needed for social change to occur is for marginalized groups to speak up and make themselves heard individualises responsibility and depoliticises the social structures that shape their condition:

Placing the burden of social change on (marginalized) individuals not only implicitly blames them for their misfortune(s), it also discounts the role that neoliberalism, racism, patriarchy, and colonialism play in sustaining structural violence. (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020, p. 223)

The authors thus criticise that “privileging sex workers’ participation and voice in critical sex work studies has become an unquestioned epistemological certainty” (Nencel, 2017, p. 72) and caution that “the ambitions of participatory research can sometimes be (mis)applied as a panacea for all of the tensions inherent in knowledge-production processes, including those associated with the extractive nature of research” (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020, p. 219). Questioning “whether research can ever be truly participatory or emancipatory” (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020, p. 220), Oliveira and Vearey warn that “romanticized notions of PR [participatory research] as a power-free mode of knowledge production can blind us to the ethical and methodological challenges inherent in the framework” (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020, p. 220). While recognizing some benefits of PAR, these authors thus admonish other scholars of its unexamined standardisation in research with sex workers and other marginalized populations.

In fact, many other methodologies can translate researchers’ engagement towards social transformation and produce knowledge useful to sex workers. Nencel (2017) argues that the utility of methodologies depends on context, thereby drawing back to feminist standpoint theory and the situatedness of knowledge: “seeing research as a situated act permits the possibility of including research *for sex workers*” (Nencel, 2017, p. 81 italics in original). In Nencel’s own research projects,

(...) dialogical instances [between sex workers and researchers] helped create a relationship in which we mutually recognised and respected each other’s expertise. Most importantly, they are also a recognition of our different positionalities. It is this recognition which creates compassionate and empathetic equitable research relationships. (Nencel, 2017, p. 80)

Ethical and transformative research should thus be predominantly guided by the principles of responsibility, empathy and care (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020). Given the practical and theoretical limitations of PAR and heeding these criticisms, I instead focused on a feminist constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) approach. Sharing important features with PAR, this approach proved more feasible in the given political and institutional context, and more adequate to answer my research questions while accounting for sex worker activists’ interests and capacities.

3.3 A Feminist Constructivist Grounded Theory Approach with Participatory Elements

GT is an established methodology for qualitative empirical research within the social sciences (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 2009), but has been applied only rather implicitly in social movement studies (Mattoni, 2014). At its core, GT aims at the construction of original theory through the collection and analysis of rich qualitative data. Through constant comparison within a “spiral of abstraction”, classic GT developed by Glaser and Strauss (2009) sought to provide a systematic approach that equals the academic standards of quantitative methodologies. Building on a positivist epistemology which presumes that researchers access and explain an objectively existing social reality, this approach has been employed to examine sex workers’ entry into sex work (Karamouzian et al., 2015), commercial relationships with clients (Robertson et al., 2014), or experiences of stigma (Wong et al., 2011). Positivist epistemologies, however, ignore how researchers’ choices and interpretations continuously impact research processes and outcomes (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). As Wahab (2003) emphasises, sex work research within a positivist paradigm has often failed to account for the “influence of context, power, and social construction” and thus “further excluded and alienated sex workers from the production of knowledge about their lives and experiences” (Wahab, 2003, p. 626).

Constructivist GT as conceptualised by Charmaz (2006) rejects the existence of a single social reality and the researcher’s objective access to and detachment from it. In Charmaz’ words, “any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretative* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10, italics in original). This not only validates differing perspectives of research participants but also relativizes the privileged role of the researcher. An essential component of constructivist GT is reflexivity: in order to recognise, understand and interpret participants’ views of the world, the researcher first and foremost has to examine their own, and scrutinise how they influence the inquiry. Charmaz’ criteria for constructivist GT thus pertain to issues of ethical and critical research: besides a theory’s argumentative credibility rooted in data and the originality of research findings, research outcomes need to resonate with participants and serve them as well as wider social justice goals. Adding a critical social justice position to GT’s focus on social processes allows for a deeper understanding of individual’s agency and its dynamic interrelations with social structures (Charmaz, 2006).

In its emphasis on reflexivity, ethical and non-hierarchical research processes, and the acknowledgement of the multiplicity of participants' experiences, constructivist GT corresponds to central epistemological principles of feminist research (Olesen, 2007; Plummer & Young, 2010; Wuest, 1995). Feminist GT stresses the importance of participants' empowerment as a research outcome and the need for researchers' continuous awareness of the (potential) implications of their research (Wuest, 1995). Constructivist and feminist GT have been used in sex work research by e.g. Choudhury (2010) to incorporate sex workers' perspectives into public health interventions, or by Bailey and Figueroa (2018) who research condom use among sex workers. In this research project, constructivist feminist GT helps me uncover sex workers' personal and diverse political perspectives and activities through rich data provided through sex worker activists' interviews, events, and documents. It furthermore enables me to trace sex worker activists' continued relation to prostitution politics and permits me to complicate existing narratives on sex workers and their political subjectivity and agency through my work.

There are significant points of convergence between constructivist feminist GT and PAR. Firstly, both share an epistemology that recognizes multiple (and especially non-academic) ways of knowing and acknowledges that researchers' interpretation of reality is just one among many. Secondly, constructivist feminist GT matches PAR's ethical commitment to creating equal research relationships, empowering participants, and transforming social structures that condition a community's marginalization (Hale, 2008; Wuest, 1995). Thirdly, knowledge production and action in constructivist feminist GT are equally grounded in empirics and occur in an open and emerging process that often involves participatory elements such as feedback loops on interview guidelines, transcripts, or results (Bailey & Figueroa, 2018; Keddy et al., 1996). Eventually, GT complements PAR by ensuring rigorous data analysis, interpretation and theory generation, which are central to doctoral work but marginal aspects within PAR (Dick, 2007). In some significant parts, GT differs from PAR: in GT, the researcher retains the prerogative over decision-making and data interpretation. This rendered feminist constructivist GT more fitting for my PhD project in which I introduced participatory elements during data collection, analysis, and dissemination, rather than during project development.

Throughout the research process, I integrated participatory elements wherever feasible to create instances of reciprocity, collaboration, and dialogue with sex worker activists. In the

context of interviewing, I first tested the interview guideline during the 2019 whore congress organized by BesD. That year, the whole congress was sex worker only, yet activists wanted to include sex work research. Together with my colleague Sabrina Stranzl, I thus created a research space in the event location where we hung posters with interview questions and complemented them with profiles of ourselves and our research. Congress attendants could write answers and comments on these posters with differently coloured markers, while being able to read and respond to what others had written. This created a space in which participants not only anonymously interacted with our research, but also with one another. After the event, we evaluated the inputs and compiled them into a report that was published on BesD's website (Hofstetter & Stranzl, 2020). During the face-to-face interviews I conducted at a later stage, I asked participants for feedback and sent back transcripts for approval and potential edits. I also asked sex-working colleagues to review the research outputs emerging from my project before publication. In other instances, I reciprocated through my own academic labour: I proposed edits to a university assignment one interviewee wrote, gave feedback on an open letter another activist was publishing, conducted background research into issues of interest to activists, obtained journals' permission to translate and republish my existing articles on sex worker activist platforms, and shared my data and analyses with activists wherever requested (such as subchapter 7.4 on union organizing). In some contexts, I was able to use my access to academic platforms and resources in activists' interest by inviting them as paid speakers to workshops I was co-organizing, recommending them to journalists and politicians who had contacted me for inputs, or lobbying for their inclusion into conferences organized by others.

3.4 Methodological Triangulation & Data Set

After having detailed the epistemological foundations and methodological approach of my dissertation project, I continue with explications on the specific methods I employed. Social movement research is generally a field of methodological pluralism (della Porta, 2014b) and a range of qualitative methods is available to collect rich data.¹³ Following Charmaz' (2006)

¹³ See Kindon et al. (2007) for a diversity of qualitative methods employed within participatory approaches, among which are e.g. diagramming, mapping and cartographies, art, theatre, photovoice, video and the use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS), as well as of combinations of those with more conventional social science methods.

recommendations for constructivist GT projects, I combined in-depth interviews, documents, and field notes taken during participant observation. Methodological triangulation strengthens data validity and theory building because it compensates for the shortcomings of individual methods and “allows for the analyst to paint a more holistic picture of the complex phenomena that social movement scholars study” (Ayoub et al., 2014, p. 68). Diverse data also serves to “undermine the mistaken notion that sex workers represent a homogeneous population” (Shaver, 2005, p. 314). Each of the methods I employed has advantages and disadvantages: in-depth interviews are situated products of individual sense-making. Consequently, they can generate socially desirable responses. Hence, behaviour cannot be inferred from self-reports, and accounts given in interviews must be situated in relation to observed action and interaction (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). Moreover, interviews are affected by unequal power-relations and provide a low level of anonymity, thus privileging certain individuals over others (e.g. “outed” sex workers comfortable with face-to-face encounters) (Dewey & Zheng, 2013). Documents are more accessible and produced independently from the researcher (Mattoni, 2014). As such, they increase data range and include perspectives of more marginalised community members without consuming their resources. Comparison with field notes taken during participant observation then provides insights into the “relative congruence – or lack of it – between words and deeds” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 39) and allows for an observation of interaction as it unfolds. I entered all data into MAXQDA software and coded it in line with constructivist GT. In the beginning, I used initial and in-vivo coding strategies. As I established preliminary codes, I moved on to axial coding, and finally to selective coding focusing on emerging concepts (Mattoni, 2014). Throughout the analytical process, I wrote theoretical memos in which I noted ideas and reflections about emerging codes and concepts. Data analysis also informed my changes in sampling strategy in an iterative manner (Charmaz, 2006).

Time Frame

Because ethnographic approaches are long-term, immersive, and fluid, it can be hard to pin down the exact time frame of field work. My first field work phase began with several one or two-week visits to Germany in September, October, and November 2018. The main field work phase then lasted from April 2019 to August 2020, during which I was based at the Berlin

Graduate School of Social Sciences as a visiting researcher (April – August 2019) and at the Freie Universität Berlin under an Erasmus Traineeship (September 2019 – August 2020). I completed my final interview in October 2020, but still conducted participant observation at selected protest events in 2021. Even after I decided to stop data collection, I continued attending activist events whenever I was in Berlin and followed political developments on sex work, occasionally adding relevant documents to the data set. I made final additions of documents to the data set during writing, with the latest occurring in September 2022.

Notably, the overall span of my research project included various, overlapping phases in prostitution politics and sex workers' self-organization: when I started field work in the fall of 2018, the Prostitute Protection Act had been in effect for just over a year. Having failed to prevent its implementation, activists were struggling with the frustration, exhaustion, and demotivation that frequently comes with political loss. In addition, sex workers had to mitigate the effects of the law, which also impacted their internal organization and political alliances. Yet, this was also a time of reorganization, reorientation, and revitalization in which activists continued their struggles for the abrogation of the law, and a time of renewed political threats which became more concrete as the parliamentary working group created by anti-prostitution campaigners held its first session in October 2019. Not even half a year later, the Covid-19 pandemic hit Germany and sex workers had to face the illegality, precarity, and vulnerability it brought: starting in March 2020, sex work venues across Germany were closed and various aspects of sex work prohibited. With interruptions and local variations, this temporary condition lasted well into 2021, and in some federal states into 2022.¹⁴ In December 2021, a change in German government occurred from a grand coalition of CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) and SPD (Social Democratic Party), to a coalition of three parties including SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens, and FDP (Free Democratic Party). The elections were carefully observed by activists, yet the improvements within the fields of gender, sexual, and labour politics anticipated from a switch to a more liberal and centre-left government have not yet affected prostitution politics. In addition, the government under SPD chancellor Olaf Scholz contains influentially placed politicians with a declared anti-prostitution position, such as the SPD member of parliament Leni Breymaier and the SPD minister of health Karl Lauterbach (see Winkelmeier-Becker et al., 2020).

¹⁴ For a detailed and continuously updated list of pandemic related ordinances affecting sex work in Germany, see e.g. Doña Carmen (2021, 2022).

Although my project initially focused mainly on the political self-organization around the Prostitute Protection Act, the time frame it spanned eventually became much more eventful than expected.

In-depth Interviews

Interviewing is a classic qualitative method in the social sciences that serves to capture subjects' perspectives (della Porta, 2014a). Interviews are also essential in social movement studies, as they "bring human agency to the center of movement analysis" (Blee, 2013, p.96 in della Porta, 2014a, p. 229).

I began field work with in-depth interviews that combined elements of narrative interviewing, which allow participants to determine the direction of the interview (C. Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016), and semi-structured interviewing, that allow researchers to cover specific topics (Blee & Taylor, 2002). At the beginning of the interview, I inquired how interviewees became engaged in sex work activism. In most cases, this prompted extended narratives which I encouraged through brief verbal signals and specific questions building on what had already been said. When narration came to a halt, I used questions from my interview guideline to continue. My use of the interview guideline was dependent on how comfortable and willing to share interviewees were: in a few cases, I used the entire interview guideline, yet in most cases I needed only a few "backup" questions and gave as much space to the interviewee as possible. Participants could select the mode (face-to-face, online, phone) and location of the interview. I conducted interviews in all three modes, and met participants at their home, workplace, or at university, public parks, and cafés. Most of the interviews conducted online or via phone took place in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, with pandemic-related measures restricting movement or desire to prevent infection being the main reasons participants opted for these modes. At the beginning of the interview, I offered participants a brief summary of the project and reminded them of the voluntary and confidential nature of the interview. Seeking to stick to the communicated time frame, I alerted interviewees when we had spoken for an hour. Most interviews lasted between 60 and 80 minutes, with a few exceptions. I closed the interview inquiring whether participants had any questions, and offered the possibility for feedback,

which some participants used. I transcribed the interviews using MaxQDA software. Interview transcripts were returned to interviewees for approval, and if desired, for editing.

I conducted 41 interviews in total, of which 33 were held in German, seven in English, and one with the help of a Bulgarian-English interpreter. I coded in English and only translated from German into English when using direct quotes during writing. For reference, I always retain the German original statement in brackets, or in a footnote (in case of quotes exceeding four words). Potential translation mistakes from German into English are my own. Direct quotes without brackets or footnotes stem from interviews conducted in English.

Participants were interviewed individually, except for two interviews which included two activists, thus amounting to a total of 43 interviewees. Out of these, 34 participants had lived experience in sex work, which ranged from street- to brothel- and studio-based work, and comprised BDSM, fetish, porn, tantra, escorting, stripping, erotic dancing, sexual surrogacy, sugaring, and web camming. Most interviewees identified as sex workers, with a few exceptions: a participant who only occasionally engaged in sex work identified as a “hobby whore”, while some porn workers I interviewed had occasionally engaged in sex work but stated they hesitated to claim the label and perspective for themselves. Two interviewees did not engage in sex work anymore and identified as “former” sex workers. Nine interviews were conducted with non-sex working individuals who engaged in sex work activism. These drew from various backgrounds in counselling centres, municipal health departments, political parties, trade unions, feminist collectives, and mixed sex work projects, and identified as social workers, feminist activists, trade unionists, disability rights activists, or combinations thereof. One of the interviewees identified as a “client in solidarity” (*solidarischer Kunde*). For a complete overview of interviewees, see appendix.

Sampling

As della Porta (2014a) writes, “sampling in qualitative research does not follow the representativity criteria of quantitative research, but rather criticality with respect to the theoretical model, as well as feasibility with respect to access to the subjects involved” (p. 240-241). Laying no claim to representativity, I could thus circumvent challenges connected to sampling from a population on which reliable quantitative data is missing, and whose composition and borders are largely unknown. Accordingly, I went through different stages

in sampling for interviewees, commencing with convenient sampling of easily accessible interviewees at a stage when recruitment proved difficult. After a few interviews, I proceeded with snowball sampling, asking interviewees for contacts and referrals to other activists. Because these sampling strategies “tend to be biased toward the more cooperative participants” (Shaver, 2005, p. 296), I moved on to selective sampling when I felt certain categories of interviewees were sufficiently represented, seeking to incorporate perspectives of still underrepresented activists. Among these were for instance migrant, racialized and trans sex worker activists, and collectives engaging in less publicly visible forms of activism than BesD. Because selective sampling “is only as good as one’s ability to penetrate the local networks of the stigmatized population” (Shaver, 2005, p. 296), this strategy only made sense at a later research stage. Within the German sex worker movement, there is a diversity of activists and collectives. Furthermore, due to the federal structure of the German state, activists deal with a variety of localised applications of prostitution laws, municipal regulations, and policy practices. Without claiming representativity, I sampled for as much variety in local contexts, industry sectors, organizational affiliations, and individual standpoints as possible. In addition to sex worker activists, I sampled non-sex working interviewees to provide additional information, in particular on coalition building aspects. I here selected participants who engaged in sex work activism from a range of political perspectives and organizational backgrounds, and had intimate knowledge of political events, developments, and political alliances.¹⁵

Participant Observation

Due to the initial challenges I faced with interviewing, participant observation became my primary method in the early stage of field work. Participant observation is a method of ethnographic research approaches and has been used widely to study social movements (Uldam & McCurdy, 2013) but only recently made a “turn” into political science (Brodkin, 2017; Joseph & Auyero, 2007). When adopting ethnographic approaches, researchers study subjects in the real-life settings they are embedded in, paying particular attention to action,

¹⁵ Even though targeted sampling served to incorporate diverse perspectives into my research, interviews often inevitably uncovered unanticipated intersecting standpoints. For instance, many sex worker activists I interviewed would also form part of political parties, trade unions, counseling centers, and feminist collectives. Many other intersections probably remained covert. The distinction between sex-working participants and non-sex working informants is thus not entirely clear cut: it is based on what interviewees shared with me, even though in some cases I was aware of overlaps.

interaction, and implicit meanings. Through longitudinal immersion and thick description of the microlevel, researchers render subjects' everyday experiences visible and generate understanding of their life worlds. Such "ethnographies of the particular" (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 466) have the potential to reveal socio-political life in its intertwined complexities while avoiding generalisations and "othering" on behalf of the researcher, thus providing me with a more holistic image of activists' political struggles in their complexity and contradictions.¹⁶ The strength of ethnographic methods also lies in their ability to foster trust with marginalized groups through extended periods of presence in the field (Dewey & Zheng, 2013). Because "[l]arge-scale political transformations have ground-level sources and effects" (Joseph & Auyero, 2007, p. 2), ethnographic methods can serve social movement scholars in capturing "hidden forms of politics" (Brodkin, 2017), "repertoires-in-the-making" (Joseph & Auyero, 2007), the emotional and contradictory sides of political processes, and the gaps between political rhetoric and everyday practices.

Especially in the early stages of my field work, I conducted long periods of participant observation at the local level. After encountering difficulties in recruiting interviewees during my first brief field visit in the fall of 2018, I returned to Berlin in the spring of 2019 and began attending almost any public sex worker event in the city. I focused predominantly on Berlin as a centre of sex work activism, but added visits to other cities and regions to expand my sample. Events I participated in included conferences and workshops, demonstrations, marches and rallies, film screenings, storytelling events, fundraising dinners, art exhibitions and performances, cabaret shows, panel discussions, and commemorations.¹⁷ From the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, participant observation also included public online events hosted by activists. In addition, there were many informal meetings and encounters, as well as closed organizing events to which I had been invited. Although I purposefully excluded these from participant observation, they inform my research indirectly. My research excluded sex-worker only spaces from participant observation and instead explored their meaning to sex worker organising with specific items during interviewing.

A colleague functioned as a gatekeeper and introduced me to some of her contacts. In the first few months, I hardly knew more than a handful of activists at the events I attended,

¹⁶ According to Abu-Lughod (1991), this does not mean "privileging micro over macro processes" (p. 474), but understanding that it is the local and particular where macro-processes are manifested, embodied, and (re-)produced.

¹⁷ For an overview of selected participant observations, see appendix.

which gradually increased. Because at this point I prioritized trust-building, I mostly participated and observed general settings, actors present, and activities taking place, rather than interviewee recruitment or micro-interactions, which I focused on at a later stage. I then wrote my field observations as well as personal reflections down into a notebook after I had left the site, since note taking at place seemed disruptive. In cases where I was worried I would forget, I took quick notes on my phone at the site, which was less conspicuous than pen and paper. I later entered these field notes into MaxQDA and analysed them in line with my GT approach.

Documents

In addition to interviews and field notes taken from participant observation, I examined documents using the same GT coding strategies. These included textual sources such as press releases, legal documents, reports, open letters, advocacy material (flyers, info brochures), newspaper and magazine articles, blog posts, tweets, and visual material such as photos, films, and stickers. I did not collect documents systematically, but only selectively: following the concepts emerging from interviews and participant observation, I added documents wherever these data sources could not provide sufficient information, or where documents served to bolster an argument. Most documents were taken from organizations' websites, social media platforms, or collected at protest events. Some stem from the Madonna Archive and Documentation Centre on Sex Work in Bochum, which I visited in April and November 2018.¹⁸ In a few cases, interviewees provided me with documents. Where I cite from documents, I indicate them as sources in line with the literature citation style.

3.5 Persistent Dilemmas in Sex Work Research

Adopting a qualitative research design combining feminist constructivist GT with participatory elements addresses some of the ethical dilemmas of sex work research (e.g. centring sex workers' perspectives, reflexivity, and accountability, as well as avoidance of exclusionary dynamics, theoretical bias and stigmatization) (Dewey & Zheng, 2013; Wahab & Sloan,

¹⁸ See <http://www.madonna-archiv.de/>.

2004).¹⁹ Still, other problematics of sex work research persisted in my approach, which ran through the research process from its conceptualization until its first outputs, and for which it was impossible to prescribe general ethical standards beforehand.

Starting off, even my usage of the terms “sex work” and “sex workers” presents an ethical dilemma as these subsume a wide range of individuals and activities, and suggest a homogeneity or simplistic dichotomy (between those who define themselves as sex workers, and those who don’t) that does not exist in practice (Dewey & Zheng, 2013; Shaver, 2005). Using methodologies that illustrate the diversity within sex work is thus crucial. In order to avoid harm, researchers also require sensitivity to the “enormous variations in the ways that individuals understand and emotionally process their experiences of sex work” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 18). A project on sex workers’ political self-organization may carry less risk of causing emotional distress among participants than a project examining other aspects of sex work (e.g. experience of police violence). Still, sex workers’ living and working experiences strongly inform their activism: even though I consciously excluded questions about entry into and experiences in sex work from my interview guideline, many interviewees directly connected their politicization and activism to such lived experiences. What created strong emotional distress in my research was, however, the impact of political conditions on their working and living conditions. This is illustrated by an exchange from my interview with Alexandra. Using an open question, I asked for her perspective on the sex worker movement’s future developments. To this, she responded that she strongly relied on the fact that professional bans were “irreconcilable with German Basic Law”. Not fully understanding the connection to my question, I inquired whether she was referring to discourses around client criminalization, and whether this meant she considered it “would not happen” in Germany because it was legally impossible. Alexandra responded that she did not want to make a statement on this and stated that she found my question beleaguering. When I said we could move on, she continued noticeably agitated:

‘Do you think you’re screwed for the rest of your life if politicians decide one way or the other?’ That’s not a good question. (...) You know, this is an existential threat, it’s not like when you get fired from some really

¹⁹ This is not to say that qualitative methodologies in sex work research are paradigmatically more critical, ethical, or transformative than quantitative ones, as shown by Hubbard (1999) who discusses the usefulness of mixed method research designs within the field of critical geography.

cool job and you say, 'Oh shit, I'll never get a job that cool again, well, then I'll just go somewhere else, I'll find another one, at least something similar to some extent, somewhere.' That's not the case here.²⁰

For Alexandra, my question on the sex worker movement's political future had evoked the looming scenario of a professional ban in the form of client criminalization, which would have devastating effects on her securing her existence through sex work. This threat triggered a strong emotional response of anger and fear in her, and an explicit rejection of my intrusion into this topic. The interview then moved on to another topic fairly quickly. Only during transcription, I realized I had not apologized for the emotional distress my question had caused her, and emailed her expressing my regret. She reacted in a very placable manner and we still had a productive exchange. The incident, however, demonstrated that in a charged political context, even seemingly "neutral" open questions can evoke emotional distress, and that for the interviewer, this can be unforeseeable, unintended, and difficult to handle sensitively within the interview situation.

Anonymity, Confidentiality & Consent

Among marginalized, stigmatized, and often criminalized groups such as sex workers, anonymity and confidentiality are imperative in the research process. Anonymity and confidentiality are particularly important when the "activist scene" is relatively small and well-connected. Sex workers are never "just" sex workers, but multi-positioned individuals. Trying to illustrate the diverse subjectivities activists inhabit conflicted with the risk of outing them by using multiple descriptors: if a collective comprised only a few members, or there were only a handful of activists of a particular gender, nationality, or ability within the movement, describing them as such would have rendered them identifiable to anyone with insider knowledge of the scene, which in Berlin in particular overlaps with other political scenes and subcultures. More than once, non-academic friends or acquaintances in the city asked me whether I had interviewed one person or another, and were amused when I refused to share this information "even with them". In my experience, having personal social and political

²⁰ „Denkst du, du hast die Arschkarte für den Rest deines Lebens gezogen, wenn die Politik so und so entscheidet?' Das ist keine gute Frage. (...) Weißt du, das ist ja eine Existenzbedrohung, das ist ja nicht, wie wenn dir irgendein total geiler Job gekündigt wird, wo du sagst, 'Oh scheiße, so einen geilen Job krieg ich nie wieder, na gut, dann mach ich halt irgendwo, ich finde schon einen anderen, zumindest ansatzweise irgendwo, der so ist.' Das ist ja dann in dem Fall nicht der Fall.“ (Alexandra)

circles that include sex workers and overlap with sex worker communities actually requires heightened attention to confidentiality.

The need for anonymity diverged among participants: many activists were “out” publicly with their real names, while others still retained work aliases, or were out to only parts of their social circles. To protect the identity of all research participants, I assigned pseudonyms to all interviewees when I began data analysis and writing. I anonymized field notes in a similar fashion. Where names of third parties were mentioned, I anonymized them with a general “colleague” or “other activist”, and anonymized names of places and locations where not relevant to the argument. In public documents, I retained orthonyms even if there was an overlap with interviewees’ pseudonyms. In assigning pseudonyms, I followed a reflexive method that is attentive to the power entailed in naming and name perception (Lahman et al., 2015). I was aware that due to sex workers’ stigmatization, eroticized work names can negatively impact readers’ perception of the speakers’ credibility. However, I found that dropping titles like Miss, Mistress, or Lady, or turning “Stormy” into “Sandra”, would entail a more problematic desexualisation of an eroticized work name. However, keeping these signifiers would inevitably provide additional information on the interviewees, as titles are commonly associated with professionals in BDSM, while catchy first names are common among strippers. These reflections show other entangled power relations and ethical dilemmas in my research which I could only resolve with a trade-off. As practically all interviewees communicated with me on a first-name basis (both real names and work aliases), I eventually used substitutes for these first names only. I roughly adjusted the pseudonym to meaning, gender, age, and cultural context, while not leaving the pseudonym too close to the orthonym to minimize risk of identification (as I felt would have been the case with turning “Stormy” into “Sunny”). I chose this method after I had first assigned numbers to interviewees. During writing, this felt like I was stripping interviewees of any subjectivity. It conflicted with my intention of transmitting personal narratives and seemed to contribute to the invisibilization and dehumanization of a marginalized group. Assigning pseudonyms was not without its downside either: it left the power of naming to me, prevented me from giving due credit to speakers where I directly cited them, may feel distorting to interviewees, and can never fully guarantee anonymity (for an in-depth discussion of pseudonym use in ethnography, see Jerolmack & Murphy, 2019). Also, it still desexualized those names whose erotic “ring” stemmed from a combination of a “regular” first name with a more stylized

surname (as in the name of German porn worker Theo Meow). Looking back, in future research I would consider asking participants to name their pseudonym at the time of interviewing, and in addition offer the possibility of being credited by name.

Apart from anonymity and confidentiality, informed consent is important in any qualitative research, but even more significant in a context of victimizing political attitudes and exploitative research relationships (Dewey & Zheng, 2013; Shaver, 2005). In order to obtain participants' informed consent before interviewing, I had prepared an information sheet and a consent form written in simple language (one English, one German version each). The information sheet briefly described the research project, how the data would be used, assured participants of their anonymity and confidentiality, and would be signed by both me and, optionally, the interviewee. It also stated that participation was entirely voluntary, and that the interviewee could decline, terminate, or retract the interview at any moment without giving reasons and without repercussions. I usually sent both documents to participants via email after an interview had been scheduled, and brought two printed-out versions to the meeting (in case of online and phone interviews, I sent documents with electronic signature). Most participants signed the consent form without commenting on it. I usually started the interview asking if participants required a refresher on the project information. From the many affirmative responses to this question, I deduced that the information sheet was often not read or only skimmed through. In one or two cases, participants expressed appreciation of the documents sent from my official university email address, as a proof that "everything was done in an orderly fashion", thus attributing a symbolic function to the document. While signing the form, one interviewee stated that to him, this procedure was irrelevant. To my question why, he casually responded that if I actually violated consent or confidentiality, he had much more useful tools than this document. Instead, he could ruin my reputation as a researcher within the sex worker community, resulting in my inability to continue doing empirical research. He was of course right. This exchange shows that power relations between researchers and participants are complex: with respect to ethical standards, credibility, and community access, he held significant power over me as a researcher and was not afraid to articulate this. I told him I appreciated his perspective and we cooperated again several times after. I later shortened the consent form and offered it as optional to interviewees.

Remuneration

Paying sex workers for their participation in research is a strongly debated issue (Dewey & Zheng, 2013). Whereas Shaver (2005) describes paying small sums of 10 or 20 US- or Canadian dollars to interviewees as a “token of appreciation”, Dewey (2013) struggled with the fact that she would have rather provided her research participants with a meal than with cash, which she knew in the particular street-based site she studied many would use to purchase drugs. Remuneration, she argues, could negatively impact both her participants “who may use the funds to engage in self-harming behaviors such as substance abuse”, as well as her research outcomes, since “participants may engage in the study for the sole purpose of obtaining money to buy controlled substances” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 19). While I recognize these concerns, I would argue that defining what entails “self-harming behaviour” and trying to prevent participants from such practices falls into other ethical traps: one in which the researcher assumes a paternalistic, moralizing, and interventionist role, and another in which the “real” motivations of participants in need of money are questioned and scrutinized more strictly than those of participants who are financially independent. Do we presume the latter have “better” and more altruistic motivations, and use money solely for activities that promote their health? And how does *not* paying a remuneration skew samples and outcomes towards those who can afford unpaid participation in research? Such a distinction also disregards how conditions of precarity, vulnerability, and hardship are created through punitive and prohibitive drug policies in the first place (Schrader & Künkel, 2020). Whether a researcher pays a remuneration or not may change little about these structures, but may be significant for the participant at the present moment, in whichever way that person – not the researcher – sees fit. Concerns about remuneration and its potential impacts on research outcomes should be discussed and made transparent, yet these ethical considerations should extend beyond research with marginalized populations, and include research designs in which *no* remuneration is paid.

In my project, I continuously adapted my approach to remuneration to context: I conducted my first two interviews scheduled at the 2018 whore congress without remuneration, paying only for coffee and snacks at the cafés they took place in. In one of these cases, the interviewee and I visited an exhibition on women’s movements after, for which I paid the entrance tickets. It was one of my longest interviews and I could tell she

simply enjoyed spending time together, talking about political struggles while also sharing stories about her daughter, who was my age. Informed by what I had experienced upon entry into field work, I changed my approach fairly quickly. Since it was clear that there was a significant lack of resources among activists, as well as a charged atmosphere in relation to researchers, I then offered 20€ compensation per one-hour interview. On the one hand, this was symbolically signalling my awareness of these conditions and my appreciation for the time invested. On the other hand, given that I paid this remuneration out of my personal funds and aimed at conducting 30 interviews, it was as much as I could budget. In my experience, the symbolic effect of remuneration was significant: I managed to recruit more interviewees, who in many instances then politely declined remuneration. Some simply stated they “didn’t need it”, while others declined because they knew the money came from my personal budget, or because they did not want to add to costs I had already incurred traveling to their city. Some asked me to donate the money to a sex worker organization, or added it to the *Kaffeekasse* at their work place (literally “coffee fund”, usually a small pool of money shared among colleagues). In most cases, I felt the actual sum was insignificant, but my offering was appreciated (one interviewee laughingly declined my 20€ note after a one-hour interview, joking that I would have to “add another zero” if I wanted to match her rate). Overall, it is hard to isolate the influence of remuneration from the connections and trust facilitated by friends, colleagues, and other activists, and from my growing networks as I spent increasing time participating in movement activities. In fact, these factors were mutually reinforcing: one activist who was initially hesitant about participating in research eventually agreed to an interview via messenger app, stating “I am quite skeptical [sic] toward research, but I like money and coffee, and you have a good reference from [colleague].”

I then again changed my approach to remuneration toward the last six months of my field work phase. As many of my early interviewees had declined payment, I could increase remuneration later on. This was useful for several reasons: first, by that time I had moved on from interviewing more visible “frontline” activists to those whose political engagement was less public, and who were often multiply marginalized in terms of migration status, race, language, and work area. Second, judging from the quick responses I got to requests I sent out unfacilitated by others, a sum of 40€ or 50€ could definitely tip the scale toward participation, although these were still all activists I had already met in person. Third, this time period coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. All sex workers faced the

temporary prohibition of sex work and the closure of sex work venues from March 2020 on. Many of the activists I interviewed at that point had gained time but lost their sources of income, and were additionally raising money for community emergency funds. Ironically, under these difficult circumstances, recruitment became easier (still, at that time I had also spent 1.5 years in the field). Moreover, remuneration seemed even more ethically imperative given that I was among those privileged groups who continued receiving a steady income. Finally, towards the end of my two years of field work, I still lacked interviews with two activists who I had met at political events several times and who I was sure could provide my research with underrepresented perspectives, but who lacked the resources to participate in an interview. In these two cases, I compensated both participants for the income they would have generated in the course of an hour, thereby depleting my budget. In the end, remuneration had taken the character of redistribution from the person who received an income (me) to those who did not (some participants) and from those participants who did not need the money (some activists) to those who did (other activists). Of course, the remuneration process remained highly non-standardized, localized and subjective: learning from the research process, I decided how much I offered, when, and to whom. Remuneration was neither “equal” across my sample, as compensation for loss of income was not something I could have offered to all participants from the start, nor were the changes I made in the process known to interviewees. A research project intentionally designed to allocate unequal payments to participants from the start would certainly face much more profound ethical questioning. A conversation with a colleague based in Austria also showed how context dependent remuneration practices are: in Austria, she explained, many sex worker organizations strictly decline payment, as they feel these could put their political autonomy into question. Adapting remuneration practices to localized conditions is thus paramount.

Researching and Publishing in a Politicized Context

Doing research on sex work means engaging in a highly politicized, polarized, and emotionally charged field. This inevitably positions the researcher in the midst of political contestations that can affect both research and career. Thus, Dewey and Zheng (2013) note, “sex work research of any kind constitutes a deeply political act for researchers and participants alike” (p. 76). Whereas “positioning those familiar with the subject matter as authorities of their

own experiences (...) is standard practice in social science research” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 12), sex workers are rarely afforded the same legitimacy and credibility. Instead, anti-prostitution scholars characterize sex workers as “morally repugnant characters unworthy of academic investigation” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 12). Merely by adopting the terminology “sex work” and the perspective of sex workers, sex work researchers can become targets of anti-prostitution scholars, who accuse them of condoning human trafficking and sexualized violence against women, and criticize their work heavily. “This criticism”, Dewey and Zheng (2013) elaborate further, “has taken the form of very public denunciations of such work at professional conferences, on listservs, and in scholarly journals” (p. 8) and exhibited “a level of confrontation and anger far exceeding the norms at professional academic events” (p. 12). According to the authors, the undeniable potential of attacks, litigation, and intense scrutiny sex work researchers work under “threaten academic freedom and present a form of silencing” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 13). Such conditions can in particular threaten young scholars’ professional advancement, the authors note. Knowing that your work might be under intense scrutiny while you are establishing yourself in the field indeed increases work-related pressure immensely.

Sex work research in Germany is still small in terms of scope, visibility, and institutionalization. As a researcher in this context, even more so as a young PhD scholar, I do not have the same exposure as more established scholars in the Anglo-American context have. Yet, I also move within the latter as a researcher working in an international academic setting. Still, over the course of now more than eight years of academic engagement with sex work, I have made experiences that resemble those described by Dewey and Zheng (2013). One took place when I had just been accepted into my PhD programme. In April 2017, I presented my master’s thesis on sex worker activism in Europe at the International Conference on Cross-Movement Mobilization in Bochum, Germany. My panel on women’s, gender and progressive movements included another scholar whose work dealt with the mobilizations of Scandinavian feminist movements against prostitution. During the panel, this colleague clearly positioned herself as an anti-prostitution scholar who considered her work particularly significant for the German context – given the country’s accepting and legalized approach to prostitution, which she framed as problematic. I presented my work after. The difference in our approaches was apparent and certainly intended by the session organizer. While the panel remained uneventful, this scholar later approached me during the informal

part of the conference, asking about my PhD project. When I explained I was going to research sex worker activism in Germany, she recommended I reconsider my choice of research subjects, stating that “so-called sex workers” were rarely who they claimed to be. To illustrate this point, she asserted a leading sex worker activist in her own country was in fact a “pimp”, “foreigner”, and suffering from “mental health problems”. I was so struck by these statements, I quickly ended the conversation. Looking back, this could have merely been a well-meaning older colleague seeking to counsel a much younger scholar. Still, her comments were clearly intended to discredit sex workers as legitimate subjects of research. Moreover, they were disparaging in content and inappropriate for an academic exchange. I later wondered how the conversation would have developed if I had expressed disagreement and engaged in debate. Finally, I hesitated writing out this experience in my work, as I feared it could be interpreted as “disparagement” of a colleague, in which case I would have effectively silenced myself. Because I find the event indicative of research challenges faced in a politicized context, I opted to include these reflections in this thesis.

Additionally, even within German speaking academia, scholarly outputs on sex work draw quick attention and rebuttals. In 2020, my colleague Giovanna Gilges and I wrote an article in which we discussed the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on sex workers (Gilges & Hofstetter, 2020). The article, which was published on the interdisciplinary gender studies blog run by the Women’s and Gender Research Network of North Rhine-Westphalia, was quickly responded to by a scholar who expressed agreement with our “call for decriminalization, recognition and solidarity with sex workers”, but claimed that the lesson to be taken away from the pandemic was a turn towards client criminalization (Wolff, 2020). In the comment section, more responses by colleagues and readers gathered, some of which again pointed out the particularly harmful effects of client criminalization for migrant and precarious sex workers. This interaction illustrates the contentious dynamics on sex work which exist in the context of German women’s and gender studies, too. The example also shows the unpredictability of how one’s research outputs will be used: despite the fact that client criminalization illegalizes sex workers by extension, deprives them of labour, social, and political rights, and paternalizes them as victims, our responding author built her argument for this model on our analysis of sex workers’ precarity and vulnerability during the pandemic. Considering the impact of research on sex workers is an essential step in ethical research, but

potential outcomes are hard to anticipate. Within a highly politicized context, even seemingly neutral or supportive research findings can be used to argue against sex work.

Navigating Positionality

Just as participants' perspective is informed by their social location, so is that of the researcher. Rendering transparent researchers' positionality is an essential part of feminist methodology and ethical research with marginalized populations. Wahab (2003) has noted that despite extended collaboration with sex workers, the researcher retains a complex and hybrid insider-outsider subjectivity. Halberstam (2011) argues that "[r]eally imaginative ethnographies (...) depend upon an un-knowing relation to the other" (p. 12), thus underlining the benefits of difference in social location between researcher and participants. Yet, situated knowledge is different from embodied knowledge, and reproducing perspectives one does not embody has to be done with caution (Saeidzadeh & Strid, 2020). In my experience, explicating one's positionality in sex work research comes with specific pitfalls and trade-offs – in particular when the researcher needs to locate themselves in relation to embodied experiences in sex work. As a researcher without lived experience in sex work, my own positionality has been a central object of reflection and source of different challenges throughout my project.

First, explicating my positionality as a non-sex working researcher became noticeably more difficult during field work. In the beginning, my outsider position was apparent because I was still unfamiliar to many activists and continuously introduced myself as a researcher. This shifted with my steadier presence at events and protests, and once I developed closer relationships with some activists, with whom I also engaged in private conversations and free-time activities. At times, activists I did not know yet would relate to me as if I was a colleague because they inferred so from my interactions with other sex workers. In other situations, more familiar activists told me they had simply forgotten I was a researcher, which is not unusual in ethnographic field work. In moments where I consciously disclosed or reminded sex workers of my subjectivity as a non-sex working researcher, this was usually disruptive and inevitably moved me into the centre of attention. Moreover, rather than creating transparency, I felt that emphasizing I was "not a sex worker" gave the impression of me seeking to distance myself from the activists and elevate myself as "more respectable". Some

situations in which I did not intervene became more challenging once someone started sharing sensitive information (e.g. disclosing illegalized activities such as working under pandemic related prohibition, or outing of colleagues and their real names). Naturally, I either excluded information shared in casual settings from my research or kept it confidential. Still, I felt it was ethically imperative for people to be able to make informed decisions about whom they shared sensitive information with, which was not given if my position as a researcher was undisclosed. Whatever strategy I opted for, I could not completely resolve these contradictions in many instances.

Second, embodied experience in sex work is not only an issue in field work, but in sex work studies in general. Research done by non-sex working academics is heavily contested within sex worker communities, and there is a growing number of sex working academics (see e.g. Sex Work Research Hub, 2022). At the same time, disclosing one's own experiences in sex work is complicated in academia: while this is vital to claim situated knowledge as a sex worker, it requires the researcher to perform an "outing". Researchers who "come out" as sex workers can contribute embodied knowledge and foster research participants' trust, but may experience stigmatization, distrust and repercussions in academic institutions and their career (Simpson, 2022; M. Snow, 2019). Researchers who refrain from coming out avoid these repercussions, but can only ever explicate their positionality partially. They may also face obstacles with regards to access and trust-building in the field, and the risk of being outed accidentally if they adopt a hybrid strategy. In my own academic circles there are some sex working researchers who have outed themselves completely and some who are out to a few trusted colleagues only.

Third, my insider-outsider role has been difficult when formulating critiques of activists and sex worker movement politics. I know that any political self-organization is an impressive feat, even more so when it is done from marginalized positions and under hostile political conditions. At the same time, I am aware that collective efforts are always permeated by power relations, and that subjects resist, as well as accommodate and reproduce them. Given the politicized context and the unpredictability of how research outcomes will be used, I have always been particularly careful when criticizing activists and sex worker movement politics. I once discussed my hesitations with a sex worker activist who advised I should exclude a discussion of movement internal conflicts from my thesis as it was "not my place" to pass judgement on these. However, excluding critiques of sex worker activists would amount to a

one-sided romanticization of their struggles, and would expose my work and the movement's politics to even greater criticism. In the end, I followed Berg (2021), who in citing sex work scholar Vanessa Carlisle, maintains "you do not need to be a sex worker to write about it well, 'but you do need to understand a liberation struggle when you see one'"(p. 7). Like Nencel (2017), I am convinced that an insider-outsider position and the recognition of different positionalities and forms of expertise can bolster compassionate, reciprocal, and caring relationships between researchers and activists which advance rather than sabotage movement politics.

In over eight years of sex work research, I have indeed seen connections develop between researchers and activists. After the whore congress in Berlin in 2018, both groups expressed disappointment over the research workshops. The few participating sex workers had mainly shared their immense frustrations with high number of research requests, stereotypical and stigmatizing questions, as well as a lack of compensation and information on results. One of them was so enraged by being misrepresented she loudly defended the primacy of self-representation over the perspectives of those "who have never spread their legs for money." The participating researchers, on the other hand, felt their inputs were not "appreciated", a general lack of interest in research, and that the organizational structure of a separate research stream had discouraged participation. Out of this experience, many researchers were demotivated, sceptic, and pessimistic about the future of cooperation, even though they saw the need and value of ongoing dialogue, and the increased mutual understanding of the differing experiences with research that had resulted from the congress. My own interaction with activists also revealed that research participants rarely (can) distinguish between scholarly interviews and journalistic interviews. This has been and continues to be especially problematic at a time when sex workers were experiencing misrepresentation and sensationalism in the media: while sex work researchers themselves still need to constantly reflect and improve on their research ethics and positionality, journalists are often not bound by such standards. Many complaints I heard sex workers express about unethical interview practices concerned journalistic work. Also, participants who were used to the short-term publications that journalists offer were sometimes dissatisfied with the slow output of research. Any sex work researcher has to deal with the "heritage" of these processes, and, as a colleague put it, "often becomes the representative object of all frustrations over research" in general. Dealing with these frustrations among sex workers as well as researchers strongly

characterized the beginning of my field work. In the years following, communication and collaborations with sex worker activists improved noticeably, as colleagues and I were increasingly invited to congresses and other sex worker events, and workshop formats were changed to improve interaction. Research on sex work thus also requires the building and maintaining of coalitions, and the emotional work of managing existing frustrations and mobilizing optimism to continue.

Working at the Intersection of Academia, Sexuality, and Politics

Relating to positionality, other challenges stem from working at the intersection of academia, sexuality, and politics. I produce and manage knowledge, just like activists do, but the knowledge I produce is first and foremost geared towards achieving a doctoral degree and dedicated to academic audiences. As such, it is often inaccessible to the very subjects I am researching with. More so, academic institutions can still be particularly inhospitable towards sex work studies. Sometimes the obstacle is as simple as being denied access to websites from within the university network because of institutional internet bans on sexual content. At other times, inhospitality is more profound: sex working academics face stigmatization, exclusion, harassment, and even assault in academia (Simpson, 2022; M. Snow, 2019; Stardust, 2020). Sex work stigma also transfers to non-sex working researchers, who may be exposed to sexualization, ridicule and incredulity because of the subject they study (Hammond & Kingston, 2014).

I have experienced genuine openness towards and recognition of sex worker movements as valid subjects of study within the field of social movement studies, my own institution, and the institutes I have visited. To be sure, in many contexts, sex work studies is far from being an established discipline and academics are not exempt from holding uninformed, stereotypical ideas on sex work. The conflation of sex work with sexualized violence and human trafficking, and the deep divides in feminist thinking can also express themselves in inept comments to one's work. Whereas Hammond and Kingston (2014) found they had to manage stigma within formal academic contexts, I found the managing of resources in informal academic settings more challenging. The topic of sex work generally triggers great interest, emotions, and opinions. As academics, we are typically curious, keen to debate, and afforded expert status. In informal contexts, my research subject would frequently unleash a

flurry of questions and sentiments as colleagues or acquaintances sought to quiz and debate the “expert on all things sex work” I was made out to be. While there have been many great, respectful interactions, there have also been countless exhausting and frustrating encounters in which I was confronted with prejudiced, moralizing ideas about sex workers, or expected to provide resolving answers to fundamental contestations around sex work to individuals with irrefutable ideological positions. I had become a “forced ambassador”²¹ of sex work – an involuntary representative of an issue or group which others have only little or stereotypical knowledge but great curiosity about. Conversations I had as a forced ambassador of sex work would easily fill entire lunch breaks, after work drinks, or weekend meet-ups, and would leave me feeling exhausted and rarely satisfied with the results. Initially, I still engaged in discussion and tested different rhetorical strategies. In some cases, I mentioned my research topic, but stated I didn’t want to discuss, which was met with incomprehension and the claim that this would contradict my role as a scholar (understood as someone always available for and interested in discussing and educating). I would eventually merely state I was “researching social movements” if new acquaintances asked about my research subject. Similar to Hammond and Kingston (2014), who “felt reluctant to identify or discuss the nature of our research with people [they] did not know” (p. 14), I “censored” my research on sex work. Rather than a method to manage stigma, as for Hammond and Kingston, for me this was a boundary-managing strategy to protect my own resources from what I came to experience as unpaid, emotionally draining, and often fruitless educational work. Censoring myself contained a trade-off in itself: I resisted expectations of scholarly availability and unpaid educational labour, and the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure time in academia, but also contributed to the invisibility of sex work within informal academic spaces. Certainly, I also required boundary-drawing strategies in field work, where I needed to negotiate how much time, empathy, and involvement I could invest without exhausting myself. The need for boundary management is also as a general condition of feminist scholarship that blurs professional, political, and private spheres.

²¹ I am lending this term from Patterson’s (2018) discussion of racism in non-normative sexual communities. Patterson (2018) describes the “forced ambassador” as a “role you didn’t ask for, don’t want, and can’t really throw off without looking like an asshole” (p. 15). To be clear, I am referring to parallels in the undesired attribution of expert status and advocacy interest by others (race and non-normative relationships in the case of Patterson, and all things sex work and sexuality in mine, with the distinction that I could keep this topic concealed and felt that others generally assumed a researcher would not have embodied experiences of sex work). I am not suggesting that the inevitable, embodied and lived experience of racism is similar to having to discuss sex work with uninformed counterparts.

Still, particular ethical challenges emerge where academic work intersects with politics and sexuality. The role of the sensual and sexual subjectivity of the researcher in field work, and the taboos around these aspects within academia, has long been examined by ethnographers (e.g. Bolton, 1995; Kulick & Willson, 1995). Sexuality plays a role not only as an object of study, but as a personal, embodied experience of sex work researchers, many of whom inhabit non-normative sexual subjectivities themselves.²² From conversations with colleagues I know that in the scholarly engagement with sex work, some benefit from the unsettling of personal internalized ideas of morality, whereas others find a home for queerness or practices of “exuberant intimacy” (Bauer, 2014). Berlin, the main focus of my field work, is certainly a site in which various communities of non-normative sexualities intertwine. As Groes (2017) shows, participant observation in a sexualized and eroticized environment such as sex work can create “discomfort, danger and desire” (p. 157) for ethnographers. Researchers need to strategically manage their own sexuality in negotiation with the field and their personal boundaries.

What I found most notable in my own experience was the socially constructed separation between a supposedly cognitive, rational and normative academic sphere and the embodied, sensual and transgressive world of sex work. For instance, participants constructed me as a disembodied and desexualized “brain” when assuming that I would like to refrain from seeing or hearing sexually explicit content: I once participated as a guest in an otherwise sex worker only meeting and was asked to briefly leave so that the attendants could discuss among peers. After the meeting, I stayed behind with one of them for an interview. Perhaps in an effort to keep me from feeling excluded, she declared she found this separation unnecessary as I “certainly won’t keel over dead if we talk about dick sometime.”²³ While she trusted in my strength to handle such conversations, she nevertheless assumed them to be unexpected or undesired by me. Other activists enjoyed transgressing the presumed boundaries between academia and sex work: at the after-party of the 2019 whore congress, some activists were overjoyed with the idea of “challenging” me with a visit to the dark room. At another sex worker conference, an activist who had questioned my presence as a non-sex working researcher seemingly casually shared stories about private sex parties with me while we were

²² A colleague laughingly sharing her surprise over finding out about a colleagues’ heterosexuality in fact suggests this as a presumed norm in the field.

²³ „(...) wenn wir mal über einen Schwanz reden, dann wirst du sicherlich auch nicht tot vom Stuhl fallen (...)“ (Lara)

snacking at the buffet. During an interview I conducted at a BDSM studio, the interviewee's colleague suggested I take a seat in the gynaecological chair that stood in one of the studio rooms. In these situations, I usually played along, thus resisting desexualisation and what I assumed were expected reactions of discomfort. At the same time, I understood that these moments presented possibilities for participants to challenge the authority attributed to me as a researcher through sexuality and skew the power dynamics in their favour.

Beyond personal and interpersonal aspects, other challenges encountered at the intersection of academia and sexual politics can arise from the institutional setting: the production of knowledge is political, yet as researchers we move in the context of the neoliberal university. Researchers who pursue political intervention through their work still encounter obstacles when academic institutions regard this to be "incompatible with the production of rigorous and credible academic knowledge" (Pereira, 2016, p. 102). Even though affecting positive social change resonates with the increasing significance put on research impact, Connelly and Sanders (2020) find that this is treated differently in the context of sex work:

Whilst the current buzz words are often around 'inclusivity' as a framework for staff and students and 'research partnerships', we know from our own experience that the topic of sex work can throw these principles to the wind and can instead present concerns around reputational risk for universities that preempt bad media press. We are aware of colleagues who are working within sex work studies whose work has been silenced, despite doing pioneering, timely and important work which has policy relevance and a direct positive impact on sex workers and the broader sex industry community. Academics have been pressurised to not publish work, not speak to the media about their research findings, and not pursue dissemination events, conferences or other public engagement platforms where the university name could be connected with sex work. (L. Connelly & Sanders, 2020, p. 11)

Unlike in other subject areas, research seeking to improve the social situation of sex workers may be institutionally discouraged and regarded as prejudiced due to sex work stigma. Nevertheless, many sex work researchers engage in "minor" forms of activism which exists in "spaces of betweenness" (Katz, 2017 in Laing et al., 2022, p. 3). Studying sex work researchers in the Anglo-American context, Laing et al. (2022) find that many participate in protests, outreach work, volunteering, networking, and "behind-the-scenes" support for sex worker organizing, engage in consultations, report-writing, and evidence gathering for policy advocacy, publish on non-academic platforms, deliver public talks and workshops, or develop critical teaching modules on sex work. Since I started researching sex work in my master's

studies, I have engaged in most of these forms of activist work in different country contexts. Most of this work was unpaid, took place outside working-hours, and occurred in addition to study and work requirements. Similar to the sex work researchers in Laing's study, I feel unease with using the labels "activism" and "activist", even though I recognize the political significance of my "minor" political engagement. Like many colleagues, I certainly share the "desire to challenge and change the narratives, stigmas and stereotypes that the public, policymakers and (sometimes) practitioners hold about sex workers" (Laing et al., 2022, p. 13), and seeks to intervene in public discourses, prostitution politics, and sex work research practices. Laing et al. (2022) find that "the boundaries between academe and activism are already quite porous in the field of sex work studies" (p. 14). As a researcher of both sex work and social movements, engaging in activism might be even less surprising as it actually "comes with the job." For me, researching sex worker movements has surely always been a site where the personal, the professional, and the political fuse.

Emotional and Embodied Experiencing in the Field

Since my theoretical approach entails a sensitivity to emotions within social movement processes and prostitution politics, I will end this chapter with a reflection on my own emotional and embodied experiences during field work. As Oliveira (2019) writes, "[p]ersonal experiences of research are generally not encouraged in traditional academic writing, but are nevertheless an essential, even mandatory component to taking an empathetic stance in our research relationship" (p. 524). Influenced by affect theory, ethnographers have come to consider how emotions impact research and knowledge production (Spanger, 2017). Emotions constitute subjectivities, are expression of political and social phenomena, work through individual and collective bodies, and shape the relationships between them. The production of shame in prostitution politics, for instance, serves to bolster hegemonic gender relations, discipline deviant sexualities, and disqualify illegitimate political subjectivities (Frederiksen, 2012). Emotional and embodied experiences have also accompanied my research process. When starting field work, I strongly felt like "sticking out like a sore thumb" at sex worker events that, although public, often consisted of small, closely knit communities where most people knew each other. Emotions like desperation, anger, annoyance, exhaustion, and suspicion by activists towards outsiders were palpable and created tension

in me, which required effort to manage in order to still openly engage with activists. I frequently felt like an intruder harassing people with interview requests that served to extract information. This is not an uncommon experience for ethnographers, but was certainly aggravated by the fact that many activists, even though they valued research and networking with researchers, essentially saw me as a representative of predatory, sensationalist spheres: on the one hand, the sphere of academia, and on the other hand the sphere of public media, as I learned that many activists had difficulties distinguishing between research requests and journalistic requests.

After several months of participant observation, the feeling of being alien changed, as many activists came to see me as a trusted participant and resourceful contact. Field work became less emotionally taxing, but negative emotions could persist in situations where activists did not know me yet, and were frequently expressed non-verbally. Exemplary for this was one particular interview situation with a representative of a sex worker organization which had agreed to an interview with me, and then left my scheduling requests unanswered. After mobilizing personal contacts within the organization and almost a year later, this representative contacted me. As I came to understand later, there had been a great turnover of people within the organization in the meantime, and this particular activist had not been part of the initial agreement. During the interview, the interviewee appeared annoyed and distant, which expressed itself in the physical set-up of the interview situation. She had asked me to come to the BDSM studio she was working at, where she led me to a room furnished with a low couch and a large wooden desk. From earlier visits to the place I knew this room was mainly used for teacher-student re-enactments. It being the only seating, I sat down on the couch. Rather than sitting next to me, the interviewee sat down on top of the desk, thus towering slightly above me. During the interview, she kept facing the door, and from time to time interrupted the conversation to check the ringing studio phone she had placed next to herself. Through the choice of location, the arrangement of our bodies in the space, and the presence of the phone, the interviewee had created distance, established a hierarchy between us, and communicated that I had only part of her attention. As in Spanger's (2017) experience, verbally unexpressed emotions of annoyance and aversion towards the researcher are still transferred through bodily practices.

Sometimes, however, negative emotions were made explicit, such as during a 2-day sex worker conference a colleague and I participated in. The event was sex worker only, but one

of the organizers had invited us in the role of “allies” to contribute research perspectives. I had inquired which inputs were desired, but as communication and organization remained slow, I could not find out beforehand. During the event’s introduction round, my colleague and I identified ourselves as academics who could offer input on sex work research, but stated that we were there to also listen and learn. To us, this represented an effort to merge our lack of information on the event with an openness to the needs of the sex workers present. As there were no spontaneous requests for research inputs, we simply participated in the workshops offered, as long as they were not designated sex worker only. In the feedback round at the end of the first day, our participation then became the subject of discussion: one participant questioned the purpose of our presence, given that we didn’t contribute specific inputs. She seemed frustrated and explained that she understood “allies” as meaning close friends and family, thereby suggesting that she experienced us as distant and disturbing outsiders. This started a debate about our role in the space and differing understandings of the term “ally”. While the discussion certainly surfaced discomfort and confusion, it was carefully mediated by one of the organizers who clarified misunderstandings. Nevertheless, experiencing participants’ aversion and annoyance at my presence despite my explicit invitation did not leave me emotionally unaffected, and I felt misunderstood, unwelcome, and annoyed. Moreover, I was a guest at an event for and by sex workers, where centring my emotions seemed inappropriate and managing them on my own the only option. I decided to regard the situation as a case of miscommunication and differing expectations, and to not take it personal. Looking back, it also created a learning opportunity for everyone involved, with the organizers agreeing to improve their internal communication, and my colleague and I facilitating an ad-hoc workshop on research ethics on the second conference day, which several sex workers attended and appreciated. Still, I left the event exhausted and sobered, and spent the following days emotionally processing the experience in conversation with my colleague.

Beyond the emotions linked to my insider-outsider status, I often noticed I was stirred by activists’ emotions. With the ethnographic immersion in participants’ real-life settings and an empathetic approach to research also comes a sharing of their anger, despair, or sadness over political developments, even if one is personally unaffected. In prostitution politics, this meant feelings of alarm at the growing political mobilizations against sex work, or helplessness and indignation over the precarizing and discriminatory impact of the Covid-19

pandemic on sex workers. I also experienced feelings of sadness and loss when I stopped hearing from activists I had developed closer ties with, because burnouts had forced them to drop out of activism. Dealing with these emotional processes takes a great deal of energy from the researcher. Adding to this is the general individualization and isolation that comes with PhD field work: despite having supervision, the PhD researcher is the sole one in charge of executing the project and the only one present in the field. Pauses from field work during which I returned to my institute, and recurring online exchanges with colleagues who were also engaging in field work alleviated the stress.

Both political engagement and research can be frustrating, and in telling stories about it we run the risk of only noticing challenges and limitations. I valued many moments of enjoyment, empowerment, and personal development over the course of my research. Some experiences propelled me forward, such as the energized and optimistic feeling after a protest with a great turnout. Other experiences were beyond what I had initially felt possible, such as the growing closeness and understanding with activists with whom I shared moments ranting about politics and adverse working conditions. I especially remember the excitement and appreciation I felt after being able to convene activists, researchers and practitioners at an interdisciplinary workshop I co-organized in 2020. In this online workshop on digitalization and sex work, we defied the limitations the pandemic had put onto all of us, communicated across different standpoints, addressed political conditions as they were unfolding, developed new collaborations and project ideas, and finally celebrated with a performance by the Berlin Strippers' Collective. In the growing number of participants at these yearly workshops and in the sex worker activists who felt welcome and safe enough to contribute, engage in discussion, and put themselves forward to the audience, I could see the rewards of something I had contributed to. Given the fraught relationship between researchers and sex worker activists I started in, this was incredibly valuable to me. Beyond this, I felt admiration seeing activists' persistence, and the renewal and growth of self-organization after defeat. I felt joy taking walks in the Brandenburg countryside or drinking red wine in a Berlin bar with activists who turned into friends, and I could draw personal satisfaction from contributing to the movement's efforts, which on one day meant publishing research findings in an accessible blog post, and on another day simply meant driving tired activists home after a whole day of demonstrating in platform heels. Thanks to many activists and colleagues, I too, experienced hope and the sustaining power of community which forms part of political organizing and

feminist scholarship. Having delineated my methodological framework, I expound the particularities of the German case in the following chapter in order to locate sex workers' self-organization within its historical, legal, and socio-political context.

4 The German Case

Sex workers' self-organization in Germany can only be understood in its historical, legal and socio-political context. As a heavily politicized and contested issue, this context is shaped by various legal provisions on prostitution, the involvement of other political actors in the field of prostitution politics, and by broader international developments in the fields of labour, gender, and migration. In this chapter, I sketch out this context and its relevance to sex workers' political self-organization in Germany.

The German case occupies a specific position in public and political discourses on prostitution on the European and international level. Here, Germany is frequently misrepresented as a country which recently "legalized" prostitution and subsequently became the "brothel of Europe." To correct prevalent misconceptions which also seep into academic debates, I first give a brief overview of the current legal regulation and political governance of prostitution in Germany (4.1). In subchapter 4.2, I then delineate how the German whore movement as a historical predecessor of today's sex worker movement succeeded in initiating and shaping legal reforms which were codified in the Prostitution Act of 2001. However, this reform did not pacify political disputes, and little more than 15 years after its adoption, Germany would again legislate on the issue of prostitution. The profound political shift Germany performed with the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016 is closely linked to international political developments in the fields of labour, gender, and migration. In subchapter 4.3, I first address these international developments and then focus on their manifestations at the national level. In the course of this, I portray the emergence, spread, and effects of the policy of client criminalization in detail to explain its growing international prevalence. Finally, I expand on the legislative process leading up to the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016, which opened a new window of opportunity for different political actors to intervene in prostitution politics, and constituted the impetus for sex workers' self-organization (4.3). Because the German approach to prostitution remains continuously contested, I weave accounts of various actors' involvement in prostitution politics throughout the subchapters.

4.1 Legal Regulation and Political Governance of Prostitution

Contemporary public and political discourses on prostitution heavily centre around various forms of legal regulation. These legal “frameworks”, “regimes”, or “models” are commonly termed criminalization/prohibitionism, (neo-)abolitionism, regulation/non-regulation, legalization, or decriminalization, associated with the nation states they are applied in (e.g. the New Zealand, Swedish, Nordic, or Dutch model), and weighed against one another (Jahnsen & Wagenaar, 2017; Östergren, 2017). Sex work scholars have questioned these debates and categorizations. According to Agustín (2008), the “conventional classification of policy by country (...) results in unsubtle and overdetermined nationalistic explanations” (p. 73) that fail to account for the messy reality of commercial sex and its ubiquitous governance and existence outside the boundaries of law. Similarly, Wagenaar and Altink (2012) find that the focus on regimes neglects their implementation and maintain that “within a broad national policy framework, considerable regional and local variation exists” (p. 11). Hence, a legal framework’s effects often contradict its stated goals and depend on the type of sex work targeted (and, I would argue, on sex workers’ specific social location, e.g. as migrants or women). Scoular (2010), however, contends that legal frameworks matter in that they uphold hegemonic power relations, even if different regimes lead to similar outcomes in practice. In an empirically founded typology, Östergren (2017) distinguishes between repressive, restrictive and integrative policies which are based on disparate understandings of sex work, and expressed in differing aims and means.

Within the discourses criticized by these scholars, Germany occupies a specific position. Often, it is stereotypically presented as having become the “brothel of Europe” and a “hub for human trafficking” after it supposedly “legalized” prostitution and began treating it “as a job like any other.” These descriptions are prevalent but misleading. In fact, prostitution has always been legal in the Federal Republic of Germany since its foundation in 1949.²⁴ At the same time, it has been strictly regulated in comparison to other economic activities. Whereas Östergren (2017) describes the German framework as “predominantly restrictive, with integrative aspects” (p. 24) and a managerial form of governance, Pates (2012) characterizes the German framework as liberal and regulatory but with shifting aims. These differing

²⁴ For specifics on the regulation of prostitution in the German Democratic Republic, see for instance Brüning (2020).

assessment attest to the complex, contradictory, and changing nature of the German legal regulation and political governance of prostitution.

The most important laws pertaining to prostitution in Germany are the Prostitution Act adopted in 2001, and the Prostitute Protection Act adopted in 2016, which amends the former. Apart from these, special provisions in e.g. taxation, trade, or zoning laws impact how the German sex industry and sex workers operate in practice. Whereas the 2001 Prostitution Act sought to improve sex workers' social situation by granting them access to fundamental legal and social rights, the 2016 Prostitute Protection Act aimed at curbing crime and better controlling the industry in the name of sex workers' protection, thus marking a significant change in German prostitution politics over the course of little more than 15 years. As the implementation of these national laws lies within the purview of the different German federal states (*Länder*), prostitution is also subject to multi-level governance at the national, state and municipal level. Diverging local policy traditions, political party stances on prostitution, and moral convictions of local governments and their respective subordinates result in a diversity of localized and conflicting policy practices across Germany. The more conservative Southern states of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, as well as some of their municipalities, for instance, practice a much stricter application of national legal provisions than the more liberal states of North Rhine-Westphalia or Berlin do (Euchner, 2019).

While sex workers thus enjoy a certain amount of legality and security within the German framework, in practice it is often difficult for them to navigate this system, comply with legal obligations, and claim their rights. The more marginalized individuals in the German sex industry are, e.g. because of insecure migration status, the less likely they are to benefit from the established legal provisions. The continued legal discrimination of sex work in comparison to other forms of work, the threat of increasingly repressive legislation, and most recently, the detrimental impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, have repeatedly prompted sex workers' collective self-organization for recognition, decriminalization and destigmatization of sex work. Additional challenges to their self-organization are created through shifting discourses on prostitution, violence and human trafficking, by moral panics around sex and migration, and by growing mobilizations against sex work. At the same time, Germany presents a case in which sex workers' self-organization has historically succeeded in initiating and shaping legal reform. In the following subchapter, I illustrate how the German whore movement did

so with regards to the Prostitution Act of 2001, and explicate how this law informed continued political contestations.

4.2 The German Whore Movement and the Prostitution Act of 2001

In the 1980s, sex workers in the Federal Republic of Germany began to organize together with social workers in the self-ascribed German “whore movement” (*Hurenbewegung*) (Heying, 2019).²⁵ Grievances created by the country’s antiquated legal regulation of prostitution were at the forefront of their protests: while prostitution was legal (i.e. not prohibited by the Criminal Code), it was defined as “immoral” (*sittenwidrig*) in the country’s Civil Code. Moreover, anyone “promoting” or “facilitating” prostitution was liable to criminal prosecution, and the activity was further restricted by zoning laws (*Sperrgebietsverordnungen*). These allowed local authorities to prohibit prostitution around certain public spaces, as well as in communes of under 50.000 inhabitants. These legal provisions had considerable consequences for the social situation of sex workers and the conditions they worked under. Transactions and contracts with regards to prostitution were legally void (thus formalized employment relationships impossible), so sex workers could not obtain statutory social insurance (tied to employment status in Germany) or use legal means, e.g. to assert their right to payment vis-à-vis clients.²⁶ Yet, income generated from sex work was taxed regularly. Operators of sex work venues who provided more than bare work spaces, sex workers who organized one another’s work in collective workplaces, or social workers who distributed safer sex supplies all ran the risk of being prosecuted for facilitating prostitution. Thus, prostitution in Germany was in some ways regulated and taxed as an economic activity, while working conditions were poor and sex workers were prevented from accessing fundamental social and legal rights. These conditions persisted beyond German unification in 1990, since these laws were retained by the unified German state.

²⁵ The collective organization of temporary, small-scale resistance by prostitutes is not a new phenomenon in the fractured history of Germany. As Julia Roos (2010) shows in her research on prostitution in the Weimar Republic, prostitutes in Leipzig or Bremen exercised collective resistance against police repression. They also organized legal counselling for peers after state-run brothels, moral policing and the otherwise general prohibition of prostitution were abolished in 1927. As Heying (2019) shows, the German whore movement which emerged in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1980s presented the first sustained social movement. Heying furthermore states that no self-organization of sex workers formed in the German Democratic Republic.

²⁶ De facto, some sex workers had other ways to at least access public health insurance: in practice, married sex workers could, for instance, enter public health insurance schemes via their spouses. However, they could not do so independently in their status *as sex workers*.

The German whore movement demanded the recognition of sex work as a profession and its equal legal treatment. Activists based this claim on the right to free choice of employment enshrined in German Basic Law. The whore movement eventually managed to put its demands on the political agenda of the Green Party (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*), which succeeded in initiating legal reform as part of the governing coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) during the legislative period starting in 1998 (Heying, 2019).

The Prostitution Act (Act Regulating the Legal Situation of Prostitutes - *Gesetz zur Regelung der Rechtsverhältnisse der Prostituierten*) was adopted on the 20th of December 2001 and entered into force on the 1st of January 2002. The national law consisting of only three paragraphs aimed at strengthening sex workers' legal and social rights and at improving their working conditions. Most importantly, to achieve this goal the law repealed the definition of prostitution as "immoral" from the German Civil Code. This allowed sex workers to enter into legally valid transactions and employment relationships, and to finally access public health, pension and unemployment insurance. The reform also intervened in the German Criminal Code. Here, the creation of agreeable and safe workplaces no longer constituted a criminal offense, thus liberalizing the operation of sex work venues. Legislators hoped this would indirectly lead to an improvement in working conditions in the sex industry. The Prostitution Act also retained certain legal provision that constrain prostitution. In order to strengthen sex workers' independence and self-determination, transactions and employment contracts are only unilaterally binding. This means sex workers can claim payment, refuse services or stop working at their own discretion, while clients and venue operators cannot claim the provision of services or determine their nature. The Criminal Code continues to criminalize the "exploitation of prostitutes" and the restriction of their personal and financial independence by third parties (Kavemann & Rabe, 2007). Moreover, advertising for prostitution is still banned in line with the Administrative Offenses Act. Zoning laws prohibiting prostitution in specific spaces remain in force, with significant impacts on the exercise of sex work in practice.

The Prostitution Act thus removed some legal discriminations that separated sex workers from their social and legal rights, while keeping up specific restrictions and criminalizations. As such, the law took a pragmatic compromise to regulating the negative sides of a phenomenon considered as an inevitable social reality. It refrained from passing moral judgement on sex workers and instead focused on improving their self-determination and the

conditions they worked under, thereby intending “neither to abolish prostitution nor to enhance its status” (Kavemann & Rabe, 2007, p. 9).

Experts, however, predicted that the law would fail to impact the general social situation of sex workers in Germany, as it stopped short of fully recognizing the professional equality of sex work, disregarded the situation and needs of vulnerable people in prostitution (e.g. illegalized migrants, drug users, and minors), and remained vague in how its provisions were to be implemented at the local level of states and municipalities (Heying, 2019). Moreover, industry realities would present practical obstacles to sex workers claiming their formal rights. The 2001 Prostitution Act thus remained far behind the transformative changes activists of the whore movement had envisioned. To them, the law was a half-hearted compromise. Following the law’s adoption, they criticized the separate legal treatment of prostitution in family rather than labour law, its increased control in practice, and its moralizing treatment by the media (Hydra, 2011). Despite the only incremental success the German whore movement achieved in hindsight, it was regarded as one of the most successful cases of sex worker mobilisation at the time: the 2001 Prostitution Act was in significant parts the result of long-standing advocacy work by activists who kept problematizing the legal situation, tirelessly advocated their position in public, and cooperated with social workers, politicians and lawyers. After the Prostitution Act was passed, the whore movement dissipated and its self-help organizations institutionalized themselves in the form of state-funded counselling centres dominated by social workers and the task of service provision.

The official evaluation of the Prostitution Act conducted five years later confirmed the concerns voiced by activists and other experts (Kavemann & Rabe, 2007). Only few sex workers had entered employment relationships subject to statutory social insurance, or claimed payment in court. Neither did the evaluation find a decrease in crime or an improvement in sex workers’ independence from venue operators and other facilitating and potentially exploitative third parties. “However,” the evaluation stated, “it was clear at all times in the legislative process that this would be an indirect effect of the Prostitution Act that could be expected in the long term” (p. 44). The authors also emphasized that “certain groups such as prostitutes working illegally in Germany or those addicted to drugs can hardly benefit from the strengthened legal position” (p. 44). Furthermore, they concluded that improvements in working conditions could “most likely be expected in the area of legal prostitution in brothels” (p. 63). Here, the evaluation stated, “hardly any measurable positive

effects could be ascertained in practice; at best, there are first tentative approaches that point in this direction” (p. 80). The authors noted that venue operators would invest into infrastructure only if this was economically profitable and remained hesitant until legal security was achieved at the level of local trade and licensing law.

A main reason for the lacking effects of the Prostitution Act were thus found in its deficient implementation: local laws on taxation, trade, and construction still retained provisions that contradicted the Prostitution Act’s intentions, and the missing national directives left considerable scope for interpretation to the implementing authorities at the local level of the federal states and municipalities. Some conservative federal state governments refused to develop administrative implementation guidelines for a law they rejected on moral grounds, while others simply failed to do so (Pates, 2012). This resulted in the persistence of old institutional logics, arbitrary and diverse policies, and great legal uncertainty for sex workers. The evaluation also confirmed that transaction and employment contracts were inadequate in an industry in which most workers are (bogus) self-employed, practice payment up front, and fear the loss of anonymity that comes with social security registration or a civil law suit with a client (Kavemann & Rabe, 2007). Moreover, particular German self-employment regulations blocked other paths to statutory social insurance.

Apart from these critiques, the Prostitution Act also prompted dissent from anti-prostitution feminists. To them, the law bore the “hallmarks of the traffickers in women and their lobbyists” and represented the German state’s approval to a “modern form of slavery” (EMMA, 2013a). According to their position, prostitution was not a job but a fundamental expression of patriarchal violence that no women could engage in voluntarily, and an obstacle to gender equality. In their view, the failures of the Prostitution Act were descriptive of the failures of legalized frameworks in general, and consequentially, they began campaigning for stricter criminal measures and the complete eradication of prostitution through client criminalization. Prostitution politics in Germany was therefore not consolidated through the 2001 Prostitution Act, but continued to be the site of intense contestation between different political actors. In fact, discourses and problem definitions on prostitution shifted significantly in Germany in the years following the Prostitution Act. These shifts were informed by broader and more longstanding international developments at the intersection of labour, gender and migration, which I present in the next subchapter.

4.3 International Political Shifts and Their National Manifestations

The shift in prostitution politics that Germany would perform through renewed legislation little more than 15 years later is linked to international developments in the fields of labour, gender, and migration. Among these are specifically a growing debate on human trafficking which firmly links the phenomenon to sex work, is consolidated within international institutions, and motivates national prostitution policy interventions in Europe in particular. By tracing the changing engagement of political actors within these fields, I highlight transforming power relations and the new hegemony of anti-prostitution actors and frameworks. In the following, I first address international developments and then focus on their manifestations at the national level.

Starting from the 1970s, increased flows of international migrants and tourists as well as a feminization of migration and precarious labour have contributed to a globally expanding sex industry (Standing, 2013; United Nations, 2017). According to estimates, migrant women form the majority of sex workers in all of the 14 old EU member states²⁷ (TAMPEP, 2009). Migration flows of women into precarious forms of labour revoked a debate on human trafficking that links the phenomenon almost solely to sex work. As a result of this, “by the mid-1980s, trafficking and prostitution were back on the political agenda of many states and supranational institutions” (Outshoorn, 2005, p. 141). The debate culminated in the first major international agreement on human trafficking at the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime: the so-called Palermo Protocol (United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children). Ratifying states agree to combat human trafficking with a specific emphasis on women and children (Shoaps, 2013). In its definition of human trafficking, the protocol mentions the “exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation” (United Nations, 2000, art. 3a) alongside forced labour, slavery, and organ removal. Following the protocol, scholars observe a “multiplication of interventions” (Garofalo Geymonat & Macioti, 2016, p. 10) undertaken by states against human trafficking and exploitation in prostitution. These interventions manifested themselves in the revision of national prostitution laws. The gender-biased nature of the protocol created specific attention to women as the predominant

²⁷ Comprising Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

trafficking victims, and “sex trafficking”²⁸ as the predominant form of human trafficking (Shoaps, 2013). In these developments, scholars see a moral panic over sex and immigration akin to the one at the turn of the 20th century when working-class women migrating from Europe to the US evoked narratives over “white slavery”, thus channelling fears over women’s sexuality and mobility, and over national identity (N. Davies, 2009; Doezema, 1999; Ellison, 2015; Thiée, 2005; Weitzer, 2005b, 2006).

These political shifts have been particularly strong in Europe: since the late 1990s, numerous national prostitution laws have undergone changes, thereby taking two broad directions (Danna, 2014). On the one hand, some states adopted or extended legalized frameworks where prostitution is specifically regulated and recognised as an economic activity, which afforded prostitutes certain social, legal and labour protections (e.g. Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands). On the other hand, several states adopted frameworks aimed at the complete eradication of prostitution and centring around the policy of client criminalization (e.g. Norway, Iceland, Finland, England, Wales, France, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland). The prostitution policy of client criminalization originated in Sweden in 1999, and the country has since been lobbying for the dissemination of its approach through its diplomatic missions abroad (Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Kulick, 2005). Even though similar frameworks have been implemented in Israel, South Korea or Canada, their proliferation has been particularly vast in Europe (J. M. Davies, 2015; Rubio Grundell, 2021b; Scoular & Carline, 2014; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011). Client criminalization aimed at the eradication of prostitution was also adopted as the official stance of the EU parliament in 2014 through a resolution commonly termed “Honeyball report” (due to the leading role of EU parliament member Mary Honeyball). The resolution proclaims that prostitution is a “form of violence against women and an infringement of human dignity and gender equality” with a “direct link to trafficking and organised crime” (European Parliament, 2014, sec. 2), thus reflecting central premises of contemporary anti-prostitution feminism. Consequently, the EU parliament urges member states to “mobilise the necessary means and tools to fight trafficking and sexual exploitation and to reduce prostitution as breaches of women’s fundamental rights” (European Parliament, 2014, sec. 1). Despite the legally non-binding nature of this motion, Foret and Rubio Grundell (2020) find the Parliament’s position “has not

²⁸ This terminology is absent from the protocol and mostly used from an anti-prostitution perspective, see Chapman-Schmidt (2019).

only managed to become hegemonic within the EU but also contributed to the expansion of client criminalisation in the national domain” (p. 1811). In a specific form of “European morality politics”, the authors find, the institution has successfully linked gender equality, women’s rights and anti-prostitution attitudes, and positioned them as sexually progressive and fundamentally European values. Similarly, Mattson (2016) sees the “new” prostitution politics emerging in Europe “as a symptom of European integration” (p. 27). Since the EU’s influence began reaching from the economic into the cultural domain, member states employed national prostitution reforms to retain a distinctive national identity and sovereignty within the EU, and to mitigate fears over permeable national borders, transnational organised crime, and undesired immigration. As Mattson underlines, the

(...) potential expansion of European authority added to the anxieties that Member States were already facing with the fall of the Soviet Bloc, the dramatic influx of migrants from formerly Communist countries, and the sovereignty already transferred to the Union over such key domestic issues as currency control and borders. (Mattson, 2016, p. 29)

Against this background, political attention to prostitution resurfaced as “prostitutes came to symbolize the ability of nations to preserve their values and police their borders, and the efficacy of transnational politics to solve global problems” (Mattson, 2016, p. 2). These political shifts also fed distinct subject narratives: on the one hand, the predominantly Eastern-European migrant woman trafficked and coerced into prostitution as the “victim”, on the other hand the male “perpetrators” in the form of a foreigner trafficking and exploiting women through organised criminal structures, and the form of a national consume fueling the sex industry and the exploitation of women through his deviant demand for sexual services.

Most importantly, the engagement of political actors in the field of prostitution politics shifted, and power relations transformed along with them. According to Mattson (2016), the “new” prostitution politics are characterised by “harsh intergovernmental criticism, broad media coverage, and public interest” (p. 2) as well as by “women in positions of political power, policy polarization, and the way these politics are embedded in robust civil society organizations and transnational ties” (p. 5). This is illustrated by the case of the European Women’s Lobby (EWL), which is the EU’s largest umbrella organization of women’s associations and an influential anti-prostitution actor within the institution. Through its campaign “Together for a Europe free from prostitution” launched with the support of about

200 other NGOs in 2012, the EWL had successfully lobbied for the inclusion of anti-prostitution perspectives in the resolution taken by the European Parliament (EP) in 2014 (European Women's Lobby et al., 2012). The EWL also pursues various activities beyond Brussels: it seeks to insert anti-prostitution frameworks as a distinctly European perspective into international bodies such as the UN, ILO or OSCE, and sponsors national anti-prostitution organizations and campaigns. Moreover, EWL members have rallied against EU states with legalized frameworks such as Germany and the Netherlands and framed them as "legal pimps profiteering from the exploitation of human beings" (Mattson, 2016, p. 46). Finally, the EWL maintains ties with transnational NGOs active in the field of migration. It is allied with the Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW), a US-organization involved in the elaboration of the Palermo Protocol which pursues interventions against human trafficking and prostitution at the international level, where it is opposed by the Global Alliance against Trafficking in Women (GAATW), a Thailand-based umbrella organization approaching sex work from a human, labour, and migrant rights perspective.

These actors form part of what Milivojević and Pickering (2013) have termed the "global trafficking complex", referring to "a network of institutions and actors that engage in global antitrafficking debate" (p. 586). Emerging in the Global North at the end of 1990s and early 2000s, the authors see the rise of anti-trafficking politics as "intrinsically linked to the process of reconstructing prostitution as sex work" (Milivojević & Pickering, 2013, p. 586). This reconstruction has itself been a result of the political efforts and successes of sex worker movements, who reframed prostitution as sex work in the 1970s in their demand for rights, recognition, and decriminalization. Departing from a radical feminist perspective, prominent anti-prostitution feminists such as Kathleen Barry, Andrea Dworkin, Catherine McKinnon, and Janice Raymond (currently board member of CATW) perceived these sex work politics as a threat to women's rights and began mobilising against them. Characteristic of the countermobilization of these anti-prostitution actors is the equation of prostitution with human trafficking and violence against women, the negation of voluntary sex work, a terminological imprecision that lumps together prostitution and human trafficking with problematic notions of "sex trafficking", "forced prostitution" and "sexual slavery", and the use of grossly overstated statistical claims to illustrate the size of a global problem and emphasize the urgency of political action (Milivojević & Pickering, 2013; Weitzer & Ditmore, 2010). Anti-prostitution feminists thus successfully linked the issue of prostitution to that of

human trafficking at a time when the latter rose on the international political agenda (Milivojević & Pickering, 2013), thereby bolstering the hegemonic position of anti-prostitution frameworks at the international level.

At the national level, political alliances between feminist actors and state institutions again fostered this hegemony. Ward and Wylie (2017) attribute the growing hegemony of anti-prostitution frameworks to the “convergence between radical feminism and states’ interests” (p. i) where the pursuit of feminist goals through state institutions matches neoliberal states’ interest in securing borders, restricting immigration, and combating crime. To Bernstein (2010, 2012), who coined the term “carceral feminism” for these movements, the prominence of anti-prostitution policies illustrates how “neoliberalism and the politics of sex and gender have intertwined to produce a carceral turn in feminist advocacy movements previously organized around struggles for economic justice and liberation” (Bernstein, 2012, p. 233). In recent years, this carceral turn in feminist politics has been most visible in the calls for high prison sentences and stricter legislation against gender-based and sexualized violence in the mediatized context of the #metoo movement. As Gruber (2019, 2021) demonstrates, these feminist politics contribute to the reinforcement of the penal state and the mass incarceration of marginalized communities. Marxist feminists such as Haug (1989) have long criticized that European feminist movements of the 1960s have developed from a radical, anti-state actor addressing “the ‘big’ social questions of the division of labour, property, exploitation and domination” (p.108) to an institutionalized “state feminism.” State feminism has indeed played a central role in gender politics and contributed fundamentally to “realizing women’s movements’ demands in policy-making and in gaining access for women in decision-making arenas” (Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007, p. ix). In fact, Sweden’s adoption of client criminalization within an anti-prostitution framework was the result of Swedish women’s movements long-standing mobilizations and the integration of their demands into the formal political structures of a welfare state that was broadly accepted to intervene into social matters (Dodillet, 2005; A. Gould, 2001; Scoular & Carline, 2014). Yet, with new challenges arising from globalization and welfare state restructuring state feminism is said to have abandoned its “emancipatory promise” (Fraser, 2009) and turned into a “state-sanctioned” feminism whose policies have ceased to benefit women, especially those marginalized along multiple axes (Allsopp, 2012).

It should furthermore be noted that the prevalence of anti-prostitution frameworks is not related to its effectiveness in reaching its stated aims. Although the Swedish state and feminist anti-prostitution actors promote client criminalization as successful, the policy has produced no results in curbing human trafficking, reducing gendered and sexualized violence, decreasing the exploitation of sex workers and the demand for sexual services, or improving gender equality²⁹ (Danna, 2011; Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Kingston & Thomas, 2019). On the contrary, client criminalization has harmful consequences for sex workers' living and working conditions. On the one hand, this derives from the policy's combination with various other anti-prostitution regulations, such as in Sweden:

The overall implications of these laws is that no one can operate a brothel, rent an apartment, room or hotel room, assist with finding clients, act as a security guard or allow advertising for sex workers. This in turn implies that sex workers can not work together, recommend customers to each other, advertise, work from property they rent or own or even cohabit with a partner (since that partner is likely to share part of any income derived from sex work). (Dodillet & Östergren, 2011, p. 4)

Moreover, harm reduction efforts such as the distribution of condoms can be liable to prosecution as a form of "pandering". On the other hand, vulnerabilities are created through the lacking recognition of sex work as a form of labour within this framework: this pushes economic activities into the informal, precarious sphere and leaves sex workers without legal and social protections, while their income is still subject to taxation. Nor is client criminalization in Sweden accompanied by consistently defined and funded social services for those wishing to quit sex work (Dodillet & Östergren, 2011).

Harmful effects have been broadly documented in various other country contexts with client criminalization: here, sex workers experience increased stigmatization, victimization, violation of their human rights, exclusion from legislative processes, and lack of legal security (Amnesty International, 2016; Calderaro & Giametta, 2019; Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). Because clients need to avoid discovery, sex workers operate in more clandestine ways and settings (e.g. anonymous, online, in private homes, hotels, or urban outskirts). This increases sex workers' vulnerability to violence and exploitation as they are

²⁹ According to Dodillet and Östergren (2011), the Swedish state's official state evaluation showcased a general "lack of scientific rigor" (p. 2) and "cannot be said to have decreased prostitution, trafficking for sexual purposes, or had a deterrent effect on clients to the extent claimed. Nor is it possible to claim that public attitudes towards prostitution have changed significantly in the desired radical feminist direction or that there has been a similar increased support of the ban" (p. 3). The authors also find that the political consensus behind the law has increasingly faltered.

less able to screen clients, negotiate prices and services, may increasingly depend on third parties facilitating client contact, and become inaccessible for social service outreach work. Sex workers either operate individualized and isolated, or run the risk of being prosecuted for brothel keeping and “pimping” offenses when working together with colleagues. A reduced client base also results in price drops, lower bargaining power, and greater difficulty to maintain safer sex practices, which in turn increases sex workers’ risk of contracting HIV and STIs (more so if police treat condoms as evidence). Sex workers also experience increased hate crimes, malevolent outings and reports by civilians, evictions from homes, loss of child custody, and deportation in case of migrant sex workers (Campbell et al., 2020; Levy & Jakobsson, 2014). Sex workers are heavily policed as police seek to track clients through them, resulting in sex workers’ declining trust in authorities and experiences of police harassment and violence (Chu & Glass, 2013). Migrant sex workers in particular face police control, evictions, and deportations (Vuolajärvi, 2018). Finally, working and living under these conditions has detrimental impacts on sex worker’s physical, emotional and mental well-being (Maciotti et al., 2021; Platt et al., 2018).

In practice, these conditions resemble those found in countries with prohibitive regimes.³⁰ The insistence that legal frameworks centring around client criminalization leave sex workers unaffected by law enforcement or even “decriminalised” is thus grossly wrong. More so, it has to be concluded that the policy’s negative consequences on sex workers are accepted or even desired, as they are assumed to hinder individuals from taking up sex work or pushing them to quit. A statement taken from the Swedish state’s official evaluation of client criminalization underlines this point:

For people who are still being exploited in prostitution, the (...) negative effects of the ban [on purchasing sexual services] (...) must be viewed as positive from the perspective that the purpose of the law is indeed to combat prostitution. (SOU, 2010 in Dodillet & Östergren, 2011, p. 23)

In other words, the Swedish state considers its policy successful in so far as its detrimental effects on sex workers contribute to the repression of sex work. This prioritization of ideological goals over impacts on marginalized populations means that “sex workers’ lives

³⁰ To be sure, repression of sex work is also documented in legalized frameworks adopted by EU states. Hubbard et al. (2008) find that regardless of their legal framework on prostitution, there is a “shared preoccupation with repressing spaces of street prostitution” among EU states which are thus “perpetuating geographies of exception and abandonment” (p. 137) rather than promoting gender equality or improving sex workers’ working and living conditions.

become ‘disposable’, in that they can be sacrificed for the greater good of attempting to create a world without prostitution” (Calderaro & Giametta, 2019, p. 169). Negative consequences on sex workers are also welcomed from a feminist anti-prostitution perspective according to which sex workers harm all women by perpetuating the idea that women’s bodies are “available to purchase” (Dodillet & Östergren, 2011), thus becoming both victims and perpetrators.

Despite the ineffectiveness in combating trafficking and exploitation, and the harmful impacts of client criminalization on sex workers, anti-prostitution actors lay claims to morality and advancing women’s rights in their idea of “helping”, “rescuing” and “protecting” women from prostitution and exploitation. This entails specific subjectivities and power dynamics: whereas anti-prostitution actors appear as “benevolent helpers”, sex workers (in particular migrant and working-class women) are constructed as victims in need of protection. This justifies control and interventions undertaken on their behalf by NGOs and the neoliberal state, a process which scholars have described as “sexual humanitarianism” (Hoefinger, 2016; Kotiswaran, 2014; Mai et al., 2021) or “punitivist humanitarianism” (Vuolajärvi, 2018). An expanding social sector of anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution NGOs raises immense sums of government and donor funding, mobilizes celebrity support, produces well-paid positions for campaigners, exerts influence in international institutions, and cooperates with state authorities, for instance by participating in brothel raids in the Global South where sex workers are forcefully “rescued” by police, detained in “rehabilitation centres”, and trained into more morally acceptable (i.e. non-sexual) forms of sweatshop or factory work³¹ (A. Ahmed & Seshu, 2012; Hoefinger, 2014). Essentially, this “rescue industry” (L. M. Agustín, 2007) is historically rooted in classed, gendered, and racialized ideas of “charity” seeking to reform and “rehabilitate” sexually deviant, poor, and non-Western populations (L. M. Agustín, 2007; L. J. Connelly, 2015).

Finally, the hegemony of anti-prostitution frameworks is reinforced by an “unholy alliance” (Crago, 2003) between feminist anti-prostitution actors and the Christian Right (Bernstein, 2012; Doezema, 2001; Ellison, 2017; Jackson et al., 2017; Soderlund, 2005; Weitzer, 2006). Although they hold oppositional views on other issues concerning sexuality and gender (e.g. abortion or marriage equality), they share attitudes on sex work and

³¹ Local sex worker activists’ resistance to these “rescue operations” is, for instance, visible in the logo of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), which shows a sewing machine crossed out by the red circle of a prohibition sign.

strategically cooperate in campaigns and organizations. Hence, scholars have characterized contemporary anti-prostitution politics as both neoliberal and neoconservative (Masson, 2020; Phipps, 2014), emphasizing that the “moral-political rationality” contained in these relates to right-wing ideas

(...) based on traditional gender roles and family structures, the centrality of the church to social life, state-led patriotism including stringent immigration controls, and the defence of national and cultural borders (...) which involves a strong and interventionist military state.” (Brown, 2006 in Phipps, 2014, p. 17)

According to Sauer (2013), today, sex work is “a battlefield about the redefinition of gender relations in the context of a shifting and crumbling gender and sexuality dispositive” (p. 13). Other scholars see prostitution politics set specifically in an adverse environment of “intensified rallying against the gender and sexual equity agenda” (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017, p. 1638) reflected in attacks on sexual and reproductive rights, growing anti-feminist attitudes, and a shift towards criminalization and securitization as a response to social problems.

In Germany specifically, these political shifts merged with the dissatisfaction over the Prostitution Act after its adoption in 2001, and combined with moral panics over sex and immigration. This created a feeling of urgent need for renewed political action on the issue of prostitution. Firstly, moral panics materialized especially around the proliferation and diversification of the now more liberalized sex industry. Especially new business models such as “flat-rate” brothels (brothels in which clients pay a fixed entry fee for an unlimited number of sexual services) or advertisements for sexual practices such as “gang bang” parties (not closely defined, but commonly understood as parties where a group of clients engages in sexual activity with a single sex worker) generated fears over a supposedly rampant German sex industry (MGPEA, 2014). These fears were further intensified during the Men’s Football World Cup which Germany hosted in 2006, when media reports claimed that thousands of women had been trafficked into Germany to engage in prostitution. Although unsubstantiated, the reports made human trafficking and “forced prostitution” the subject of intense public debate and led to political campaigns, police raids of brothels, arrests of undocumented migrants, and local displacements of sex workers (Künkel, 2007; Milivojevic, 2008).³² The debates fuelled historically gendered and racialized images of prostitution

³² Moral panics over trafficking and prostitution are common in the context of large-scale sporting events, such as the yearly US Super Bowl, the 2014 Men’s Football World Cup and 2016 Olympics in Brazil, and the 2010 Men’s Football World Cup in South Africa. To varying degrees, these have served to justify urban displacement and gentrification, increased policing and militarization, as well as stricter migration laws and border controls (C. Gould, 2010; Küppers, 2018; Milivojevic, 2008; Mitchell, 2016)

discourses: on the one hand, the figure of the victimized migrant woman, and on the other hand the images of “ruthless traffickers and pimps” as well as men buying sexual services, both of which were blamed for driving the sex industry through their excessive and exploitative male behaviours and desires. Additional political pressure was put on Germany when countries with client criminalization like France and Sweden criticized Germany for having encouraged human trafficking by previously “legalizing” prostitution. On a European and international level, Germany hence came to signify the supposed failure of legalized frameworks on prostitution, and the consequential need for criminalization.

Eventually, these debates gained further momentum when the expansion of the European Union (EU) granted free movement of labour to its most recent member states in both 2011 and 2014. In Germany, this labour market expansion spurred a xenophobic moral panic over “poverty immigration” (*Armutszuwanderung*) from Eastern Europe into the German social security system. This particularly applied to migrant workers from Bulgaria and Romania, and most especially to young women who legally entered the German sex industry from these countries and visibly worked in street prostitution. These migrant sex workers were collectively labelled as trafficked and forced, either by dire economic circumstances or by male profiteers. Regardless of their individual motives and agency for migration, the German state was called on to change its approach to prostitution in the interest of their protection. The renewed legislative process on prostitution which commenced in 2013 was strongly informed by these developments.

4.4 The Prostitute Protection Act of 2016

After the German parliamentary elections in 2013, the governing grand coalition of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and SPD decided to make legislative readjustments and thereby created a new window of opportunity for different political actors to intervene in prostitution politics. Anti-prostitution feminists, who had increased their mobilizations after the adoption of the 2001 Prostitution Act, now made concerted efforts to achieve a change in prostitution politics. Most vocal among them were radical feminist Alice Schwarzer and the feminist magazine “EMMA”, which Schwarzer founded in 1977 and still heads as publisher and chief editor. Both Schwarzer and EMMA present longstanding pillars of the mainstream women’s movements that developed in the

Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s, although their leading role has since declined and they have been subject to intense criticism by other strands of feminism.

In November 2013, EMMA published an “Appeal against Prostitution” (*Appell gegen Prostitution*), a public anti-prostitution campaign which was signed by notable German politicians, intellectuals, and celebrities (EMMA, 2013a, 2013b). The cover of the respective print issue showed images of the most prominent signatories’ faces over which a yellow ribbon read “We demand: abolish prostitution! Finally change the pimp law” (*Wir fordern: Prostitution abschaffen! Ändert endlich das Zuhälter-Gesetz*). In its style, the cover replicated a famous 1971 issue of the magazine “Stern”, in which 374 women, among them celebrities, had publicly declared to have had an abortion in protest against its criminalization in Germany (itself inspired by a French campaign written by Simone de Beauvoir) (Grossmann, 2021). Through the design of the appeal, EMMA thus linked its anti-prostitution campaign to earlier struggles for abortion rights, suggesting that feminist opposition to prostitution had become as taboo and as stigmatized.

EMMA’s appeal claimed that the 2001 Prostitution Act carried “the hallmarks of the traffickers in women and their lobbyists” and that Germany had become the “hub of Europe’s traffickers and a paradise for sex tourists from the neighbouring countries” (EMMA, 2013a) after its adoption. It further proposed client criminalization as a “measures to curb the prostitution system in the short term and (...) abolish it in the long term” and maintained that the “prostitution system brutalizes sexual desire and violates the human dignity of men and women – including that of so-called ‘voluntary’ prostitutes” (EMMA, 2013a). The appeal thus expressed fundamental radical feminist positions on prostitution, called on the state to eliminate it using criminal law, and rejected the possibility of consensual, self-determined and dignified sex work. It also negated women’s agency in sex work by marking it as generally involuntary, and ignored or vilified the German whore movement’s contribution to the Prostitution Act. The same month, Alice Schwarzer also published and began promoting her book titled “Prostitution. A German Scandal” (*Prostitution. Ein deutscher Skandal*) (Schwarzer, 2013).

In the following, Schwarzer and EMMA became the leading figures in a network of anti-prostitution campaigners. This network includes women’s rights organization such as “Terre des Femmes” (among the largest women’s rights organization in Germany) and “Sisters – for the exit from prostitution” (headed by trade unionist, SPD politician and member of

parliament Leni Breymaier, as well as social worker and health department officer Sabine Constabel). Actively involved in anti-prostitution campaigns in Germany are also Christian organizations such as “SOLWODI” (Solidarity with Women in Distress – an international aid organization founded by Lea Ackermann, a sister of a catholic missionary order active in African countries) and “Neustart – christliche Lebenshilfe” (new start - Christian life support), a Christian counselling centre offering “aid for prostitutes, delinquents and drug addicts” (Neustart, 2022) through street work. Moreover, an association of psychotherapists named “Trauma and Prostitution – Scientists for a World without Prostitution” presents an important anti-prostitution actor which bases its assertion that prostitution is traumatizing *per se* mainly on the work of US-psychologist and anti-prostitution feminist Melissa Farley (see e.g. Farley & Barkan, 1998). Finally, various smaller women’s, human rights, and political organizations have formed the initiative “Stop Sex Purchase” (*Stop Sexkauf*). This national network of anti-prostitution campaigners also maintains transnational ties: in 2014, the initiative Stop Sex Purchase organized its first “international congress for dismantling prostitution” in Munich. The congress was co-funded by the EWL and saw influential anti-prostitution actors as speakers: among them were Mary Honeyball of the EP, Gunilla Ekberg of CATW, US anti-prostitution feminists Melissa Farley and Kathleen Barry, the Swedish ambassador, as well as Swedish and German police officers.³³

Similar to anti-prostitution actors operating at the international level, anti-prostitution campaigners in Germany strongly rely on unsubstantiated and uncontextualized statistical claims on the magnitude of the German sex industry. Without providing sources on how figures are established, they cite sex industry profit margins of “over 1.000 percent” (EMMA, 2013a) and commonly quote the number of women sex workers in a range from 200.000 to 1 million (EMMA, 2013b, 2020b; Terre des Femmes, n.d.; Trauma and Prostitution, n.d.). An estimate of 400.000 sex workers, which was made in sex worker activist contexts in the 1980s, continues to be cited most persistently, whereas more serious extrapolations put the range between 64.000 and 200.000 at that time (Kavemann & Steffan, 2013). No updated, reliable

³³ Notably, the event also included several women speaking as “survivors” of prostitution. The term “survivor” is frequently used in debates around sexualized and gendered violence and adopted as a self-identification by some women who frame their experiences in the sex industry accordingly. The congress speakers represented international survivor organizations CAP International (Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution) and SPACE International (on the board of which is Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of CATW). In Germany, individual survivors of prostitution founded the self-organization “network Ella” (*Netzwerk Ella*) in 2018, which has an unknown number of members. Individual survivor activists actively campaign against prostitution, but do so mainly in a subordinate role to the anti-prostitution feminists they cooperate with.

statistics have been made on the German sex industry, which has profoundly changed since then. This means that anti-prostitution campaigners' frequent statements on the supposed majority shares of sex workers are equally unsupported. Here, anti-prostitution campaigners interchangeably characterize "90%" or "95%" of sex workers as migrants "from the poorest countries of Europe and Africa" (EMMA, 2020b), "poverty and forced prostitutes" (*Armut- und Zwangsprostituierte*) (Schrader & Künkel, 2020), victims of violence and childhood sexual abuse (EMMA, 2013a), or illiterate and helpless individuals (EMMA, 2020b). This constructed majority is then positioned against a supposed "minority of prostitutes of German origin" (EMMA, 2013b) which merely claims to work by choice. As Sauer (2019) has shown, anti-prostitution campaigning also employs affective strategies. The use of graphic narratives of violence and exploitation of migrant women serves to provoke a sense of alarm, feelings of revulsion towards prostitution, and widespread public attention.

Intensified anti-prostitution campaigning added to the moral panics over sex and migration and the conflation of human trafficking with sex work. As a result, the image of the sex worker shifted: the idea of the right-bearing worker and capable political actor which had informed the 2001 Prostitution Act was displaced by the migrant victim in need of state protection. As prostitution was debated in an increasingly moralizing and scandalizing way, the previous rights-based approach aimed at improving sex workers' social realities was supplanted by calls for punitive measures and criminalizing laws to control prostitution.

The Prostitute Protection Act (Act Regulating the Prostitution Industry and Protecting the People Working in Prostitution - *Gesetz zur Regulierung des Prostitutionsgewerbes sowie zum Schutz von in der Prostitution tätigen Personen*) was adopted on the 7th of July 2016 and came into effect on the 1st of July 2017, amending the 2001 Prostitution Act. Besides seeking to further improve the self-determination and working conditions of sex workers, the declared intentions of the Prostitute Protection Act were to "better protect women from human trafficking and forced prostitution" (BMFSFJ, 2017, para. 4) as well as to "eliminate the dangerous manifestations of prostitution and to fight crime" (BMFSFJ, 2017, para. 5) attributed to the industry. To this end, the Prostitute Protection Act created comprehensive obligations for both sex workers and venue operators within a total of 38 paragraphs. Sex workers in Germany are now obliged to register with authorities and to carry a certificate of registration at all times during work. The registration and the accompanying compulsory

verbal health consultation need to be renewed continuously.³⁴ Additionally, the law mandates condom use, prohibits sex workers from simultaneously using their work spaces as living spaces, and determines high fines for violations. Sex work venues now have to obtain a specific commercial license that is dependent on their compliance with building regulations, which e.g. mandate alarm buttons in all work rooms and separate bathrooms for clients and sex workers. Licenses are denied to business models such as flat-rate brothels or gang bang parties. Operators also need to present police clearance certificates as well as ensure that all their workers are officially registered. Furthermore, the law now fully permits police to enter sex work venues and apartments to inspect documents and persons (BMJ, 2016).

Through these provisions, legislators hoped to better uncover and curb coercive and criminal conditions in the sex industry. Despite its declared intention to protect vulnerable sex workers and victims of trafficking, the Prostitute Protection Act does not afford specific entitlements or rights to these groups. The law was heavily criticized by various experts: legal scholars denounced its breach of German basic law by infringing on sex workers' right to sexual, occupational and informational self-determination, and the right to the inviolability of the home (Deutscher Juristinnenbund, 2015; Döring, 2018; Wersig, 2017). Social workers criticized that compulsory consultations would erode relationships of trust and undermine health care for marginalized groups (bufas, 2015; Greb & Schrader, 2018). Sex worker activists, who began self-organization in response to the legislative plans, deplored it would increase vulnerability, stigma and illegalization (BesD, 2014a, 2016; Herter & Fem, 2017). Even though these organizations had presented their objections in an expert hearing during the legislative process, their inputs were largely disregarded in the final law (Östergren, 2017).

Despite the lack of meaningful data, it can already be deduced that the Prostitute Protection Act has led to only low registration numbers, a reduction in sex work venues, and to an increased isolation and illegalization of sex workers. At the end of 2019, 40.369 sex workers and 2.170 businesses had been registered (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021).³⁵ Of the registered sex workers, 19% had German nationality. Among the share of migrant sex workers EU citizens from Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary formed the largest group. Non-EU migrant

³⁴ Here, the law discriminates according to age and pregnancy status: sex workers between the ages of 18 and 20 need to renew their registration on a yearly basis, while renewal is required every two years from the age of 21, thus creating an age distinction otherwise unknown in German legislation. Individuals under 18 and those within the last six weeks of a pregnancy cannot obtain registration and are thus unable to work legally.

³⁵ The significance of more recent registration numbers is even lower due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the extended prohibitions and closures of registration authorities during that time.

workers from Africa, Asia and the Americas made up about 7% of all registrations. Due to the stigmatized and partially illegalized nature of sex work, available administrative and criminal statistics do not allow for comprehensive statements on the current status of the German sex industry. A preliminary report cites problems and confusions in the administrative implementation of the Prostitute Protection Act as main reasons for comparably low numbers of registrations (BMFSFJ, 2020). According to Hydra, the oldest German sex worker organization and now a counselling centre in Berlin, many sex workers refrain from registering because they fear loss of anonymity. Nevertheless, they continue to work. These sex workers are consequentially illegalized and unable to work within licensed brothels. As a result, they switch to other less regulated and more clandestine workplaces such as private apartments, the internet, or city outskirts. Here, sex workers work in a more individualized way, are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation, and increasingly inaccessible to outreach services. The number of sex work venues has decreased with the implementation of the Prostitute Protection Act, as especially small brothels cannot comply with strict building regulations. Others have closed in avoidance of licensing fees and bureaucracy, or in anticipation of a license rejection. Others again are assumed to continue to operate covertly. In Berlin, only 171 of an estimated 600 brothels had applied for a license by the end of 2018. For sex workers, this meant a loss of workplace options and a deterioration of working conditions in the industry (Berliner Zeitung, 2019). Sex workers who need to rent living spaces in addition to their work places are now under more financial strain, and in more dependent relations towards clients who negotiate prices and operators who manage their registration. At the same time, the Prostitute Protection Act has had no observable impact on the trend in human trafficking in the German sex industry. Reported numbers of victims and perpetrators of sexual exploitation have been low and decreasing continuously since the beginning of separate statistical reports on this criminal offense in 2005. Despite extended police powers, police now claim it is increasingly difficult to access prostitution venues, as they have shifted from public bars and brothels to clandestine apartments (BKA, 2020).

These preliminary indicators suggest that the negative impacts anticipated by sex worker activists and other experts have indeed transpired, and questions the law's efficacy in achieving its declared goals. While dealing with the practical realities of the Prostitute Protection Act, sex worker activists thus continued their mobilizations against it. Since the Prostitute Protection Act was considered an unsatisfactory result of a political compromise

(Wersig, 2017), so did other political actors in prostitution politics. Anti-prostitution campaigners, for whom the Prostitute Protection Act falls short of outlawing prostitution, maintain their lobbying for client criminalization (EMMA, 2019). The Prostitute Protection Act is currently under evaluation at the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony, with results expected by the 1st of July 2025. For the different actors vying over influence in German prostitution politics, this presents another window of opportunity, and the political field retains momentum for further shifts. In this chapter, I presented historical, legal, and socio-political developments in the fields of prostitution politics at the international and national level, and their intersection with issues of labour, gender, and migration. In the following chapter, I examine how this context shaped the agency, subjectivities, and politicization of sex workers, and trace the emergence and development of their self-organization against the Prostitute Protection Act.

5 Self-Organizing Against the Prostitute Protection Act

The German whore movement which developed in the 1980s dissipated after the adoption of the Prostitution Act in 2001 (Heying, 2019). The counselling centres which had formed out of its self-help organizations survived the movement as institutionalized “abeyance structures” (Taylor, 1989), and a few individual sex worker activists kept organizing within these contexts, criticizing the Prostitution Act’s shortcomings and refuting the growing discursive victimization of sex workers. Nevertheless, the years after the Prostitution Act did not see any broader collective organizing efforts undertaken by sex workers. This changed after the German parliamentary elections in 2013 when the governing parties CDU/CSU and SPD agreed to legislate again on the issue of prostitution. These legislative plans triggered sex workers’ collective self-organization.

In this chapter, I trace the emergence and development of sex workers’ self-organization within this institutional context. In subchapter 5.1, I first delineate sex worker activists’ entry into sex work, the working conditions they experienced before the Prostitute Protection Act came into force in 2016, and their relationships to their work. I illustrate the various forms of agency activists found in sex work and the subjectivities they developed under these conditions, which later came to inform their political engagement. Although the Prostitution Act of 2001 could not create comprehensive improvements in the German sex industry, I show its significance on the micro-level: sex workers from a diversity of backgrounds experienced significant progress in their legal and working conditions and came to understand themselves as skilled workers and right-bearing, equal citizens. These experiences and subjectivities starkly contrasted with the growing victimization of sex workers in public and policy discourses, and bolstered activists’ emerging political consciousness and actions.

In subchapter 5.2, I analyze how sex workers who had benefitted from the legal and social improvements of the Prostitution Act of 2001 then saw these conditions endangered by the planned Prostitute Protection Act. Faced with this political threat, these sex workers politicized themselves and launched their formal self-organization through the foundation of the Professional Association for Erotic and Sexual Service Providers, short BesD (*Berufsverband erotische und sexuelle Dienstleistungen*), in 2013. Through BesD, sex worker activists established a public and political means of self-organization and self-representation so far unprecedented in Germany.

Following this, I trace how sex worker activists strategically pursued lobbying and public outreach work through BesD to prevent the implementation of repressive legislation and to impact victimizing public discourses on sex work (5.3). Their mobilizations within these arenas were strongly informed by their political context. Although sex worker activists succeeded in gaining access to the legislative arena and public sphere, they were not substantially involved in the political process leading up to the Prostitute Protection Act. They instead faced a lack of epistemic authority and political influence, and struggled with persistent stigmatization and the emotionalization and moralization of prostitution politics. Despite their efforts, the Prostitute Protection Act was eventually adopted in 2016 and stipulated many of the legal provisions sex worker activists had objected to (5.4). This presented a political loss for sex worker activists, whose self-organization stagnated as a result. Out of the political disillusion they felt, sex worker activists also examined the limitations of their strategies and formulated political learnings, which informed tactical reorientations. Sex worker activists were therefore not only reacting to changes in institutional context, but actively shaping their self-organization as political actors.

In subchapter 5.5, I describe how rather than disintegrating, sex workers' self-organization persisted and diversified into a sustained social movement following the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act – a development linked to the further deterioration of legal, political and social conditions thereafter. New threats and grievances extended sex workers' mobilizations, but also drained the movement's resources. In closing, I summarize and contextualize the findings within the relevant literature. Here, I argue that sex worker activists achieved significant political successes despite failing to prevent the Prostitute Protection Act: under marginalized and adverse conditions, they managed to build a collective presence in the political and public arena, and sustained their self-organization into a diversifying social movement, which attests to their resilience rather than their often-proclaimed fragility as political actors.

5.1 “You Could Somehow Make Ends Meet” – Sex Working Before the Prostitute Protection Act

When I began interviewing sex worker activists, I consciously avoided questions about their entry into sex work, as I thought of it as a stereotypical line of inquiry. Because my research

focusses on sex workers as political actors, I instead kicked off the interviews asking about activists' politicization into sex work activism. However, as Simone explains, "how I came to do sex work is also part of it,"³⁶ a sentiment shared by many interviewees. Work realities, I was reminded, are fundamental to sex worker activists' political struggles and our understanding of these, and so any narrative of their mobilizations has to start with work.

"We Have Achieved a Certain Civil Equality" - Improved Working Conditions, Legal Security, and Professionalization

Many of the activists I interviewed had started working after the Prostitution Act of 2001 came into effect, and before plans for renewed legislation were initiated. Melanie, who is among the few interviewees who took up sex work before the legal changes, saw their positive impact in the brothels she had been working in since 1994. "Suddenly there were nice brothels!" she tells. "Ey, workplaces really improved enormously, because before [the Prostitution Act] there were really only lousy flophouses."³⁷ Because venue operators could legally invest into their premises, sex workers found improved infrastructure. Lara, who took up work in brothels in 2006, recalls the conditions she found at different venues at that time:

I grew up in the time of the Prostitution Act, you could say, and in those years when I started, (...) I was also assured again and again by all the places where I worked that 'here in Germany, we have been having clear conditions since 2002 [the year the Prostitution Act came into force], you came just at the right moment, everything is perfectly regulated here, none of you have to be afraid of doing anything wrong if there is a raid, you are absolutely in the right, you are allowed to pursue this activity.'³⁸

After the Prostitution Act of 2001, brothel workers like Lara enjoyed legal certainty and a decreased fear of police raids at work. Under these conditions sex workers developed a "self-image of 'we have achieved a certain civil equality,'"³⁹ Lara remembers. Other interviewees report using their newly strengthened legal rights to enforce their interests vis-à-vis clients: "I reported every customer who didn't treat me well and who, in my eyes, did something that

³⁶ „Wobei, finde ich, gehört ja schon auch dazu, wie ich zur Sexarbeit gekommen bin (...).“ (Simone)

³⁷ „Und es gab dann plötzlich schöne Bordelle! Ey, die Arbeitsplätze haben sich wirklich enorm verbessert, weil davor gab's wirklich nur miese Absteigen.“ (Melanie)

³⁸ „Ich bin quasi in der Zeit der Prostitutionsgesetzes groß geworden, könnte man sagen, und in diesen Jahren, in denen ich angefangen hab (...) Also mir wurde auch von sämtlichen Betriebsstätten wo ich war immer wieder zugesichert 'wir haben hier in Deutschland klare Verhältnisse seit 2002, du kommst grade günstig, es ist hier alles perfekt geregelt, es muss keiner mehr von euch Angst haben, dass er irgendwas Unrechtes tut, wenn ne Razzia kommt, ihr seid absolut im Recht, ihr dürft dieser Tätigkeit nachgehen'.“ (Lara)

³⁹ „(...) Selbstverständnis von 'wir haben ne gewisse bürgerliche Gleichstellung erreicht.'“ (Lara)

wasn't right,"⁴⁰ Simone tells. She is particularly proud of getting a client who verbally insulted her fined for slander:

I was very happy about it because this story simply made sense to me, to show that I am not defenceless and have to accept that someone insults me for my profession.⁴¹

Because the public court case between herself and the client was visited by a school class that day, "it was totally embarrassing for him,"⁴² Simone laughingly recalls. In other instances where she reported clients for refusing payment, the police officers in the rural town she lived in knew the individuals in question. "And then, in order to settle such a thing, the fine is usually paid quickly,"⁴³ Simone summarizes. The way Simone employed the legal security guaranteed through the Prostitution Act of 2001 to report, out, and shame clients for their misconducts illustrates the agency contained in sex workers' reversal and utilization of social stigma to pursue their rights.

Sex workers also gained agency within the professional realm, where they expanded their economic activities and began professionalizing themselves within the diversifying German sex industry. As self-employed workers, this could mean learning about self-marketing, accounting and tax returns, or acquiring specific skills in an industry sector, such as BDSM, tantra, erotic dancing, or webcamming. Professionalization also increased workers' influence over their working conditions and independence from venue operators, as some sex workers opened self-managed venues in which they worked together with colleagues. Alexandra, for instance, occasionally rents out work spaces "under fair conditions" (*zu fairen Konditionen*) in a BDSM studio collectively owned by three other sex workers who she describes as "women who worked their way up."⁴⁴ She links the venue's success to the working conditions which are fairer and more pleasant than at other venues:

(...) the place is booming. And not because they [the sex workers who own the venue] come up with any pressure or coercion or horrendous rents, not at all, quite the opposite, the only pressure there is (*laughs*)

⁴⁰ „Ich habe zum Beispiel jeden Kunden, der mich nicht gut behandelt hat und der in meinen Augen etwas gemacht hat, was nicht geht, den habe ich angezeigt.“ (Simone)

⁴¹ „(...) da hab ich mich schon sehr darüber gefreut, weil diese Geschichte einfach für mich dann Sinn gemacht hat, zu zeigen, ne, ich bin jetzt nicht wehrlos und muss das so hinnehmen, dass mich jemand beleidigt für meinen Beruf (...).“ (Simone)

⁴² „(...) das war für ihn total peinlich(...).“ (Simone)

⁴³ „Und dann, um so eine Sache aus der Welt zu bringen, wird halt schnell bezahlt.“ (Simone)

⁴⁴ „(...) Frauen, die sich hochgearbeitet haben (...)“ (Alexandra)

is 'clean up after yourself or you'll be in trouble' (...). Everyone is allowed to feel at home there, and it works and it is super and great.⁴⁵

Enjoying the collective, self-reliant atmosphere of her work environment, she likens the studio to a home. Professionalization could also pertain to safety aspects, with sex workers advancing their digital security skills, sexual health education, or their ability to negotiate and set boundaries with clients. Silke, a former sex worker who experienced several violent incidents with clients in a brothel, explains professionalization allowed her to move into escorting, where she could charge higher rates and "select clients very carefully."⁴⁶ Professionalization thus allowed personal career development, higher determination over working-conditions, and the managing of workplace safety.

Interviewees underline that professionalization was, and continues to be, grounded in knowledge exchange with colleagues. Sex workers could now legally pass on their skills to others in workshops and trainings, since the Prostitution Act removed the criminalization of such "facilitating" activities. The community is a vital source of work-related knowledge to sex workers, as Adrian emphasizes:

(...) because you can't have any vocational training in sex work or learn it somewhere at a university or a vocational school or something, all the knowledge is very community-based.⁴⁷

The collective sharing of expertise, information and skills through peer-to-peer work thus plays a significant role in sex workers' professionalization. In the years following the Prostitution Act of 2001, these activities mainly took place within the institutional context of the counselling centres that had emerged out of the former whore movement. Nina and other colleagues, for instance, founded a peer project associated with counselling centre Hydra in Berlin in 2011. The project is organized by sex workers for sex workers, with the facilitators being paid on a freelance basis, thus also creating alternative income opportunities to sex workers. The project still exists today, receives state-funding, and is the only one of its kind in Germany. "It's a pity that it hasn't caught on,"⁴⁸ Nina finds. She explains that the peer project initially focused on outreach work together with social workers, and later began offering

⁴⁵ „(...) der Laden brummt. Und zwar nicht weil die irgendwo mit irgendwelchem Druck oder Zwang oder irgendwelchen horrenden Mieten aufwarten, überhaupt nicht, ganz im Gegenteil, den einzigen Druck, den es gibt, (lacht) ist 'mach gefälligst hinter dir selber sauber sonst gibt's Ärger!' weil, ne? (...) Jeder darf sich da zuhause fühlen und das läuft und ist super und ist toll. (Alexandra)

⁴⁶ „(...) sehr sorgfältig meine Kunden ausgewählt (...).“ (Silke)

⁴⁷ „(...) dadurch, dass man jetzt ja keine Ausbildung in der Sexarbeit haben kann oder das nicht irgendwo lernt an einer Uni oder einer Berufsschule oder so, ist ja das ganze Wissen sehr community basiert.“ (Adrian)

⁴⁸ „(...) es ist schade, dass es immer noch nicht so ein bisschen mehr Schule gemacht hat.“ (Nina)

workshops “completely tailored to the requirements”⁴⁹ of whichever sex workers were present. For Nina, the project however goes beyond a pragmatic focus on improving service provision:

It is about recognising expert knowledge. And this does not only mean sex work experience and the expert knowledge that comes with it, but also biographic experience, which is highly valued and which we take seriously and without which things [in service provision] are not going to work (...).⁵⁰

Acknowledging sex workers as experts of their own working and living realities is thus a crucial aspect of the peer-to-peer work professionalization is grounded in, and informed sex workers’ changing subjectivities. Through the improved working conditions, legal security, and growing professional establishment and expertise, sex workers gained a new confidence about their social position and came to understand themselves as skilled workers and right-bearing, equal citizens.

“Not Having to Pinch Pennies Anymore” – Achieving Financial Stability Through Sex Work

What would seem almost trivial to state about any other form of work, is more complex and requires emphasis in the context of sex work: most interviewees took up sex work because it allowed them to generate an income and achieve financial security. Some interviewees bluntly stated to have started sex work “out of material need”⁵¹ (Simone) after a divorce and years of unpaid care work, or after encountering “financial hardship” (Lukas) as a university student. Barbara began sex work when she found herself unemployed at middle age and unable to find a new job in her field in the cultural sector. Now, well into her 60s, she continues doing sex work. “I need the cash because the pension I get is not worth mentioning,”⁵² she claims. Alexandra agrees that financial need motivates sex workers of all ages: “For a lot of people it is a situation of ‘I was young and needed the money’ or ‘I am old and need the money.’”⁵³ Gina migrated from her home country to England where she first worked in education, service work, and office management before starting stripping: “I tried other jobs. I’ve been an English teacher. I’ve been a waitress. I worked in an office as an

⁴⁹ „(...) total an die Bedürfnisse angepasst (...).“ (Nina)

⁵⁰ „Es geht darum, Expertinnenwissen anzuerkennen. Und damit ist nicht nur gemeint Sexarbeitserfahrung und das Expertinnenwissen, was damit kommt, sondern eben auch lebensgeschichtliche Erfahrung, die sehr wertgeschätzt wird und die wir ernst nehmen und ohne die es nicht geht (...).“ (Nina)

⁵¹ „(...) aus einer materiellen Not heraus“ (Barbara)

⁵² „(...) ich brauch die Kohle, weil die Rente, die ich krieg ist nicht der Rede wert.“ (Barbara)

⁵³ „(...) bei ganz vielen ist es ja wirklich auch so die Hausnummer ‚ich war jung und brauchte das Geld‘ oder ‚ich bin alt und brauche das Geld.‘“ (Alexandra)

administrator in London,” she itemizes. Alexandra took up sex work to finance herself as an artist, something she did not manage through other precarious jobs while having caring responsibilities and relying on additional welfare payments:

I know, for most people it’s inconceivable, (...) when you’ve spent your life, you’ve worked like a champion, you’ve cared for others and this and that, you’ve never really gotten out of these Hartz IV [welfare] things, you’ve just been on supplementary benefits and then you just, roughly, got by, (...) you know, this usual low-wage sector (...). You can’t earn money with art. And for the first time in my life I can say that doesn’t matter.⁵⁴

Not “having to pinch pennies any more” she says she feels “finally, like a normal person.”⁵⁵ In her view, sex work presents plausible advantages in comparison to many other precarious jobs:

This financial consideration is one that many people make. That is simply the case. I’d rather loll about (...) in a suspender belt all day than pick strawberries on a piecework basis in a strawberry field. That is simply a logical consideration.⁵⁶

From her long-standing experience at a counselling centre, social worker Ruth emphasizes the particular pragmatic advantages of sex work for migrant women who cannot rely on state support, are limited on the job market by their visas, and need to remit money to their families abroad:

The women who come [to Germany] still go into prostitution in very large numbers and also choose to do so because other sectors provide a lower income, and I would also say that the conditions are more difficult. Those who establish themselves here, establish themselves well in prostitution, find relatively good conditions.⁵⁷

Such “relatively good conditions” can be particularly significant for migrants who experience high levels of gender-based discrimination and violence in their countries of origin, as Liljana, a trans woman and migrant doing street-based sex work explains: “I’m from the Balkan. And

⁵⁴ „(...) ich muss nicht mehr auf den Pfennig achten, das ist endlich wie ein normaler Mensch ist das...! Ich weiß, für die meisten Leute ist das nicht vorstellbar, das sag ich jetzt dir, das ist überhaupt nicht vorstellbar, wenn du dein Leben lang, du hast geklotzt wie so ein Weltmeister, du hast dich gekümmert um andere und dies und das und jenes, du bist über diese Hartz IV Geschichten nie wirklich rausgekommen, du warst halt Aufstocker und dann bist du so phi mal Daumen, mal gerade so eine halbe Idee rübergependelt und wieder... weißt du, dieses übliche, dieser Niedriglohnsektor (...) Mit Kunst kannst du kein Geld verdienen. Und es ist zum ersten mal im Leben wo ich sag, das ist egal.“ (Alexandra)

⁵⁵ „(...) ich muss nicht mehr auf den Pfennig achten, das ist endlich wie ein normaler Mensch ist das!“ (Alexandra)

⁵⁶ „(...) diese finanzielle Überlegung ist eine Überlegung, die ganz viele machen. Das ist einfach auch so der Fall. Lieber den ganzen Tag (...) im Strapshalter räkeln als auf dem Erdbeerfeld im Akkord zu pflücken. Das ist einfach eine logische Überlegung.“ (Alexandra)

⁵⁷ “Die Frauen, die kommen, gehen noch immer in sehr großer Zahl in die Prostitution und wählen das auch, weil die anderen Bereiche ein geringeres Einkommen erbringen, und ich sage auch, die Bedingungen schwieriger sind. Wer sich hier aufstellt, gut aufstellen kann in der Prostitution, hat relativ gute Bedingungen.“ (Ruth)

the living conditions and also the work conditions of people with different gender orientation or identity is (...) much more difficult than here.” Due to the legality of sex work in Germany, she can financially support herself under much safer conditions, she explains. Another interviewee disclosed having migrated to Germany from outside the EU with an artist visa, and starting sex work illegally. Today, she has established residence status and works legally as a dominatrix. Her colleague Christin has German citizenship and has always worked legally in the higher income sector of BDSM work. She emphasizes that even workers like her are not “high income earners” (*Großverdienerinnen*) and fundamentally depend on the money generated through sex work. Dan, a non-EU migrant and professional dom⁵⁸, stresses the commonality with other workers by stating “we are all under the compulsion to make money.”⁵⁹ Unlike in other professions, activists of different backgrounds could thus secure their livelihood through sex work.

Furthermore, interviewees’ diverse and non-linear career trajectories reveal the importance of sex work as a flexible and consistently available professional option. Whereas Christin says she “incidentally” (*zufällig*) took up work as a dominatrix in 2007, Katharina’s path into BDSM work was gradual and began with erotic dancing:

I started dancing in 2011 and at the beginning I thought, wow, the women who also take guests to the rooms are somehow very strong women, and I couldn’t do that.⁶⁰

While at first she could not imagine performing full-service sex work (a term commonly used to denote forms of sex work that involve in-person contact with clients), this eventually changed. When she began working in the BDSM studio of a colleague where she “just felt comfortable”, Katharina discovered she was “actually able to sleep with other people, for money” and “found it nicer than [she] thought.”⁶¹ Having a trusted colleague and a safe work environment enabled her to gradually enter into industry sectors she found attractive. Barbara moved from sporadic online sex work to full-service sex work, as she had “already worked a bit with the webcam”⁶² on the side before receiving one of her regular online clients in her workroom at home for the first time. Maya describes going through a long and careful

⁵⁸ “Dom” or “male dom” is the male equivalent to the female dominatrix or “domme.”

⁵⁹ „(...) wir stehen alle unter dem Zwang Geld zu verdienen.“ (Dan)

⁶⁰ „Ich habe 2011 mit Tanzen angefangen und habe am Anfang auch eigentlich gedacht so, wow, die Frauen, die auch mit den Gästen aufs Zimmer gehen, sind irgendwie ganz starke Frauen, und ich könnte das nicht.“ (Katharina)

⁶¹ „Und dann war ich auch tatsächlich in der Lage, mit anderen Menschen zu schlafen, gegen Geld. Und das war auch schöner, als ich dachte.“ (Katharina)

⁶² „(...) ich hatte im Vorfeld schon so ein bisschen mit der Webcam gearbeitet.“ (Barbara)

process of conscious self-examination, gathering information on the working conditions and legal situation of sex work, seeking out a consultation at Hydra counselling centre, and connecting to sex worker communities. This process first led her to decide against sex work, and several years later eventually preparing a web presence and starting escorting. Simone says she started working in a brothel after a divorce, which enabled her to provide for herself and her two children despite her lack of formal education. After a period of working intensively, earning well and enjoying her job so much she considered opening her own venue, she explains having overworked herself to a point where she needed to find an alternative. “At some point, I didn’t feel like it anymore,”⁶³ she states. When I interviewed her, she had completed a bachelor’s degree in social work and was working at a counselling centre for sex workers. While finding a new purpose in this job, she also struggled with the low income and long working hours. “I also notice again how good sex work actually was and how much freedom I had there,”⁶⁴ she admits. She had therefore taken up part-time sex work again, and later quit the counselling job completely.

Overall, activists started sex work in different periods of their lives, some while in their early 20s, 30s, or 40s. Many share a non-linear trajectory in sex work, moving from one sector of the sex industry to another, from part-time to full-time work and back again, as well as through quitting and restarting. Reasons for these shifts are manifold: changing work situations (university studies, unemployment, professional reorientation), family constellations (divorce, parenthood), or personal events. Eric, a trans man who used to escort presenting as a cis woman, quit sex working during a phase of illness, and then began his gender transition. When he tried to restart sex work he found it hard to market himself as a trans man in the sex industry, and eventually dropped his plans. “I think that it’s not for right now. Maybe it’s not for ever again. I don’t know. But it’s not for right now. And that’s OK”, he explains. In a similar vein, Katharina, who says she “get[s] on very well” with sex work, remarks this “doesn’t mean that the work has to be good for me forever.”⁶⁵ For many interviewees, financial stability derived from sex work presenting a consistently available option to secure their livelihood, which can be adjusted to changing economic, social and

⁶³ „Ich hatte irgendwann mal keinen Bock mehr drauf.“ (Simone)

⁶⁴ „(...) dass ich auch wieder merke, wie gut eigentlich Sexarbeit gewesen ist und wieviel Freiheiten ich da hatte (...).“ (Simone)

⁶⁵ „Ich komme damit sehr gut klar. (...) Das heißt auch nicht, dass die Arbeit auch für mich deswegen für immer gut sein muss.“ (Katharina)

personal circumstances. At the same time, activists report enjoying advantages that go beyond material considerations.

“It Gave Me so Much to Be Able to Walk in the World With” – Non-Material Benefits of Sex Work

Part of these advantages are the numerous non-material benefits interviewees find in sex work. Like Christin, many interviewees value the high degree of personal freedom it affords them: “I of course have certain freedoms in this society that I wouldn’t have without sex work,”⁶⁶ she admits. For Christin, this means having more disposable time for politics or hobbies than she would have in regular full-time employment. Dayana, a migrant sex worker who describes herself as “queer, black and a descendent of enslaved people”, decided to engage in sex work because it offered her not only freedom, but an otherwise unknown opportunity for self-determination and self-realization:

Sex work for me was a choice! I discovered something I was really good at, and that I could take control of, and that I could really take time to develop for myself, in myself. And time management skills, financial skills, financial liquidity, don’t need a boss... like, it gave me so much to be able to walk in the world with that I never got from somewhere else. It gave me a freedom and an autonomy over me and my body and my sexuality that nobody else wanted to give me.

Like Dayana, Lucia experienced marginalization and discrimination in other forms of work, which she specifically relates to her physical disability:

In my previous professional life, in the normal labour market, I experienced massive exclusion and discrimination. Which is why I actually gave up hope of being gainfully employed myself, of financing myself (...).⁶⁷

Through sex work, she gained a previously lacking agency over her income and working conditions, and a new attitude towards life, she claims:

⁶⁶ „Durch die Sexarbeit hab ich natürlich auch bestimmte Freiheiten in dieser Gesellschaft, die ich ohne die Sexarbeit nicht hätte.“ (Christin)

⁶⁷ „(...) in meinem vorherigen Berufsleben, auf dem normalen Arbeitsmarkt, massive Ausgrenzung und Diskriminierung erfahren habe. Weswegen ich tatsächlich eigentlich die Hoffnung aufgegeben habe, selber erwerbstätig zu sein, mich selbst zu finanzieren (...).“ (Lucia)

I am not rich from being a sex worker. God, no! But I don't have to struggle like I did when I was still on Hartz IV [social welfare]. That's a quality of life (...) there are good times and bad times. Sometimes the money comes in sooner, sometimes it's slow. But it's cool to know that I can influence it!⁶⁸

Because of these experiences, she finds sex work uniquely accessible and fitting: "For me, as a sex workers, as a person with a disability, with very specific, individual needs, this job is almost tailor-made."⁶⁹ Still, she does not disclose her disability in her work to avoid discrimination and the loss of clients. "After all, I have to earn money,"⁷⁰, she subsumes. Many activists emphasize that sex work offers them a unique combination of comparably high levels of income, self-determination, and flexibility to adjust their work to their personal needs:

Where else can I earn some money so that I can keep my family afloat or just myself, or so that I can do a job at all, because I can't work in a regulated way. I have to be my own boss.⁷¹ (Simone)

For others again, personal self-development is a crucial quality of sex work. Melanie had worked in brothels for a period during her early 20s, and later left a "regular" job to return to sex work in her 40s and professionalize herself as a BDSM worker. To her, "that meant self-revelation and self-discovery, daring to do something (...). Now I've thrown everything away and am taking the socially untypical path and so on (...)."⁷² Consequently, pursuing self-realization and professionalization in sex work also entailed resisting social norms. In the resistance to restrictive gender, sexual, or labour relations, Nicky sees a common trait of sex workers: "whores are generally freedom-loving people who don't want to be told what to do. Not by any boss and not by any conservatives either (...)"⁷³, she laughingly summarizes. Under the legal conditions provided by the Prostitution Act, many activists thus pursued sex work also for its non-material benefits. While many emphasize its superiority in offering freedom, self-determination, flexibility, and self-realization, it also provided the opportunity to push the boundaries of power relations at the intersection of gender, labour, and sexuality. At the

⁶⁸ „Ich bin nicht reich durch die Tätigkeit als Sex Worker. Gott, nein! Aber ich muss nicht mehr so rumkriechen, wie als ich noch Hartz IV bekommen habe. Das ist schon mal Lebensqualität (...) es gibt gute und schlechte Zeiten. Mal kommt das Geld eher rein, mal eher schleppend. Aber es ist cool zu wissen, dass ich das beeinflussen kann!“ (Lucia)

⁶⁹ „Für mich ist dieser Job als Sex Worker, als Menschen mit Behinderung, mit sehr speziellen, individuellen Bedürfnissen nahezu maßgeschneidert.“ (Lucia)

⁷⁰ „(...) ich muss ja auch Geld verdienen (...).“ (Lucia)

⁷¹ „Wo kann ich denn noch einigermaßen Geld verdienen, damit ich meine Familie über Wasser halten kann oder mich selbst nur, oder damit ich überhaupt einen Job machen kann, weil ich kann nicht geregelt arbeiten. Ich muss mein eigener Chef sein.“ (Simone)

⁷² „(...) erstmal so ne Selbstoffenbarung und ich entdecke mich selber und jetzt hab ich mich aber was getraut und so weiter, ich hab alles hingeschmissen und geh den gesellschaftlich untypischen Weg.“ (Melanie)

⁷³ „(...) Huren grundsätzlich freiheitsliebende Menschen sind und sich nicht viel vorschreiben lassen wollen. Von keinem Chef und auch nicht von irgendwelchen Konservativen (...).“ (Nicky)

same time, interviewees remained firmly located within those, as their continued discrimination, repression, and stigmatization shows.

Continued Discrimination, Repression and Stigmatization

While interviewees benefitted in various ways from the improvements of the Prostitution Act of 2001, they still experienced various grievances in the German legal system and society. On the one hand, sex work was not fully equal to other forms of work and its exercise and management remained highly regulated and partially criminalized. Barbara's idea to offer sexual surrogacy to elderly and disabled people living in residences failed because the small town she lived in made extensive use of zoning law to prohibit sex work in its entire area. For Barbara, this practice was not only professionally limiting but particularly "unworldly" (*weltfremd*) in the face of an informal street-working area existing in the city's industrial zone where she stated "women stand in all kinds of weather, without the possibility to wash themselves."⁷⁴ Like Barbara, Simone experienced professional restrictions when she attempted to open a shared workplace in her private house in 2009. When the city she lived in rejected her plans, she took legal action against it, but lost the court case: "the judge ruled that I was not allowed to open a brothel there because my neighbours' property values would drop and a red-light district might form,"⁷⁵ she recalls. Simone experienced this differential treatment of her job vis-à-vis others forms of self-employment as discriminatory, eventually causing her to work individualized instead:

Yes, I thought that was somehow quite unfair because (...) everyone around me was doing their job in their house, only I wasn't allowed to. (...) So then I worked alone in my house.⁷⁶

Sex workers also observed new forms of labour exploitation with the increasing shift of sex work online, where platforms charged high commission rates of "60-70%" (Scarlet). Other interviewees disclosed discriminations and repressions due to citizenship status, such as migrant sex workers who could not obtain a visa to engage in sex work. This meant they were either restricted to working with an artist visa in industry sectors not legally defined as prostitution (e.g. erotic dancing), or engage in sex work in an illegalized manner.

⁷⁴ „(...) Frauen stehen bei Wind und Wetter, können sich noch nicht mal waschen (...).“ (Barbara)

⁷⁵ „(...) die Richterin hat dann entschieden, dass ich überhaupt kein Bordell da aufmachen darf, weil die Grundstückswerte meiner Nachbarn dann sinken würden und es vielleicht zu einer Ausbildung eines Rotlicht-Milieus kommen würde.“ (Simone)

⁷⁶ „Ja, das fand ich schon auch irgendwie ziemlich unfair, weil (...) um mich herum hat jeder irgendwie seinen Beruf in seinem Haus ausgeübt, nur ich durfte es nicht. (...) So habe ich jetzt allein in meinem Haus dann gearbeitet.“ (Simone)

On the other hand, interviewees recount how they still faced stigmatization and social marginalization due to their engagement in sex work. Like Scarlet, several activists describe being “forcefully outed” (*zwangsgeoutet*) as sex workers by members of their neighbourhoods and local communities. Barbara tells she was outed through anonymous letters which a “so-called concerned citizen” (*sogenannter besorgter Bürger*) had sent to each of the political, church, and cultural groups she was involved in. The result, she says, was a “witch hunt (...) where I was eaten alive.”⁷⁷ She received anonymous hate mail, and had to step back from her local engagements. Simone, who was outed in the context of court proceedings, remembers the “humiliation” (*Demütigung*) she felt in her rural town afterwards. “Actually, I had almost no choice but to move away, which I did,”⁷⁸ she explains. As a result of an outing, these activists either found themselves socially isolated, or saw themselves forced to change their social circles and place of residence. In addition to material and non-material benefits, these experiences of discrimination, repression and stigmatization presented an ongoing reality for sex workers which constrained their agency and shaped their subjectivities under the Prostitution Act of 2001.

“I Am Turkish, and I Am a Sex Worker, and I Have a Handicap. I Am not a Victim” – Rejecting Victimhood

Most importantly for sex worker activists, their experiences and changing subjectivities stood in stark contrast to the growing victimization of sex workers in public and political discourses in the years following the adoption of the Prostitution Act. This applies not only to activists who pursued self-realization and other non-material benefits in sex work, but also to those for whom sex work has always presented one among the few options available to secure a livelihood. Barbara, for instance, decries that others construct her as a victim because she started sex work while on social welfare and would face old-age poverty without this source of income. In her view, claiming victimhood affords you the status of the “morally superior” (*moralisch Überlegene*). “But that’s not my thing,”⁷⁹ she concludes. Victimhood is also rejected by Lucia, whose work experience is informed by her physical disability: “I am Turkish,

⁷⁷ „(...) Hexenjagd (...) wo sie alle über mich hergefallen sind.“ (Barbara)

⁷⁸ „Eigentlich blieb mir auch fast nichts anderes mehr übrig, als da weg zu ziehen, was ich dann ja auch gemacht habe.“ (Simone)

⁷⁹ „Aber das liegt mir nicht.“ (Barbara)

and I am a sex worker, and I have a handicap. (...) I am not a victim. Nobody dominates me and I am in control at all times,"⁸⁰ she stresses.

Other activists reject victimization based on both their own experiences and their observations of the sex industry at large. These are "contrary to all this victim myth that is always conveyed about us,"⁸¹ Lara emphasizes:

I've worked in many venues, I've worked a lot in Germany, I've worked in Switzerland, I know the most diverse places of work, I know brothels where there used to be 50% old East German girls, then Russians, then I saw how the Russians were replaced by Poles, then later by Bulgarians and Romanians, and in Switzerland the Hungarians. So, I know all these sub-communities, so to speak, and I simply know that what we are being accused of now is simply not true. That, somehow, they are all forced women. Just because they don't speak German and just because they don't fit into our societal image doesn't mean that these women have any problem with what they do.⁸²

Having worked in various country contexts and venues where she observed shifting migration flows, Lara refutes the attribution of victimhood to migrant sex workers, which she sees fuelled by social prejudices. Eric confirms that constructions of victimhood disregard migrant sex workers' realities and are clearly gendered, since he as a trans man is exempt from victimization. Drawing on his peer work experiences with migrant trans women engaging in street-based sex work, he asserts that "a lot of them are strong, strong people. And I don't think that's recognized at all. (...) I think we're just used to seeing them as victims." Rather, he sees the effects that victimizing and paternalistic forms of social service provision have on these workers:

If people keep telling you you're a victim over and over and over again, and then telling you what you need instead of asking you, eventually you become someone who needs what they tell you you need. (...) You become a victim because that's what society tells you you are.

Eric's statement thus also highlights how victimizing discourses and institutions produce the very subjects they apply to.

⁸⁰ „(...) ich bin Türkin, und ich bin Sex Worker, und ich habe ein Handicap. (...) Ich bin kein Opfer. Mich dominiert niemand, und ich habe jederzeit alles im Griff.“ (Lucia)

⁸¹ „(...) entgegen diesem ganzen Opfermythos ist, der über uns immer vermittelt wird.“ (Lara)

⁸² „(...) ich hab in vielen Läden gearbeitet, ich hab in Deutschland gearbeitet sehr viel, ich hab in der Schweiz gearbeitet, ich kenne unterschiedlichste Arbeitsorte, ich kenne Bordelle, in denen noch früher 50% alte Ossi-Mädels waren, dann irgendwie Russinnen, dann hab ich gesehen, wie die Russinnen abgelöst wurden von den Polinnen, dann später von den Bulgarinnen und Rumäninnen, und in der Schweiz die Ungarinnen. Also ich kenne sozusagen auch diese ganzen Sub-Communities und ich weiß einfach, dass das, was uns jetzt gerade vorgeworfen wird, einfach nicht stimmt. Also dass irgendwie das alles gezwungene Frauen sind. Nur weil sie nicht Deutsch sprechen und nur weil sie nicht irgendwie in unser Rollenbild passen, heißt das nicht, dass diese Frauen irgendein Problem damit haben, was sie tun.“ (Lara)

Under the conditions provided by the Prostitution Act of 2001 “you could set up yourself comfortably and somehow make ends meet, there were no big threats,”⁸³ Christin sums up. These “comfortable” professional and political conditions eventually came under threat by the planned Prostitute Protection Act and incited sex workers’ self-organization.

5.2 “A Voice That Speaks for Sex Workers in Germany” – Foundation of BesD

In the years following the Prostitution Act of 2001, interviewees perceived the changing political discourses and calls for renewed legislation as increasingly threatening to the status quo they had found within sex work. Christin herself says she had started working with little knowledge about the political situation, to then hear from colleagues that “there was something amiss.”⁸⁴ Similarly, Marie recounts hearing that “something is afoot again”⁸⁵ while participating in the first “Frankfurter Prostitutionstage” (Frankfurt Prostitution Days) a three-day event hosted by “Doña Carmen,” the Frankfurt-based Association for the Social and Political Rights of Prostitutes (*Verein für soziale und politische Rechte von Prostituierten*) in November 2012. “Ten years after the Prostitution Act came into force, the legal equality of women and men in prostitution seems to have moved out of reach again,” Doña Carmen (2012) stated in the event announcement. “Instead of a reduction of legal discrimination, keywords such as ‘regulation’ and ‘compulsory licensing of prostitution establishments’ signal a new repressive turn.” The association furthermore bemoaned the “one-sided media coverage relying on prejudice and stereotypes,” the “public debate on prohibiting prostitution,” and the ongoing discrimination of sex work that rendered sex workers “second-class citizens.”

The same year, the Bochum-based counselling centre Madonna, which sees itself in the tradition of the whore movement, celebrated its 20th anniversary with a conference. Both these events provided spaces for sex workers to meet and congregate in a unique way, among other things in specific “sex worker only” meetings. As such, they presented an important base for sex workers’ politicization and self-organization: many of the sex workers who

⁸³ „(...) man konnte sich da sehr bequem einrichten, man konnte irgendwie über die Runden kommen, also es gab keine großen Bedrohungen“ (Christin)

⁸⁴ „Ich bin dann zufällig zur Sexarbeit gekommen und bin da ziemlich blauäugig rangegangen und wusste auch gar nicht viel über die Situation von Prostitution und Sexarbeit in Deutschland (...)“ (Christin)

⁸⁵ „Es ist wieder was im Busch.“ (Marie)

attended these events and meetings did not see themselves represented in the increasingly victimizing political debates. While some had already appeared on public media to individually defended their profession as self-determined, they had found themselves isolated in confrontations with police representatives and anti-prostitution campaigners, and lacked collective representation. Meeting and exchanging with other colleagues, sex workers realized “that we actually all like our profession very much and also want to stand up for it, but that somehow we are not given space for it, that we lack networking,”⁸⁶ Simone explains. Melanie remembers “that everybody had the same feeling of powerlessness. Everybody thought something needed to happen.”⁸⁷ Observing the growing debates around more restrictive and controlling legislation thus created feelings of impotence, pressure to take political action, and the need for “a voice that speaks for sex workers in Germany”⁸⁸ (Melanie). Expressing and sharing these feelings with colleagues confirmed the required self-organization and self-representation, and shaped the idea to establish an association.

A group of 50 sex worker activists then founded “BesD”, the Association for Erotic and Sexual Service Providers (*Berufsverband erotische und sexuelle Dienstleistungen*) in Cologne in October 2013 (see also Gloss, 2020). Just a month later, the newly elected governing grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD confirmed their plans for renewed legislation on prostitution in its coalition agreement (CDU/CSU & SPD, 2013), which rendered the political threat concrete but also created a new window of opportunity for different political actors to intervene in prostitution politics. The foundation of BesD presents the formal starting point of the self-organization of sex workers in Germany that continues into the present. Because BesD organizes only active and former sex workers, it differs from the whore movement and the mixed organizations that emerged out of it.⁸⁹ Moreover, the self-organization differed from the whore movement in its composition of activists: BesD was founded by sex workers who had started sex work and politicized themselves after the Prostitution Act, and none of these activists had a history of participation in the previous whore movement. One of the first

⁸⁶ „(...) dass wir eigentlich alle unseren Beruf sehr mögen und auch dafür eintreten wollen, aber dass uns irgendwie kein Raum dafür gegeben wird, dass uns die Vernetzung fehlt.“ (Simone)

⁸⁷ „Ich hatte den Eindruck, dass alle dasselbe Ohnmachtsgefühl haben. Alle meinten, ja, es müsste da was passieren“ (Melanie)

⁸⁸ „eine Stimme in Deutschland, die für Sexarbeitende spricht“

⁸⁹ After the whore movement dissipated, individual sex workers and venue operators founded the *Bundesverband sexuelle Dienstleistungen*, *BSD* (Federal Association for Sexual Services) in 2002. Some sex workers continued political engagement together with social workers in the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Recht*, a working group on law that emerged out of the whore movements' congresses and criticizing the lacking implementation of the Prostitution Act. The working group and counseling centers emerging from the whore movement then merged into the *Bündnis der Fachberatungsstellen für Sexarbeiterinnen und Sexarbeiter*, *bufas* (Alliance of the Counselling Centres for Sex Workers) in 2009 (Heying, 2019).

activities of BesD was the creation of an internet forum for nationwide networking and the collective support of previously isolated sex workers. According to Melanie, with BesD, sex workers

(...) suddenly had a place where they could exchange ideas with like-minded people who were not necessarily in their city, but in other places in Germany. Where they realised, 'I am not alone!'⁹⁰

Physical and virtual places of encounter and exchange broke the isolation and thus formed a crucial basis for self-organization. To the sex worker activists who founded and began self-organizing within BesD, the association provided an unprecedented point of contact, platform for networking among colleagues, tool for generating public visibility, and a collective mouthpiece in prostitution politics.

5.3 “Active Involvement in All Measures” – Lobbying & Public Outreach Work

Given the now concrete legislative plans, the main aim of the self-organizing sex worker activists was to prevent the implementation of repressive legislation on prostitution. After its foundation, BesD thus pursued two main strategies. Firstly, BesD focused its activities on influencing the government's legislative plans through lobbying. Most significantly, BesD contributed a statement to the official hearing on the “regulation of prostitution” (*Regulierung des Prostitutionsgewerbes*) which was conducted by the responsible Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) on the 12th of June 2014 (BesD, 2014a). This statement outlines the comprehensive political demands activists expressed: on a total of 23-pages, activists demanded the full recognition and equality of sex work in line with other self-employed professions, and the “consistent decriminalization of sex work” (p.18) through the abrogation of all prostitution-specific provisions from criminal law. Specifically, this meant the abrogation of discriminatory advertising bans, special taxation regimes, and zoning laws, and the removal of prostitution-specific provisions on exploitation, which maintained the stigmatization of sex work and were deemed unnecessary since general sections of the German penal code already covered exploitation. Activists also maintained that “clear and unambiguous regulations at the federal level would end the

⁹⁰ „(...) hatten plötzlich einen Platz, wo sie sich mit Gleichgesinnten austauschen konnten, die gar nicht unbedingt in ihrer Stadt waren, sondern an anderen Punkten in Deutschland. Wo sie gemerkt haben, ‚ich bin gar nicht alleine!‘“ (Melanie)

uncertainty with which many regional authorities face our topic” (p.21) and called for a clear distinction between sex work and human trafficking.

BesD furthermore opposed the discussed registration of sex workers and licensing of sex work venues, as well as provisions that would mandate condom use, health consultations and counselling. It objected to the expansion of police powers with regards to prostitution, and criticized the ongoing legal discrimination of migrant sex workers. Activists instead demanded increased funding for nation-wide counselling and outreach work, which should be offered voluntarily, free of charge, and anonymously by health authorities and counselling centres. According to activists, social and health workers should be specifically trained and sensitized, include interpreters for migrant sex workers, and provide education and trainings for sex workers in multiple languages in order to strengthen their rights and self-determination. Finally, BesD’s statement called for an inclusion of sex work into anti-discrimination law to address discrimination based on professional choice, and emphasized that the “direct, active involvement of sex workers as advisors and experts is important in all measures” (BesD, 2014a, p. 23). Finally, activists criticized the hearing’s lack of neutrality. In their view, the official questionnaire they had been given was “frequently suggestive”, which led them to “assume that this is intended to steer the respondents’ answers in a certain direction even before the hearing” (p.2).

Aside from intervening in the legislative process at the national level, BesD activists engaged in lobbying and policy formulation at the local level, especially through participation in round tables on prostitution. The round table on prostitution in North-Rhine Westphalia, Germany’s largest federal state, congregated more than 70 experts over the course of four years. In its final report, the chairwoman claimed it had “proven to be a successful participatory process that, in an innovative way, has created a unique knowledge base in the difficult field of prostitution,” conceding that “some experienced the inclusion of people in sex work as well as clients as breaking a taboo, or in any case as a courageous step” (MGEPA, 2014, p. 1). In sum, the round table identified stigmatization as the main obstacle to improving sex workers’ living and working conditions, bemoaned lacking research, argued for the strengthening of sex workers’ position through “empowerment,” professionalization, and counselling, and stated that “direct participation of people in sex work [was] indispensable” (p. 76) in policy making. The round table also made extensive recommendations on the regulation of prostitution and the securing of labour standards in various sex industry sectors.

Secondly, in addition to lobbying, BesD activists engaged in public outreach work. Here, they sought to combat the widespread lack of knowledge on sex work, and to change victimizing public discourses. For activists, stereotypical media portrayals played a significant role in shaping people's rudimentary ideas on sex work. As Alexandra states, "regular people know basically nothing [about sex work], I didn't either, (...) what you know comes from film and television."⁹¹ By informing and educating political stakeholders, administrative personnel, and the general public, they sought to combat negative stereotypes about sex work, provide a more realistic image of the sex industry, and destigmatize and normalize their profession. Activists gave interviews on TV, radio and in print media, participated in public discussion rounds, took on speaking engagements, set up informational websites, such as *voices4sexworkers.com* created in 2014, or communicated through social media accounts and personal blogs. Specifically, activists informed about the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of legal regulation, warned of the planned Prostitute Protection Act, and commented on the one-sided media coverage of sex work.

Frequently, activists' outreach work combined political education with brothel, bar and studio tours to give insights into the everyday working environments and lives of sex workers. "Telling inside stories" (*aus dem Nähkästchen plaudern*) from their own work experiences illustrated "how you can work with the body"⁹² (Marie), aimed at "breaking down barriers" (*Berührungsgänge abbauen*) between sex workers and the general public, and served to demystify and normalize sex work. In doing so, activists tell they often encountered curiosity and stereotypes pertaining to sexuality and embodiment in sex work. Kerstin explains she

(...) noticed that a lot of people have a lot of questions. Many questions like, whether I still have a sexual sensibility. They always want to know a lot about my body, how I deal with it.⁹³

Katharina sarcastically comments that in doing public outreach work she often has to start her explanations from the "primordial soup" (*Urschleim*) and refute irrational ideas on sex work:

You first have to explain to people, 'no, even if you are a prostitute, you don't sell your body. Just because an orifice is penetrated doesn't mean that the body is suddenly gone.' There is also a lot of prejudice, like

⁹¹ „(...) normale Menschen wissen ja so im Grunde nichts, wusste ich ja vorher auch nicht (...) das was man aus Film und Fernsehen kennt (...).“ (Alexandra)

⁹² „(...) wie man mit dem Körper arbeiten kann.“ (Marie)

⁹³ „(...) erstmal ist mir aufgefallen, dass viele Leute sehr viele Fragen haben. Und viele Fragen, wie jetzt zum Beispiel ob ich noch ein sexuelles Empfinden habe. Sie wollen immer viel über meinen Körper wissen, wie ich damit umgehe.“ (Kerstin)

that you would wear out or something, but I mean, I don't know, a penis doesn't get thinner from masturbating. So it's just so absurd somehow.⁹⁴

Like Barbara, who found she “always has to start again with Adam and Eve,”⁹⁵ activists frequently faced a general lack of sexual knowledge among their interlocutors. Some of the older activists identify this lack in particular among young people and women. “Today, many teenagers don't know how their bodies work at all. Especially not girls,”⁹⁶ Marie claims, who criticizes that school sex education focuses solely on biological, reproductive aspects. Barbara bemoans a similar lack in sexual education. “By now, I have the impression that one of my noblest political tasks is probably sexual education [*Aufklärung*] in the broadest sense of the word,”⁹⁷ she concludes. The German term *Aufklärung* is frequently used by interviewees in relation to their public outreach work, and encompasses multiple meanings (engl.: education, sexual education, elucidation, the Enlightenment). This suggests that in many activists' view, their political engagement entails not only the clarification of facts on sex work, but additional sexual, political, and intellectual education. Here, sex worker activists appear as experts and educators with knowledge on sex work, bodies and sexuality, as well as politics and law.

Most significantly, interviewees frame their public outreach work in line with ideals of rationality. In their words, they strategically position “fact-based,” “neutral,” “objective,” “educated,” “logical” (*aufgeklärt*), and “largely non-emotional” (*weitestgehend emotionsfrei*) perspective against prejudiced, emotionalized and moralizing public discourses, and eventually seek to “convince through arguments” (*mit Argumenten überzeugen*) rather than sentiments or ideology. Following this rational and fact-based strategy within the public and political sphere creates a tension for many activists, as Silke's statement shows:

Of course, it's not that easy to argue politically, neutrally and objectively, and to always create distance and argue logically. You can't let your own feelings, the way you are affected yourself, your own experiences, your own traumas cloud your brain, and that is the challenge (...).⁹⁸

⁹⁴ „(...) man den Leuten erstmal erklären muss, nein, auch wenn man eine Prostituierte ist dann verkauft man seinen Körper nicht. Nur weil eine Körperöffnung penetriert wird, heißt das nicht, dass der Körper auf einmal weg ist. Auch diese, also es gibt halt auch super viele Vorurteile, von wegen man würde ausleiern oder sonst was, aber ich meine, keine Ahnung, ein Penis wird doch auch nicht dünner vom Masturbieren. Also es ist halt so absurd irgendwie.“ (Katharina)

⁹⁵ „(...) man muss immer wieder bei Adam und Eva anfangen.“ (Barbara)

⁹⁶ „(...) heute wissen viele Teenager überhaupt nicht, wie ihr Körper funktioniert. Vor allen Dingen nicht als Mädchen.“ (Marie)

⁹⁷ „(...) also mittlerweile habe ich den Eindruck, einer meiner vornehmsten politischen Aufgaben ist wahrscheinlich die Aufklärung im weitesten Sinne des Wortes.“ (Barbara)

⁹⁸ „Das ist natürlich nicht so einfach, politisch, neutral und sachlich zu argumentieren und immer wieder Distanz zu schaffen, und logisch zu argumentieren. Man darf da seine eigenen Gefühle, die eigene Betroffenheit, die eigenen Erfahrungen, die eigenen Traumata, die dürfen einem nicht das Gehirn vernebeln, und das ist die Herausforderung(...)“ (Silke)

Whereas activists strategically shared personal stories from their living and working realities to position themselves as experts and normalize sex work, they also sought to legitimize themselves as political actors by maintaining a disengaged and “rational” form of reasoning.

Within a very short time frame, the self-organizing sex workers thus established a formal association, pursued lobbying at the local and national level, engaged in public outreach work through manifold channels, and visibly positioned themselves as rational experts and capable political actors. Activists gained access to the legislative process, represented themselves through comprehensive political demands, and achieved policy makers’ acknowledgment of their indispensable political participation. However, sex worker activists eventually found that they could not achieve their ultimate goal of preventing the planned law.

5.4 “The Strategy of Good Arguments and Being Nice” - Making Sense of Political Losses

Less than three years after the foundation of BesD, the German parliament adopted the Prostitute Protection Act on the 7th of July 2016. The government thereby introduced comprehensive obligations for both sex workers and venue operators, all of which BesD had previously opposed. Among these were the compulsory registration and health counselling for sex workers, the obligatory carrying of the registration certificate, and strict licensing requirements for sex work venues. Sex worker activists had thus failed in their political goal of preventing the law. For them, the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act presented a “kick in the teeth” (*absoluter Tiefschlag*), Silke says. As Nicky explains:

Everyone who took part [in the self-organization] naturally hoped that this outcry from those affected, who now finally dared to get together and somehow ... yes, put their heart and soul into it, that it would do something! And unfortunately, it has done nothing at all (...).⁹⁹

In light of the time and energy activists had invested into self-organizing, and the political recognition of their self-representation, they had hoped until the very end to be able to influence the legislative process. The unexpected outcome of the legislative process created a state of shock and denial among activists. Even as “everything was lost already” and the Prostitute Protection Act a “fait accompli” (*vollendete Tatsachen*), some activists “did not

⁹⁹ „(...) alle, die da mitgemacht haben, haben natürlich gehofft, dass dieser Aufschrei von den Betroffenen, die sich jetzt endlich mal trauen und sich zusammenrotten und da irgendwie... ja, Herzblut reinstecken, dass das auch etwas bringt! Und das hat leider überhaupt nichts gebracht (...).“ (Nicky)

believe that this law would really exist and that it would have consequences for them,”¹⁰⁰ Scarlet remembers. The disbelief over the law’s adoption mixed with feelings of disillusionment, frustration and exhaustion. Looking back at her involvement in a round table on prostitution, Simone finds it “very frustrating (...) to have participated in something like that to then realize that it’s not interesting for politicians.”¹⁰¹ She also recalls being told by the chairwoman that “it could have been worse”¹⁰² and the final law even stricter, even though legislators had essentially ignored sex worker activists’ demands and interventions. BesD, which had formed with the aim of preventing the Prostitute Protection Act, “fell into a complete hole,”¹⁰³ Nicky recounts. Membership growth, which had been steady since the association’s foundation, “collapsed by two thirds”¹⁰⁴ as sex workers stopped seeing BesD’s political function. Moreover, many activists had depleted their resources and dropped out of organizing after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act:

Those who were in the association and had worked a lot were also totally exhausted. Many of those who had continued fighting to the end were out of the picture (...), the energy was completely gone. (...) It was the end of the line.¹⁰⁵ (Nicky)

Sex workers’ self-organization thus weakened immediately after the Prostitute Protection Act was passed, and the political withdrawal of activists suggests moments of disintegration within BesD.

At the same time, activists began to review their strategies, examine the reasons behind the political loss they had incurred, and formulated political learnings. This is particularly illustrated by the position of Christin, who was among the founding members of BesD, and would later leave the association. She explains how her political perspective changed profoundly over the course of her political engagement within BesD:

We had taken a very realpolitik approach. The idea was that we have to approach the federal level, we have to open the doors to these politicians, and then we have to talk nicely to them, and be nice, and sort of take

¹⁰⁰ „(...) da war eigentlich schon alles verloren, was das Prostituiertenschutzgesetz anbelangt. Und es waren vollendete Tatsachen, und es war trotzdem sehr prägend zu sehen, wie zum Beispiel Kolleginnen noch 2016 nicht geglaubt haben, dass es dieses Gesetz wirklich geben wird und dass es für sie Konsequenzen haben wird.“ (Scarlet)

¹⁰¹ „(...) sehr frustrierend (...) an sowas teilgenommen zu haben und dann zu merken, dass das uninteressant ist für Politiker.“ (Simone)

¹⁰² „Es hätte schlimmer kommen können.“ (Simone)

¹⁰³ „(...) in ein komplettes Loch gefallen (...).“ (Nicky)

¹⁰⁴ „(...) zwei Drittel ist es eingebrochen (...).“ (Nicky)

¹⁰⁵ „Die, die im Verband waren und viel gearbeitet haben, waren halt auch total erschöpft. Ganz viele von denen, die durchgekämpft haben bis zum Ende, waren erst einmal weg vom Fenster (...) da war die Energie komplett raus. (...) Es ging gar nichts.“ (Nicky)

our knowledge there in the hope that the good arguments we bring will then lead to the right decision. But they did not do that.¹⁰⁶

Sex worker activists had trusted that they could impact the law by gaining access to the political arena, representing themselves, and arguing based on facts and reason. This presented to not be the case. Looking back, Christin states she would not pursue the same strategy anymore and instead centre irrevocable ethical values in lobbying:

The strategy of good arguments and being nice, I wouldn't do that again now. I would make much clearer, broader, more consistent demands and simply say, 'No, there's no compromise. This is a demand that we have. And we won't give anything up, because these are human rights that we are negotiating, so to speak, and we don't want that.' Like that. And because we were so nice and so soft and so yielding, when you have these negotiating positions, then we just accommodated, and the others were happy to take it.¹⁰⁷

In her understanding, activists compromised their own position by pragmatically negotiating the particularities of a law which fundamentally violates sex workers' human rights, and by presenting themselves as rational, "nice" and respectable political actors. In the legislative process, activists' demands were then weakened as the ministry in charge made political concessions to other political actors. "Just the way politics is done,"¹⁰⁸ Christin believes. Still, she admits not knowing whether the "clear-cut-position" (*klare Kante*) she now advocates would have yielded a different outcome:

Well, you don't know, do you? Should have, could have, would have... But I think you shouldn't sell your own convictions too far, because we are not the people who have the negotiating power and the compromises in our hands, but we give them information, so to speak, and then the politicians negotiate, not us. And that means they just sell us out the best they can.¹⁰⁹

According to Christin, unequal power relations between sex worker activists and policy makers rendered the political success of activists' strategies at best unpredictable. While sex worker activists might have succeeded in becoming a player in the legislative arena through

¹⁰⁶ „(...) hatten wir einen sehr realpolitischen Ansatz gefahren. Die Idee war, wir müssen an die Bundesebene rangehen, wir müssen uns die Türen öffnen zu diesen Politikern, und dann müssen wir nett mit denen reden und nett sein und quasi unser Wissen dahin tragen, in der Hoffnung, dass die guten Argumente, die wir bringen, dann zu der richtigen Entscheidung führen. Das haben sie aber nicht getan.“ (Christin)

¹⁰⁷ „Und die Strategie der guten Argumente und des nett seins war, das würde ich jetzt nicht mehr so wieder machen. Ich würde wesentlich klarere, weiter gefasste, konsequentere Forderungen stellen und einfach sagen, 'Nein, da gibt es keinen Kompromiss. Das ist eine Forderung, die wir haben. Und da geben wir kein Stück zurück, weil das sind Menschenrechte, die wir da quasi verhandeln, und das wollen wir nicht.' So. Und dadurch, dass wir halt so nett und so weich und so nachgiebig waren, wenn du halt diese Verhandlungspositionen hast, dann sind wir halt entgegengekommen, und die anderen nehmen das halt gerne.“ (Christin)

¹⁰⁸ „Wie Politik halt so gemacht wird.“ (Christin)

¹⁰⁹ „Also, man weiß es nicht, ne? Hätte, wäre, wenn... Aber ich glaube, man darf seine eigenen Überzeugungen nicht zu weit verkaufen, weil wir nicht die Leute sind, die die Verhandlungsmacht und die Kompromisse in der Hand haben, sondern wir geben quasi ne Info, und die Politiker verhandeln dann, und nicht wir. Und das heißt, die verkaufen uns halt so, wie es geht.“ (Christin)

the foundation of BesD, they were not one influential enough to impact policy outcomes. In light of the failure of BesD's "realpolitik" strategy, Christin considers the consultation of sex worker activists in the legislative process as "pure busy work, a pure quota participation" which drained activists' resources and merely permitted politicians to claim "we have talked to sex workers"¹¹⁰ in a seemingly democratic and inclusive process. In Christin's words, the only symbolic political inclusion of sex worker activists represents a form of tokenism of marginalized groups, and has informed her turn towards more radical demands and positions: "If I am just a token sitting there at the negotiating table, then I have to at least say things loudly and clearly,"¹¹¹ she subsumes.

Even though not all interviewees draw the same conclusions, most share Christin's assessment that sex worker activists were not heard in the legislative process, and that the strategy of lobbying through fact-based argumentation proved futile in preventing the Prostitute Protection Act. Simone recognized some improvements at the local level of the round table she participated in, where she "could indeed notice with the authorities that something had changed in their thinking, and that there was a good exchange, that a lot of knowledge was accumulated."¹¹² Consequentially, she finds it a "mystery" (*Rätzel*) how the recommendations of the round table then did not translate into better prostitution policies at the national level:

I did my very best, I took part in the round table, and I think a very good position paper was produced there, and nevertheless, the Prostitute Protection Act with this obligation to register ... I think is simply a disaster. It frustrates you, you think to yourself, ugh, actually it doesn't really matter.¹¹³

Realizing that the participatory process and policy recommendations of the round table were essentially ineffective, Simone remained generally disillusioned with the utility of sex worker activists' lobbying in the legislative arena.

For social worker Sonja, the reasons for the failure of sex worker activists' lobbying efforts lie again elsewhere. In her view, activists were generally denied credibility as sex workers: "I

¹¹⁰ „(...) das war reine Beschäftigungstherapie. Also auch eine reine Quotenbeteiligung, ne? So, 'Wir haben ja mit den Sexarbeitern geredet.'" (Christin)

¹¹¹ „(...) wenn ich schon nur ein Token bin, der da am Verhandlungstisch sitzt, dann habe ich wenigstens aber auch laut und deutlich Dinge zu sagen." (Christin)

¹¹² „(...) man konnte schon mit den Behörden merken, dass sich da was im Denken verändert hat und das war ein guter Austausch, das ist viel Wissen angesammelt worden." (Simone)

¹¹³ „(...) dass ich mir viel Mühe gegeben habe, dass ich am Runden Tisch teilgenommen habe und dass es dort für mich zu einem ganz guten Positionspapier kam, und dass trotzdem dieses Prostituiertenschutzgesetz mit dieser Anmeldepflicht, das finde ich ist einfach eine Katastrophe. Also das frustriert einen auch, man denkt sich ja, pfff, eigentlich ist es wurscht." (Simone)

think there is still the problem that sex workers are not being listened to,”¹¹⁴ she asserts. When Sonja moved from her engagement in sex work activism volunteering to working at her city’s district office, she noticed the difference in credibility that politicians afforded to her arguments:

Simply because it’s always a question of who do I listen to and who do I believe, and who do I consider trustworthy? Which is often totally random. If I had introduced myself and said ‘I’m an activist and I’m with [sex worker counselling centre]’ they would have said, ‘hmmm....(laughs) well, what do you have to say?’ But if you say ‘Yes, I work at the district office (laughs) and I’m a sex work consultant there,’ ..., ‘Oooh, aaaah, what an expertise!’ even though I didn’t gain any expertise there. All the expertise I had, I already had before.¹¹⁵

As Sonja’s statement illustrates, credibility and trust are afforded depending on a speakers’ social and institutional position, which may be arbitrary and detached from their actual expertise. Speaking from the location of an activist, and even more so that of a sex worker or sex worker activist, negatively impacts this credibility. Still, Sonja finds that even her influence as a social worker and district officer is limited and dependent on context:

I have often made the experience and I always find that particularly frustrating, you explain things to people and it’s tedious and it takes a long time, but at some point you get to the point and you think, now they have understood. And then you meet them again two weeks later and they haven’t understood! (laughs) That’s so upsetting! Especially in the administration, I have the impression that they always go along with it up to a certain point and always nod and are like, ‘Hm, yes, that makes sense.’ And then they forget everything again (...).¹¹⁶

In Sonja’s view, informing politicians and workers in administrative authorities might create momentary understanding, but rarely produce long-standing changes in attitudes or institutional procedures. Even though much of activists’ and counselling centres’ critique of the Prostitute Protection Act would eventually prove true, “nobody listens to you. That has been a very sad realization,”¹¹⁷ Sonja concludes. Similarly, social worker Marion finds that her

¹¹⁴ „Da ist glaube ich immer insgesamt noch das Problem, dass Sexarbeitenden nicht zugehört wird (...).“ (Sonja)

¹¹⁵ „(...) einfach weil es immer darum geht, wem hör ich halt zu und wem glaube ich auch, und wen schätze ich als vertrauenswürdig ein? Was ja oft total random ist. Wenn ich mich da vorgestellt hätte und gesagt hätte 'ich bin Aktivistin und ich bin bei Hydra' hätten die erstmal gesagt, 'hmmm....' (lacht) Naja, was hast du denn zu sagen? Aber wenn man sagt ja, ich arbeite im Bezirksamt (lacht) und ich bin da Referentin für Sexarbeit, 'oooh, aaaah, voll die Expertise', obwohl ich da keine Expertise dazugewonnen habe. Alle Expertise, die ich hatte, hatte ich vorher schon.“ (Sonja)

¹¹⁶ „(...) habe ich auch jetzt schon oft die Erfahrung gemacht und das finde ich immer besonders frustrierend, man erklärt Leuten was, und es ist mühselig und es dauert lange, aber irgendwann kommt man an den Punkt und man denkt, jetzt haben sie es verstanden. Und dann trifft man die zwei Wochen später wieder und sie hat es nicht verstanden! (lacht) Das ist so schlimm! Also gerade so in der Verwaltung habe ich den Eindruck, immer bis zu einem gewissen Punkt gehen sie schon mit und nicken immer, und sind so, 'Hm, ja, das macht Sinn.' Und dann vergessen sie aber wieder alles (...).“ (Sonja)

¹¹⁷ „(...) niemand hört auf einen. Das ist eine sehr traurige Erkenntnis gewesen.“ (Sonja)

long-standing experience in a counselling centre for sex workers is often simply disregarded by her interlocutors:

When I talk to people about it [sex work] and I say 'I've been working in this field for 30 years and you can believe that I know my stuff,' they still say, 'Yeah, but I've read this and that' And I find that very annoying (...).¹¹⁸

While representatives of institutions such as counselling centres may be afforded more credibility than sex worker activists, their expertise is frequently invalidated by reference to dominant media narratives on sex work. Indeed, many interviewees describe facing a lack of epistemic authority in both their lobbying and public outreach work, where they claim they have to repeat positions “mantra-like” (*wie eine tibetanische Gebetsmühle*) in “very tedious” (*sehr mühselig*) exchanges, and often still experience the “setback” (*Rückschlag*) of others’ disbelief. Social worker Sonja identifies persistent stereotypes about sex work and a “strong internal reluctance to really deal with it”¹¹⁹ as important factors. Furthermore, in Sonja’s view individual emotional experiencing generally trumps rational arguments in conversation about sex work: “I often have the feeling that the emotional component is always stronger. Like, you have a strange gut feeling about it [sex work].”¹²⁰ Moreover, she believes that this “emotional reluctance” towards sex work connects to people’s discomfort “with their own sexuality.”¹²¹ From her perspective, general individual and social attitudes on sexuality complicate sex work politics and hinder sex worker activists’ lobbying and public outreach efforts: “It often doesn’t even have anything to do with work, but with it [sexuality] being such a difficult topic overall,”¹²² Sonja subsumes.

The centrality of sexuality to sex work politics also stands out in the fact that, aside from reluctance and discomfort, sex worker activists frequently encounter voyeuristic and sensationalist attitudes among their audiences while doing public outreach work. “Often, sex workers are asked, ‘Oh, what’s the weirdest thing you’ve ever done?’” Casey tells. Christin is equally tired of responding to such sensationalist questions. “I don’t want to be asked for the

¹¹⁸ „(...) wenn ich mit Leuten drüber rede und sage, ich arbeite da auf dem Gebiet seit 30 Jahren und könnt ihr mir schon glauben, dass ich Ahnung habe, dann sagen sie immer trotzdem, 'Ja, aber ich habe gelesen und so...' Und das finde ich sehr ärgerlich (...)" (Marion)

¹¹⁹ „(...) irgendwie ist es da so, dass, weiß ich nicht, diese Stereotype halt so stark sind oder dass da vielleicht auch so ein krasser interner Widerwillen ist, sich wirklich damit auseinanderzusetzen.“ (Sonja)

¹²⁰ „(...) ich hab auch oft so das Gefühl, dass da so die emotionale Komponente einfach immer stärker ist. Also man hat so ein komisches Bauchgefühl dazu.“ (Sonja)

¹²¹ „(...) emotionale Widerwillen, dieses unguete Gefühl, was man damit hat, vielleicht auch einfach mit der eigenen Sexualität (...).“ (Sonja)

¹²² „Es hat ja oft nicht einmal was mit der Arbeit zu tun, sondern dass es insgesamt so ein schwieriges Thema ist.“ (Sonja)

125th time, ‘What’s it like with a client and have you ever done something really kinky?’¹²³ she explains with a laughter. Both Casey and Christin eventually found ways to circumvent these requests in their public outreach work. Casey co-curates the sex worker-led art-exhibition “Objects of Desire” which combines sex workers’ narratives with personal objects. As the project’s website details, such creative interventions permit sex worker activists to insert their perspectives into an otherwise “saturated” public sphere:

As sex workers, we face a lot of barriers to telling our stories. (...) When we do speak, we are speaking in a landscape saturated with images created by those telling stories about us – Hollywood movies, media reports, academic tirades. (...) Objects of Desire (...) challenges this erasure of sex worker voices, and creates space for us to tell our stories how we want them to be told.

In a similar way, Christin has found agency over her personal story and outreach work by creating a podcast where she centres sex workers’ views on general social and political topics. Independent, sex worker-led art and media outlets are also essential because sex worker activists often face sensationalism in mainstream media. Here, Melanie describes the general attitude as “*Sensationsgeilheit*” – an expression commonly used to describe sensationalism in general, but aptly combining both the German terms for “sensation” (*Sensation*) and “horniness” (*Geilheit*). “If I talk about sex and crime, the press reports on it, and if you say something else, they don’t,”¹²⁴ says social worker Ruth, who describes how sensationalist and selective media practices limit public outreach work. Politically important issues on sex work often merely serve as scandalizing and stigmatizing headlines, social worker Sonja deplures. Besides, Eric finds that entertainment media “glamorizes” sex work and exploits sex workers’ lived experiences for story-telling purposes:

People always want to write about trans characters and trans sex workers, but they want to use us for their own sense of drama and interesting story. But does anyone actually want to listen to us? And where do we find our voice? (...) I feel like if you want to glamorize, or capitalize on, or sensationalize what someone’s life is, maybe instead of that, you should try to get to know someone and not really for your own capital gain.

While Eric himself uses the medium of film within his own gay rights activism, he doesn’t address sex work since he is not outed as a sex worker. “I’m out about everything else in my life. And it’s like that closet doesn’t really have a door,” he explains. In addition to stigmatization, Silke confirms that victimizing media portrayals present a very real obstacle to

¹²³ „(...) ich möchte nicht zum 125. Mal gefragt werden ‘wie ist denn das mit einem Gast und hast du schon mal etwas ganz Perverses gemacht?’“ (lacht) (Christin)

¹²⁴ „Wenn ich da von Sex and Crime erzähle, dann kommt das rein, und wenn man was anderes sagt, kommt es nicht.“ (Ruth)

sex worker activists' engagement in the public sphere: "Media reports convey a different reality and you constantly have to run into that wall as an activist."¹²⁵ In light of pervasive sensationalism and victimizing narratives, sex worker activists struggle to gain agency over their own narratives while doing public outreach work.

Moreover, many interviewees report negative experiences with journalists and profound feelings of distrust towards them. Activists, for instance, conduct careful background checks or generally avoid interaction with certain journalists and media outlets. Barbara, for instance, states she made "very particular experiences with journalists"¹²⁶ who "dragged [her] through three issues"¹²⁷ (*durch drei Ausgaben geschleift*) of her local newspaper after her forceful outing. "One issue even included one of my photos from the internet, which wasn't even pixelated [rendered unrecognizable],"¹²⁸ she explains. When she later saw a colleague smeared in the German magazine "Der Spiegel" (the largest weekly news magazine in Europe), she filed a complaint with the German Press Council, a voluntary self-monitoring institution setting ethical standards in journalism. However, her complaint was "shot down" (*abgeschmettert*), Barbara recounts. She therefore does not believe that the German Press Council can be of any use to sex worker activists:

I've made the experience that the Press Council is a totally fossilized bunch. What presents itself as a supposed journalistic elite is basically just an arch-conservative association, some old white men who ultimately have nothing to do with certain political minorities.¹²⁹

Equally ignored was the ethical guideline for reporting on sex work which Barbara created and sent to Der Spiegel. In sum, Barbara thinks that appeals to ethical standards and journalistic accountability in media reporting on sex work fail because of conservative sexual attitudes and privileged perspectives within the media industry, and because of the persistent dehumanization of sex workers which renders ethical violations condonable:

¹²⁵ „Aber es wird eine andere Realität durch die Medien vermittelt, und gegen diese Wand muss man dann als Aktivistin permanent laufen.“ (Silke)

¹²⁶ „(...) mit Journalisten haben wir unsere ganz speziellen Erfahrungen.“ (Barbara)

¹²⁷ „(...) mich liebevoll durch drei Ausgaben geschleift.“ (Barbara)

¹²⁸ „In einer Ausgabe sogar mit Fotos aus dem Internet, das war noch nicht mal verpixelt.“ (Barbara)

¹²⁹ „Ich habe die Erfahrung gemacht, dass der Presserat auch ein total verknöchertes Haufen ist. Was sich da als angebliche journalistische Elite geriert, ist im Grunde genommen eben halt ein stockkonservativer Verein, irgendwelche alten weißen Männer, die letzten Endes auch mit bestimmten politischen Minderheiten nichts im Sinn haben.“ (Barbara)

Because there is still the widespread perception: a whore is scum, a whore is garbage, you can walk all over a whore, you can project everything into a whore that is somehow disgusting and nasty and criminal and whatever else.¹³⁰

From her many exploitative and paternalistic interactions with journalists, Scarlet says she learned to stay “nasty and snappy” (*biestig und bissig*) in order to be cited correctly, and receive exposure and credit. “Angry women are not necessarily socially accepted, but sometimes there is no other way,”¹³¹ she sums up. Like Christin did with regards to lobbying, Scarlet has departed from a strategy of “being nice” in her negotiations with media outlets, and now strategically expresses undesired emotions such as anger to expand her agency in the public sphere.

Overall, interviewees’ re-evaluations of their strategies after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act illustrate the practical difficulties lobbying and public outreach work entailed for sex worker activists. While the foundation of BesD permitted sex worker activists to collectively represent themselves in the legislative arena and public sphere, activists still faced the unequal power relations expressed in a merely symbolic rather than substantial inclusion in the legislative process, the ineffectiveness of rational argumentation on an emotionalized and moralized issue, and a general lack of epistemic authority tied to their stigmatized subjectivities as sex workers. Given the potency of victimizing narratives and media sensationalism, sex worker activists also struggled to insert and establish their own narratives within the public sphere. Nevertheless, interviewees’ accounts demonstrate how activists sought to retain and expand their political agency within these contexts, and how their political learnings informed incipient strategic shifts which gradually became more pronounced.

5.5 “A Permanent We-Have-to-Prevent-the-Worst-Process” – Movement Persistence & Diversification

Given that the planned legislation had incited sex workers’ self-organization and BesD had specifically been formed to prevent its passing, the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act

¹³⁰ „Da ist nämlich immer noch die weitverbreitete Auffassung: Eine Hure ist Abschaum, eine Hure ist der letzte Dreck, auf einer Hure kannst du herumtrampeln, bei einer Hure kannst du alles rein projizieren, was irgendwie eklig und fies und kriminell und sonstwie ist.“ (Barbara)

¹³¹ „Wütende Frauen sind nicht so unbedingt zivilisatorisch akzeptiert, aber anders geht es manchmal nicht.“ (Scarlet)

could have heralded the end of the association and sex worker activists' mobilizations. However, while moments of disintegration existed in the withdrawal of some activists, mobilizations instead persisted and subsequently diversified into a sustained social movement.

Notably, movement persistence and diversification were linked to the continuously adverse context sex worker activists faced following the Prostitute Protection Act. At the same time as activists were processing their political loss, they were forced to deal with the impacts of the new law. Since the Prostitute Protection Act presented a "bureaucracy monster that is implemented differently in each state"¹³² (Nicky), all sex workers in Germany first and foremost required information on how to adhere to statutory obligations at their respective locations and work places. This presented both a new challenge for activists and a new purpose for BesD, Nicky explains:

That also helped a bit to make people realize, alright, we have to get together, we have to somehow see how we can bundle the information, and for that alone it was good to have this association, so that we could somehow have an information platform that was independent of the government and not dependent on the counselling centres (...).¹³³

Despite the inability of BesD to prevent the law, the association presented an important institution through which sex worker activists could respond to its impacts. BesD thus focused mainly on providing sex workers with information on the law, while continuing to criticize it and calling for its repeal.

Most importantly, activists protested against its slow and arbitrary implementation by local authorities, which created legal uncertainty for sex workers. After coming into effect on the 1st of July 2017, the Prostitute Protection Act made it obligatory for sex workers to complete registration by the end of 2017 in order to continue working legally. However, for several reasons this was impossible in practice. In December 2017, sex worker activists protested outside the Schöneberg townhall in Berlin where they drew attention to the "failures of authorities" (*Behördenversagen*) which had not yet created the relevant institutional bodies where sex workers could register. Instead of completing the compulsory

¹³² „(...) Bürokratiemonster, was in jedem Bundesland anders umgesetzt wird“ (Nicky)

¹³³ „Das hat dann aber auch schon wieder so ein bisschen geholfen, den Leuten klarzumachen, gut, wir müssen uns zusammentun, wir müssen irgendwie gucken, wie wir die Informationen gebündelt haben, und dafür alleine schon war es gut, diesen Verband zu haben, so dass wir irgendwie eine Informationsplattform, die unabhängig von der Regierung ist und nicht auf die Beratungsstellen angewiesen(...)“ (Nicky)

registration and health counselling, sex workers were thus only given an “interim certificate” attesting their attempt to do so (Jürgens, 2017). In other states, authorities lacked information on uniform procedures and kept issuing invalid certificates for extended periods. By the end of 2019, I interviewed Valentina, who worked in a municipal public health department which was charged with the compulsory health counselling. “For two years now,” she emphasizes, a city in her region has been issuing a singular certificate containing both the sex worker’s real name and alias instead of two separate ones, thus contradicting legal provisions and rendering it impossible for sex workers to retain their anonymity. In other cases, she states, sex workers were outed by fiscal authorities who sent out documents violating anonymity. The registration mandated by the Prostitute Protection Act generally puts sex workers at risk of being outed and increases their vulnerability in a variety of contexts, Anouk explains:

It puts such a red arrow pointing at you. And places like the US, you won’t be able to get in [obtain a visa as a sex worker]. There are migration problems. So many people don’t want to register because of all the consequences that you might have with that. And if we look at history, and we look at how fragile actually data is, anything can happen where they can just find your name, find out what you do for a living and you get in big trouble. And I think, as a woman you are already a target of violence and sexual violence and assaults. The last thing you want to have is an arrow saying, ‘Heeey, I suck dick for money!’

As presented by Anouk, many sex workers refrain from registering out of a justified fear over data security and the vast and unpredictable social consequences an outing would have for them. The compulsory registration significantly worsened working conditions of sex workers, and confirmed activists’ previous warnings, as BesD sums up on its website:

It quickly became clear that we were right in our predictions: the law does not regulate what is actually needed and completely fails to achieve its alleged goal - the protection of sex workers. The situation for people in sex work has not only not improved, but on the contrary, has worsened. Many are driven into illegality because they do not want to register for fear of being outed, or cannot do so because they do not have a work permit. They now work alone, find it difficult to contact the police and are not reached by counselling centres. The Prostitute Protection Act has also led to a large wave of brothel closures. Not because they were bad work places, but simply because they were in the wrong urban planning area. (BesD, n.d.)

While the compulsory registration of sex workers had an illegalizing effect, the licencing requirements for brothels interacted with the much older zoning laws and caused a reduction in sex work venues, and thus a reduction in work places. Social worker Sonja confirms this

assessment of the Prostitute Protection Act: “The fear was that it would lead to people working in a more isolated way and that’s exactly what happened.”¹³⁴ Not only were activists challenged with the overwhelming demands to inform on the law, criticize its implementation, and mitigate its negative effects on sex workers. Its illegalizing and isolating effect also impacted sex workers’ self-organization, since the loss of collective workplaces also reduced spaces of encounter, exchange, and politicization.

Expanded Tactical Repertoires, Organizational Forms, and Locations

Although the Prostitute Protection Act disillusioned and frustrated sex workers’ self-organization, it simultaneously triggered new mobilizations and diversified tactical repertoires, organizational forms, and locations. In order to counter the increasing individualization among sex workers, activists of the Berlin-based counselling centre and peer-project Hydra opened a sex worker café in 2018, Nina tells:

When it became clear that there are now really masses of colleagues who no longer work in venues, it was clear that we wanted to create a place where everyone is welcome, no matter whether you are registered or not according to the Prostitute Protection Act, no matter what your status is.¹³⁵

Beyond providing a space of encounter, activists also resisted the legal distinction between unregistered and registered, and thus between legal and illegalized sex workers which the law created.

Activists also expanded their repertoire of contention. A group of 16 anonymized sex worker activists engaged in litigation through a constitutional complaint which the Frankfurt-based Association for the Social and Political Rights of Prostitutes “Doña Carmen” filed against the Prostitute Protection Act in July 2017 (Doña Carmen, 2017). In Dresden, a mixed group of sex workers and other activists founded “Sex Workers Solidarity” in 2017, which employed hitherto unseen disruptive tactics: activists leaked the draft of the state of Saxony’s implementation law, and interrupted a session of the Saxon state parliament. Here, they confronted politicians with registration certificates issued to their names in order to highlight their stigmatizing effect (Sex Workers Solidarity, 2018). Similar forms of direct action are

¹³⁴ „Genau, und tatsächlich ist halt ja die Befürchtung gewesen und so ist es auch gekommen, dass durch das Gesetz halt viel mehr Leute vereinzelt arbeiten.“ (Sonja)

¹³⁵ „Als klar war, es sind jetzt richtig massenweise Kolleginnen, die nicht mehr in Betriebsstätten arbeiten, war klar, wir wollen einen Ort schaffen, wo alle willkommen sind, egal, ob du angemeldet bist oder ob du nicht angemeldet bist, nach dem ProstschutzG, egal wie dein Status ist.“ (Nina)

pursued by the “Sex Worker Action Group” (SWAG) which formed in Berlin in 2020, and has since organized a series of protests and marches on crucial action days, such as International Whores Day on the 2nd of June. Equally in Berlin, a small group of sex worker activists, feminist activists and social workers formed the campaign “Sexarbeit ist Arbeit. Respekt!” (Sex Work is Work. Respect!) in 2017, and campaigned for the abrogation of the Prostitute Protection Act through public protest, information events, and art. Other activists like Christin and Casey sought to diversify sex workers’ involvement in the public sphere by establishing podcasts and curating art projects like Objects of Desire. In the course of this, Casey also engaged in self-directed community research through in-depth interviews with sex worker colleagues. Community research also undergirded the peer-project trans*Sexworks, which began its outreach activities with migrant street-based sex workers as early as 2014, and increased its visibility through public outreach work and protests in the years after the Prostitute Protection Act. The expansion of sex workers’ mobilizations also encompassed sex industry workers who were legally unaffected by the Prostitute Protection Act: in November 2019, Berlin-based strippers formed the “Berlin Strippers Collective” to organize against precarious working conditions in nightclubs – an issue which was neglected in German sex work activism until then. The growth in self-organization can also be identified in the establishment of collectives which centre multiply marginalized sex workers: in 2020, sex worker activist MF Akynos, founder of the US-based “Black Sex Worker Collective,” began building a Berlin branch which dedicates itself to organizing and supporting Black sex workers and amplifying their political perspectives. Together with SWAG, trans*Sexworks, and independent sex worker activists, the Black Sex Worker Collective organized a Sex Workers UnConference in each 2021 and 2022, thus presenting an alternative to the whore congress organized by BesD in 2018 and 2019. As these developments show, sex workers’ self-organization has not only persisted after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act, but diversified and developed beyond BesD. Sex worker activists have since established a network of collectives and activists who continue to politically mobilize around various sex worker subjectivities, and as such, succeeded in building a sustained sex worker movement in Germany. The Prostitute Protection Act then quickly paled in comparison to the new threats and grievances this movement faced.

While sex worker activists state they slowly “digested” (*verdaut*) the Prostitute Protection Act and its impacts, they experienced new political headwind. A few months into my field work at the beginning of 2019, I began hearing talks among activists who suspected that anti-prostitution campaigners would soon undertake a concerted political effort towards client criminalization. First just a rumour, these lobbying efforts then became concrete on the 15th of October 2019, when the first session of a parliamentary working group titled “Prostitution – wohin?” (prostitution – whereto?) took place. Although its title suggested an open-ended approach, the working group’s intentions seemed clear to sex worker activists, since it was co-created by long-standing anti-prostitution campaigner and member of parliament Leni Breymaier (SPD), and hosted well-known anti-prostitution speakers. Sex worker activists thus presumed that the working group served to merge criticism over the Prostitute Protection Act with calls for client criminalization in anticipation of new political windows provided by the parliamentary elections in 2021 and the legal evaluation in 2025. These intensified lobbying activities by anti-prostitution campaigners within the German government presented a new political threat to sex worker activists.

The political threat of client criminalization politicized again a new wave of sex workers into activism, and the number of participants at BesD’s whore congress doubled from 2018 to 2019. For Lara, the Prostitute Protection Act presented a “bitter pill” (*bittere Pille*) many sex workers eventually swallowed thinking “the main thing is that they [politicians] leave us alone.”¹³⁶ The increased lobbying by anti-prostitution campaigners signalled that prostitution politics continued to shift, which caused Lara to feel like “now we have to do something”¹³⁷ and politicized her “in fast motion” (*im Zeitraffer*).

Besides anti-prostitution campaigners’ growing political influence and the prospect of client criminalization, conditions turned even more adverse when the Covid-19 pandemic became a global reality only a few months later. In March 2020, sex work was temporarily prohibited along with other non-essential services involving close physical contact. This again shifted the political terrain on sex work. As public health is subject to the federal level, all federal states issued decrees to close sex work venues, with some states initially banning all

¹³⁶ „(...) Hauptsache die lassen uns in Ruhe“ (Lara)

¹³⁷ „(...) jetzt müssen wir irgendwas tun.“ (Lara)

sexual services. The pandemic-related prohibition caused severe illegalization, vulnerability and precarization among sex workers. Without the opportunity to generate an income in Germany, many migrant sex workers left the country. Other sex workers moved to online work such as webcamming, which required specific skills and resources, and where competition was higher and earnings lower.¹³⁸ Some of the activists I interviewed had to take on jobs outside the sex industry, or rely on personal savings and the German welfare system to finance themselves.

Most significantly, the temporary prohibition illuminated the ongoing discrimination of sex work within the German legal framework and its detrimental effects on sex workers. Registered sex workers could access state emergency aid for self-employed workers, yet, in many cases these funds covered only ongoing expenses (e.g. office rent) and could not supplement income, thus proving futile for most sex workers. For many others, state emergency aid was inaccessible because of the required tax number, which many sex workers in Germany do not have due to a special taxation regime, the “Düsseldorfer Verfahren” (Düsseldorf procedure). Some cities even categorically excluded the sex industry from eligibility for emergency aid (Gilges & Hofstetter, 2020). For unregistered and thus illegalized sex workers, receiving state emergency aid was impossible either way. Eventually, financial pressure motivated many sex workers to continue working under increased risk of contracting Covid-19, and in more isolated, clandestine conditions to avoid being heavily fined for violating pandemic provisions. Particularly in street-sex working areas frequented by migrants, police increased their control pressure and frisked sex workers for condoms as evidence, thus exacerbating their vulnerability to contract STIs (Müller, 2020). Some German cities only fined clients, thus adopting a form of *de facto* client criminalization. Clients’ interest in remaining covert and increased financial pressure left sex workers in inferior negotiating positions. Counselling centres struggled to access sex workers and could not maintain their services due to pandemic-related closures and staff shortages.

Moreover, the social stigmatization of sex work stood out starkly in this context. As other service industries such as hair dressers, gyms, or medical massages were slowly being

¹³⁸ Whereas a shift to online sex work can increase sex workers’ influence over working conditions (Jones, 2015), it exhibits the precarizing effects of platform work (Hardy & Barbagallo, 2021). Moreover, sex workers are affected by discriminatory algorithms that shadow-ban their content (Blunt et al., 2020) and the far-reaching impact of US-laws SESTA/FOSTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act/Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act), which render online platforms liable for their content, effectively resulting in advertising websites, social media platforms and online payment services removing sex-work related content and sex workers’ accounts (Blunt & Wolf, 2020; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; Jones, 2020, 2022; Liu, 2020).

reopened under strict hygiene protocols by May 2020, sex work venues remained prohibited for significantly longer periods. Like other businesses, BesD, as well as the associations of venue operators BSD (*Bundesverband sexuelle Dienstleistungen* – Federal Association for Sexual Services) and UEGD (*Unternehmerverband Erotikgewerbe Deutschland* – Association of Erotic Industry Entrepreneurs Germany) developed hygiene protocols and contact tracing systems tailored to different industry segments and privacy requirements (BesD, 2020b; BSD, 2020a; UEGD, 2020). However, politicians dismissed these based on the prejudiced assumption that adherence to hygiene standards and contact tracing measures was generally lower in the sex industry and the infection risk higher (despite Covid-19 being transmitted via air and not sexual contact). By August 2020, individual federal states allowed gradual or comprehensive service provision in the sex industry again, while others continued prohibiting it. Those states which reopened sex work venues did so largely after venue operators had successfully taken legal action against the discriminatory treatment of the sex industry (Gilges & Hofstetter, 2020). With the justified fear over recurring prohibitions, some sex workers found other sources of income, while some venues went bankrupt, thereby reducing workplaces in the sex industry further. Overall, the pandemic-related prohibition thus created conditions in Germany similar to states prohibiting sex work or criminalizing clients.

During these months, the existing structures of the sex worker movement played a crucial role in securing sex workers' survival. BesD provided essential information on the continuously changing legal situation across federal states and municipalities, and quickly set up an emergency fund. In 2020, BesD collected a sum of over 140.000 Euro, which was distributed to sex workers in financial distress, covering essential living costs and medical treatments (BesD, 2021). Other activists kick-started fundraising campaigns for BesD, such as the "Sex in Times of Corona" porn movie made by Berlin-based porn workers in which they humorously presented safer sex strategies under conditions of social distancing (Meow Meow, 2020). Due to the pandemic-related closures, trans*Sexworks lost the space in which it had hosted a weekly dinner for street-working and often unhoused migrant trans sex workers to eat, do laundry, prepare for work, and receive peer counselling. Activists therefore used donations to purchase a cargo bike from which they distributed food, as well as safer sex and hygiene products in the streets frequented by migrant trans sex workers, thus also maintaining contact to this increasingly isolated group. As a result of the hardships experienced by sex workers, BesD experienced an increase in membership, Nicky explains:

From one day to the next, everyone who was hard hit was out on the streets [homeless] and it was impossible to miss that we are just having a big problem. Yes, that actually 'helped' to carry the association on again another wave, because it's simply needed, because people don't know where to turn, where they can get information, and now, since we've had the emergency aid fund, also practical, financial support.¹³⁹

Financially distressed sex workers turned to BesD and emphasized its necessity and role in providing emergency aid to sex worker communities. BesD also successfully lobbied for a temporary suspension of the section of the Prostitute Protection Act which banned sleeping in work places, allowing sex work venues to temporarily house those sex workers threatened by homelessness. This applied in particular to migrant sex workers without permanent housing in Germany. Activists also created new online spaces and formats: as a replacement for the whore congress, BesD organized biweekly online workshops for sex workers to meet and exchange knowledge. Furthermore, activists created strong publicity and visibility of the pandemic's effects on sex workers in public media (dpa, 2021; Kienholz, 2022).

As Christin says, activists saw themselves forced to focus on "limiting the damages" (*Schadensbegrenzung betreiben*) the pandemic caused on sex workers. This withdrew resources from other political activities, and BesD had to cancel its planned yearly whore congress in 2020. Still, the Covid-19 pandemic also triggered broad public protests among sex workers. Over the summer of 2020, sex worker activists held mass demonstrations in Hamburg, Cologne, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, and Bonn, with protest signs reminding the state that "livelihoods depend on sex work, too" (*auch an Sexarbeit hängen Existenzen*). "For many, existential fear is a very big driver"¹⁴⁰ to engage in activism, Christin confirms. Alexandra, who had to financially rely on her private retirement savings during the pandemic, claims "I'm doing this [activism] because I'm scared shitless."¹⁴¹ The protests which erupted in the summer of 2020 involved an unprecedented diversity in sex workers and collectives. Some of these had just been formed, such as "Sexy Aufstand Reeperbahn" (Sexy Rebellion Reeperbahn) comprising sex workers of the famous Hamburg redlight district Reeperbahn, while others had so far received little public visibility, such as "Cosmopolitrans," a collective of Latin-American trans sex workers based in Hanover. The pandemic-related bans

¹³⁹ „Jetzt bei Corona ging es von einem Tag auf den anderen und alle, die hart getroffen waren, saßen auf der Straße und es war nicht zu übersehen, dass wir gerade ein fettes Problem haben. Ja, das hat tatsächlich dabei geholfen, in Führungsstrichen, nochmal so eine Welle, den Verband auf so eine Welle zu tragen, weil er halt nötig ist, weil die Leute nicht wissen, wo sie sich hinwenden sollen, wo sie Informationen kriegen und jetzt seit dem Nothilfefonds halt auch praktische Unterstützung, so finanzielle.“ (Nicky)

¹⁴⁰ „Existenzangst ist ein ganz großer Motor für viele.“ (Christin)

¹⁴¹ „(...) ich mache das, weil mir der Arsch auf Grundeis geht.“ (Alexandra)

affected sex workers in all industry sectors and from all social locations, and thus had a mobilizing and uniting effect on the movement.

From sex worker activists' perspective, the pandemic presented the latest happening in a continuously more adverse social, legal and political context. According to social worker Sonja, these threat and grievances have put sex worker activists into an incessantly defensive position since the emergence of their self-organization against the Prostitute Protection Act:

It is somehow so permanent that you don't have the time to set yourself up in an orderly fashion, maybe with your own visions or something, because you are in a permanent we-have-to-prevent-the-worst-process. That is pretty stressful (...).¹⁴²

Whereas threats and grievances spurred and sustained the sex worker movement, they have also limited the development of proactive strategies and politics. Sonja's statement also points to the individual and collective costs which self-organization in such a context entails for marginalized and resource-poor political actors.

Managing Resources While "Tilting at Windmills"

As the data makes clear, sex worker activists are dealing with high costs of activism while having very limited resources at their disposal. Very generally, their stigmatized subjectivities as sex workers render activism costly: political engagement and public visibility always contain the personal risk of being outed. Because of the severe social consequences of an outing, this deters many sex workers from activism, Thomas explains:

That's a huge problem, if you think about the sex worker movement, everyone who really shows themselves is outed afterwards as a prostitute, hooker, sex worker, hustler, stripper, whatever, and that's always a risk if you're maybe only 25 and don't really know what you want to do professionally at 40.¹⁴³

As Thomas' statement shows, the deterrent effect of stigmatization has a collective dimension in so far as it reduces the mass base sex worker movements can mobilize, which limits their basic human resources. Stigmatization also means that sex worker movements and activists lack in the non-material resource of epistemic authority. While stigmatization

¹⁴² „Es ist halt irgendwie so permanent, dass man auch gar keine Zeit hat, sich irgendwie mal so ein bisschen geordnet aufzustellen, mit vielleicht auch eigenen Visionen oder so, weil man permanent nur so in einem 'Wir müssen das Schlimmste verhindern!' Prozess ist. Das ist schon relativ stressig (...).“ (Sonja)

¹⁴³ „Das ist ein Riesenproblem, wenn du jetzt an die politische Bewegung Sexarbeit denkst, alle, die sich wirklich zeigen, sind hinterher als Prostituierte, Nutte, Sexarbeiter, Stricher, Stripptänzerin, wie auch immer, geoutet, und das ist wenn du vielleicht erst 25 bist und noch nicht so richtig weißt, was du mit 40 beruflich machen willst immer ein Risiko.“ (Thomas)

negatively impacts the resources of all sex worker activists, there are variations in resource endowments among activists which correspond to social location and stratification within the sex industry. The most publicly visible “front line” activists included in my data hence often benefit from certain resources not all sex workers possess. Among these are language skills and university education, citizenship or secure migration status, sex work accepting social circles which alleviate the cost of an outing, or the comparably high levels of income and self-determination afforded by involvement in industry sectors such as studio work (e.g. BDSM, tantra) or independent escorting – which also carry reduced stigma within the whorarchy. Varying resource endowments among activists can thus skew power relations between the movement and its context, as well as within the movement itself. Nevertheless, even sex worker activists who have certain resources at their disposal need to calculate the costs and benefits of their political engagement.

On the one hand, this is crucial with regards to activists’ livelihoods. For Lucia, who works in BDSM and finds her resources limited by her disability, this takes priority over activism:

I don’t want to overburden myself as a person with a handicap. First and foremost, my income is at the top of the list, then my health, my needs, I would say. And what is left in terms of energy, in terms of reserves, I like to invest in sex worker politics. And that’s why I choose very carefully who I cooperate with [politically], to what extent I cooperate.¹⁴⁴

Maria agrees with this perspective and emphasizes that “you need to be able to afford activism.”¹⁴⁵ This is something even activists with certain resource endowments struggle with, Leo states:

(...) because we are not in a situation where we are super rich and have all the time in the world. We also have to work ourselves, we also have to manage to get clients ourselves, and it’s not always easy, even for those who are in better situations.

Apart from draining resources from their actual work, activism can have other impacts on activists’ ability to secure a livelihood. Lara, who works in escorting, says her public activism affects her client base:

¹⁴⁴ „Ich möchte mich als Mensch mit Handicap nicht übernehmen. In erster Linie steht halt mein Einkommen für mich oben, dann meine Gesundheit, meine Bedürfnisse, sag ich jetzt mal. Und was dann noch übrig bleibt an Energie, an Reserven, investiere ich sehr gerne in die Sex Worker Politik. Und deswegen wähle ich sehr genau aus, mit wem ich zusammenarbeite, wie weit ich zusammenarbeite.“ (Lucia)

¹⁴⁵ „(...) man muss sich Politik leisten können.“ (Marie)

I'm quite sure that I'm losing customers, and I'm losing them by the dozen. (...) Other people, however, are quite enthusiastic and want to get to know me for that very reason.¹⁴⁶

While activism deprives her of some clients, she specifically gains others. For Lukas, who includes activist slogans on his online escorting profile, the effect is equally two-fold:

I have the impression that there are clients who don't know what to do with it and who find it strange, and who tend to find it a bit off-putting. But then there are still some who actually find it totally cool, (...) and I then had the feeling that it rather triggers support.¹⁴⁷

Whereas Lara and Lukas find themselves able to accept these contrasting and unpredictable effects, other interviewees report carefully separating their work and activist personae to not jeopardize their financial security through activism. Andrea, for instance, believes that public activism rather threatens sex workers' professional success: "as a sex worker you are probably always the most successful if you are as discreet, anonymous or as inconspicuous as possible,"¹⁴⁸ she claims. Others again strategically limit their public engagement to avoid major costs: Roxy states she refrains from publicly criticising the management of the strip club she works at since it could endanger her work place.

On the other hand, sex worker activists need to manage resources in their pursuit of political goals. In Silke's words, sex workers' political struggles are like "tilting at windmills" (*Kampf gegen Windmühlen*), by which she alludes to a fight against overpowering opponents with limited resources. "We have no money, no power and yet we have to exert influence. That's just the problem,"¹⁴⁹ she asserts. Other interviewees describe sex work activism as a "marathon run" (*Marathonlauf*) or a "Sisyphean task" (*Sisyphosarbeit*), thus emphasizing the need for long-term persistence in the face of repeated setbacks and frustrations. "It's definitely something where you need a lot of staying power,"¹⁵⁰ social worker Sonja confirms.

While activists have managed their resources well enough to establish a movement within an adverse political context and sustain it beyond political losses, this has certainly taken a toll on them. This particularly expresses itself in the short "political life span" of sex worker

¹⁴⁶ „(...) ich bin mir ganz sicher, dass ich Kunden verliere, und zwar reihenweise dadurch. (...) Andere Leute sind wiederum ganz begeistert und wollen mich gerade deshalb kennenlernen.“ (Lara)

¹⁴⁷ „Ich habe den Eindruck, dass es Kunden gibt, die da gar nichts mit anfangen können und die es komisch finden, und das auch eher so ein bisschen abstößt. Dann gibt es aber schon noch einige, die es eigentlich total cool finden, (...) und ich dann das Gefühl hatte, dass es eher Support auslöst.“ (Lukas)

¹⁴⁸ „(...) als Sexarbeiterin bist du wahrscheinlich immer am erfolgreichsten wenn du so diskret, anonym oder so unauffällig wie möglich bist.“ (Andrea)

¹⁴⁹ „Wir haben kein Geld, keine Macht und müssen trotzdem Einfluss ausüben. Das ist halt das Problem.“ (Silke)

¹⁵⁰ „(...) es ist halt auf jeden Fall was, wo man einen langen Atem braucht (...).“ (Sonja)

activists: over the course of my research, I have gotten to know a number of long-standing activists who have continued their activism from the foundation of BesD until today. Yet, many more activists I met and spoke to at some point during my project had dropped out of activism only a year or two later. In fact, while attending yearly movement conferences and action days in the time span from 2018 to 2022, I could observe the high turn-over rate of activists within the movement. Time and again, I found predominantly new faces at protests, and often missed the ones of activists who had been present the year before. Sometimes, the entire composition of a collective would change, as was the case with trans*Sexworks, which was run by a completely different group of sex worker activists when I first got into contact with them. Among the activists who withdrew from activism are also some of my interviewees, and my research was accompanied by a continuous loss of old and establishment of new contacts. In some cases, interviewees specifically cite depression and burn-out as reasons, while others experienced declining physical health as a result of intense activist engagement. Interviewees also frequently report finding themselves overwhelmed with tasks, or wanting to pursue more activities, but abandoning them for lack of capacities. “Activism eats you up,”¹⁵¹ Alexandra concludes.

Given these resource-draining conditions, activists may also strategically use a temporary withdrawal. Lukas, for instance, states he is currently taking a “break from sex work activism” (*Sexarbeitsaktivismuspause*):

Because I think I generally overdid it last year (...) because I put a lot of energy into it for a long time, much more than was actually good for me, besides work and studies and my actual life.¹⁵²

Rather than a particularity of sex work activism, he identifies the draining of individual resources as a general feature of political engagement:

In any activism, everything is always infinitely important and infinitely urgent, and you always have to do it, and if you don't do it, nobody else will. And at some point you have to learn a bit of a balance for yourself. How much can you do, and how important is it that I do this, and that again another thing is added. And it's virtually endless.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ „Politik frisst dich auf.“ (Alexandra)

¹⁵² „Also ich hab mich letztes Jahr insgesamt damit, glaub ich, übernommen (...) weil ich sehr lang sehr viel Energie rein gebuttert habe, deutlich mehr als mir eigentlich gut tat, neben Arbeit und Studium und eigentlichem Leben.“ (Lukas)

¹⁵³ „In jedem Aktivismus ist alles immer unendlich wichtig und unendlich dringend, und man muss es immer machen und wenn man das nicht macht, dann macht es niemand anders. Und irgendwann muss man für sich selber ein bisschen die Balance lernen. Wie viel kann man da irgendwie machen, und wie wichtig ist genau das jetzt tatsächlich, dass ich das irgendwie noch mache und dass das jetzt auch noch kommt. Und es ist ja quasi endlos.“ (Lukas)

Because of the high demands of activism, “finding a balance” and learning to carefully manage the available resources is crucial for sex worker activists. For Nina, this relates to both the individual and collective level:

Very fundamentally, it is an incredibly important topic how we can manage to be good to ourselves and to each other when we do activism, how we avoid burnouts, how we create an atmosphere for each other that is somehow sustainable, that we don't constantly push each other to cross our limits to do even more and more again. This is not specific to sex work activism, but I think it is very, very important in all activism.¹⁵⁴

In very similar words, social worker Sonja emphasizes the need for activists to not only spend but also regain resources through activism:

You just have to (...) be good to each other, because otherwise I think it draws more energy than you get out of it. And I mean, somehow you have to get energy out of it yourself, because otherwise you just burn out at some point and don't feel like it any more.¹⁵⁵

From this perspective, “being good” to oneself and to others in one's community is important to maintain and reproduce the resources required for activism. This underlines the political relevance of self-care and community care for sex worker movements as resource-poor political actors, who strategically engage in these practices to sustain a costly form of activism in an adverse political context.

Summary

In this chapter, I have scrutinized the emergence of sex workers' self-organization against the Prostitute Protection Act and the developments it took after. To contextualize the forms of political agency and subjectivity which sex worker activists developed, I first detailed the working conditions they found in the time period between the Prostitution Act of 2001 and the Prostitute Protection Act of 2016. Whereas the official evaluation of the Prostitution Act of 2001 had identified only “first, tentative signs” (Kavemann & Rabe, 2007, p. 79) of improvements in the wider German sex industry, interviewees' descriptions of their work

¹⁵⁴ „Ganz grundsätzlich ist es ein unglaublich wichtiges Thema, wie wir es schaffen, wenn wir Aktivismus machen, gut zu uns selbst und uns gegenseitig zu sein, wie wir Burn Outs vermeiden, wie wir eine Atmosphäre schaffen füreinander, die irgendwie sustainable ist, dass wir nicht ständig uns gegenseitig pushen, unsere Grenzen zu überlatschen und noch mehr zu machen, und noch mehr zu machen. Das ist jetzt nicht spezifisch Sexarbeitsaktivismus, aber glaube ich, bei jedem Aktivismus immer wieder neu ganz, ganz wichtig.“ (Nina)

¹⁵⁵ „(...) dass man da einfach (...) miteinander gut umgeht, weil das sonst glaub ich mehr Energie zieht, als man dann da rausbekommt. Und ich meine, irgendwie muss man letztendlich auch Energie daraus selber bekommen, weil sonst hat man irgendwann einfach nur noch Burn Out und gar keinen Bock mehr.“ (Sonja)

experiences demonstrate that these were significant on an individual level. Activists in fact benefitted from the conditions provided by the Prostitution Act of 2001 in a variety of ways: they found improved working environments, enjoyed legal certainty, and could professionalize themselves within the diversifying German sex industry. Through this, they gained agency over their working conditions and vis-à-vis venue operators, police, and clients. Moreover, interviewees achieved financial stability in a now consistently available profession, and appreciated non-material benefits of sex work, such as increased freedom, self-determination, and self-realization. In doing so, they resisted power relations located at the intersection of gender, labour, and sexuality, while simultaneously facing continued discrimination, repression, and stigmatization in the German legal framework and society. Interviewees' work experiences also reveal the subjectivities which sex workers developed under the conditions of the Prostitution Act of 2001, which strengthened their self-conception as skilled workers and right-bearing, equal citizens. These experiences stood in contrast to the growing victimization of sex workers in public and political discourses, which interviewees from a diversity of social locations strongly reject. Detailing the forms of agency and subjectivities shaped by work experiences under the conditions provided by the Prostitution Act of 2001 serves to understand how they later came under threat by the planned Prostitute Protection Act, and how they motivated and informed activists' political self-organization within BesD.

Today, BesD is the largest association in Europe which organizes only active and former sex workers. Its foundation in 2013 presented the formal starting point of an unprecedented self-organization of sex workers in Germany, which looks back onto the history of the previous whore movement and built on its remaining institutional structures, but is distinct in its activist composition. Moreover, in contrast to the whore movement which proactively organized to expand sex workers' rights, activists of BesD engaged in reactive mobilizations against legislative plans which endangered their "taken for granted way of life" (van Dyke, 2013, p. 662). The victimizing premisses and repressive provisions of the planned Prostitute Protection Act contradicted sex worker activists' self-understanding and endangered the status quo they had achieved through the Prostitution Act of 2001, which had strengthened their rights and expanded their agency over their working and living conditions. The emergence of sex workers' self-organization in the context of the German Prostitute Protection Act emphasizes the role threats play for sex worker movements, as reflected in

previous mobilization waves identified by Hardy (2010) and Geymonat and Maciotti (2016). Sex worker activists' strategic choices further confirm the utility of political process approaches in understanding sex worker movements: after its foundation, BesD focused predominantly on lobbying to influence the legislative process, and on public outreach work to repudiate victimizing public discourses. While sex worker activists formulated comprehensive political demands and gained access to both the legislative arena and the public sphere, they struggled with a lack of epistemic authority and political influence, and with persistent stigmatization – obstacles which Gall described as common for sex worker movements (2007). A lack of epistemic authority and activists' stigmatized subjectivities as sex workers are certainly interconnected. Still, this is exacerbated by prostitution politics constituting a form of morality politics (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012) which are characterized by a general devaluation of expert authority in a largely symbolic and fact-resistant political process.

In order to avoid morality politics and elaborate beneficial prostitution policies, Wagenaar and Altink (2012) also emphasize that sex workers' meaningful involvement in the political process should take primacy. As I have shown, this was not given in the examined case: in 2016, the Prostitute Protection Act was adopted along with most of the provisions sex worker activists had objected to. Immediately after the law's adoption, sex workers' self-organization slumped, but was quickly extended. The necessity created by the harmful impacts of the Prostitute Protection Act, the intensified political lobbying by anti-prostitution campaigners from 2019 on, and the temporary prohibition of sex work at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. The latter caused grievances otherwise known in legal frameworks with client criminalization or general prohibition of sex work, and spurred movement expansion through increased BesD membership and diverse, mass-based public protests in the summer of 2020.

At the same time as sex workers' self-organization has been strongly informed by its political context, my analysis has centred sex worker activists as political actors whose agency is reflected in strategic adjustments and tactical innovations. Following the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act, activists diversified their tactical repertoires to encompass litigation, disruptive forms of direct action, or artistic interventions. They also formed a diversity of new collectives across Germany, thereby expanding sex workers' self-organization beyond BesD and establishing a sustained social movement. My analysis also recognizes that

sex worker activists are not purely rational and strategic actors by detailing the affective dimension of collective action (e.g. D. B. Gould, 2009; Jasper, 2011). Sex workers' self-organization was motivated and accompanied by a variety of collectively shared emotions: at the beginning of their mobilizations, perceptions of threat and "powerlessness" co-existed with activists' sense of their own entitlement to rights. Lobbying and public outreach work were then bolstered by a feeling of trust in the political efficacy of self-representation and fact-based argumentation, which was eventually disappointed and followed by a sense of loss, disillusion, and anxiety over the continuously deteriorating legal, political, and social conditions.

Since the emergence of their self-organization in 2013, sex worker activists have indeed been organizing in a context of ongoing decline in working and living conditions paired with stricter legal frameworks and increased political threats. This has drained the movements' already limited resources, as sex worker activists' testimonies of burn-out and exhaustion, as well as their often short political life span indicates. Part of sex worker activists' tactical repertoire are thus also practices of self-care and community care, which are employed strategically by activists to sustain their movement. As emphasized by Black feminist scholarship, these practices are largely overlooked within movements and scholarship, but fundamentally political (e.g. Davis, 2018; Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Lorde, 2017). With regards to the emergence and development of sex workers' self-organization which I examined in this chapter, these individual and collective forms of care work reveal themselves as essential to the sex worker movement's survival in an adverse political context.

Although sex worker activists failed in their declared goal of preventing the Prostitute Protection Act, their self-organization has produced significant outcomes. Among these are the establishment of an organization which represented sex workers' collective interests in the political arena and visibly intervened in the public sphere, the movement's persistence and diversification after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act, and sex worker activists' resilience in the face of continued adversities. Given that activists achieved these outcomes under conditions of resource scarcity renders them even more notable. In contrast to scholarship on poor people's movements (e.g. Piven & Cloward, 1977), I would however not conclude that this invalidates resource mobilization approaches: as I will delineate in more detail in chapter 7, community presents an important asset for resource-weak and marginalized political actors such as sex worker movements, and one which they strategically

fall back on in times of hardship. Despite the palpable pessimism which has informed sex worker activists' self-assessment of their mobilizations, my analysis still highlights the significance of the movements' resilience and transformation. My findings thus expand scholarship on sex worker movements' outcomes, which has predominantly identified obstacles to sex workers' political engagement and proclaimed the fragility and failure of their self-organization (e.g. Gall, 2007; Majic, 2014; Mathieu, 2003b; van der Poel, 1995; Weitzer, 1991). Further complicating simplified declarations of the success or failure of sex workers' self-organization is the temporal dimension (see Bosi et al., 2016): the upcoming evaluation of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2025 may provide a new window of opportunity for the sex worker movement and other political actors to intervene in prostitution politics.

In addition to institutional context, other actors operating in the field of prostitution politics have shaped sex workers' self-organization since its beginnings. This specifically applies to anti-prostitution campaigners, who occupy increasingly hegemonic positions within this field. In the following chapter, I therefore examine sex worker activists' relation to anti-prostitution campaigners and delineate how antagonistic dynamics impacted the former's self-organization.

6 (En-)Countering Anti-Prostitution Campaigners

Since the adoption of the Prostitution Act in 2001, anti-prostitution campaigners have become increasingly active in the field of German prostitution politics. At a time when the German whore movement of the 1980s had abated, anti-prostitution campaigners started building political momentum out of the critique of the Prostitution Act and moral panics generated around migration and sex (Heying, 2019; Künkel, 2007; Schrader & Künkel, 2020). Their mobilizations, which mirror broader European trends (Scoular & Carline, 2014), contributed to the discursive victimization of sex workers and calls for stricter legal control of the German sex industry, which informed the legislative plans for the Prostitute Protection Act. For sex workers who began self-organizing against these developments in 2013, the growing hegemony of anti-prostitution campaigners in the field of prostitution politics constituted a threat, and opposing them became as central to their political struggles as preventing repressive legislation.

This chapter examines how sex worker activists operate in relation to anti-prostitution campaigners, and how this interaction has impacted their self-organization. As I will show in subchapter 6.1, the relationship between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners was antagonistic from the outset when sex worker activists first entered into the field of prostitution politics by countering a publicized anti-prostitution campaign. Confrontations then characterized the dynamic between these two political actors in the long run, and shaped sex workers' self-organization significantly. Although sex worker activists managed to establish themselves as political actors in opposition to anti-prostitution campaigners, they increasingly struggled to compete with the latter. In subchapter 6.2, I delineate how sex worker activists systematically countered their political opponent in the public sphere, but were challenged by the efficacy of anti-prostitution campaigners' "affective strategies" (Sauer, 2019). I argue that sex worker activists' attempts to counteract anti-prostitution campaigners through nuanced argumentation were stifled for two reasons: by the emotionalized and ideologically charged nature of prostitution politics as a form of morality politics (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012), and by the fact that affective strategies were inaccessible to sex worker activists as marginalized and stigmatized political actors. Seeking to gain political legitimacy, sex worker activists resisted emotionalization in favour of fact-based argumentation, and strategically centred dominant ideals of rationality.

Activists' political counterefforts were further complicated by the epistemic and structural inequalities which characterize their relationship to anti-prostitution campaigners and exacerbate sex worker activists' political marginalization (6.3). On an epistemic level, sex worker activists face the discrediting effect of social stigma (Goffman, 1986), as well as the prevalent victimization and psychological pathologization of sex workers. On a structural level, the relationship between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners is marked by distinctions in class and institutional embeddedness: unlike sex worker activists, anti-prostitution campaigners occupy strategically relevant and influential positions within the field of prostitution politics and command considerable resources. As incumbents, anti-prostitution campaigners structure the political field to their advantage and constrain the opportunities and actions of sex worker activists as challengers (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015). Because sex worker activists were compelled to continuously adjust their tactical repertoire in relation to anti-prostitution campaigners, the initially enabling antagonistic dynamic eventually narrowed sex worker activists' political analysis and drained their resources.

As I demonstrate in subchapter 6.4, these processes were further aggravated by the targeted attacks and hostilities which anti-prostitution campaigners directed against sex worker activists. Anti-prostitution campaigners' delegitimization of sex worker activists as political actors had tangible impacts on activists' ability to influence the legislative process leading up to the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016. Hostilities turned again more overt when anti-prostitution campaigners intensified their lobbying efforts through the parliamentary working group on prostitution in 2019, and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic starting in March 2020. Although sex worker activists initially benefitted from the antagonistic dynamic with anti-prostitution campaigners, these confrontations ultimately drained the movement's resources, narrowed its focus, and caused the withdrawal of activists from public spaces. In order to overcome some of these impediments, sex worker activists performed a strategic shift towards counterprotesting to maintain an oppositional presence within the public sphere. In subchapter 6.5, I discuss the specifics of sex workers' protests, as well as the advantages and limitations of this strategy for their movement. A central characteristic I identify here is the strategic exhibition of nudity and a provocative aesthetic. Through the use of these tactics, sex worker activists locate themselves within feminist and LGBTQ movements and share many of the ongoing contestations over protest repertoires and structural

inequalities within these contexts (e.g. Barcan, 2002; Gupta, 2017; Hunt, 2018; Rupp & Taylor, 2003; Taylor & van Dyke, 2004).

Summing up, I link my analysis back to my theoretical framework. As part of this, I discuss the benefits of interactionist social movement perspectives within my analysis: both sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners present strategic players operating within the field of prostitution politics (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015; Fligstein & McAdam, 2015). Because they pursue oppositional goals within the same political, their relationship is inextricably linked, conflictual, and continuously escalating in a movement-counter-movement dynamic (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). While these approaches convincingly elucidate the emergence, development, and outcomes of sex workers' self-organization in relation to anti-prostitution campaigners, they also entail shortcomings. Viewed from this angle, contestations between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners appear as expected. Historically, sex worker movements have however presented alternative labour rights perspectives to old feminist polarization in prostitution politics (Phipps, 2017), and cooperation between sex worker movements and anti-prostitution feminists has been possible despite diverging political goals (Geymonat et al., 2019; Heying, 2016, 2019; Mathieu, 2001, 2003a). Most importantly, interactionist social movement approaches normalize antagonistic dynamics as legitimate facets of political interaction, and thus ignore the exclusionary effect they have on sex worker activists' political participation. Feminist theories of democracy (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Marx Ferree et al., 2002; I. M. Young, 2002) fill this gap by positing the ideal of inclusion as a precondition to the legitimacy of democratic decision-making. Viewed from this perspective, the confrontational encounters between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners reinforced existing hierarchies, resulted in the political exclusion of sex worker activists, and undermined the quality of political processes and their outcomes. Finally, feminist theories of democracy emphasize that attacks and hostilities are not stable elements of politics, but rather tools to expel marginalized group from public and political spaces (Krook, 2020), thereby threatening democracy, human rights, and gender equality.

6.1 “You Have to Act Immediately!” – Entering Into an Antagonistic Dynamic

From the onset of their self-organization, sex worker activists entered into an antagonistic dynamic with anti-prostitution campaigners. In fact, BesD made its first public appearance shortly after its foundation in October 2013 by responding to an anti-prostitution campaign. Through a leaked press release, sex workers activists caught wind of the “Appeal against Prostitution” just days before its publication by radical feminist Alice Schwarzer in the magazine EMMA in November 2013. At first, BesD members were shocked to see such a concerted public call to abolish prostitution via client criminalization, but ultimately unsure about the campaign’s political relevance. They thus consulted a journalist friend, whose alarmed reaction Melanie remembers:

‘Holy shit,’ [he] said. ‘Everybody will write this. You have to act immediately! You have to do a counteraction right now. Do a counter-action pro sex work, a signature campaign, and do it immediately! The press release has to go out today, it has to be on everyone’s desk tomorrow, otherwise it’s too late.’... Ok...!? So we sat down at night and wrote something, the three of us here, with two bottles of wine, and sent it to all our press contacts and the German Press Agency and just any contact we could find online.¹⁵⁶

Sex worker activists recognized the media impact the anti-prostitution campaign would have, the political threat it posed, and the urgent need for a timed public response. In an ad-hoc overnight meeting, Melanie and two other colleagues thus hurriedly created a countercampaign. Corresponding to the anti-prostitution campaign in format, the activists created an “Appeal FOR Prostitution” (*Appell FÜR Prostitution*) (BesD, 2013) in which they refuted EMMA’s claims that prostitution violated human dignity, occurred only under coercion, and that the 2001 Prostitution Act had turned Germany into a “hub of Europe’s traffickers and a paradise for sex tourists from the neighbouring countries” (EMMA, 2013a). Instead, BesD maintained that sex work was done in a “predominantly voluntary and self-determined” manner and presented a “professional activity in which sexual services are offered in return for payment” (BesD, 2013). Activists emphasized that the exchange of money did not invalidate sexual consent, and distinguished sex work from slavery, human trafficking, and sexualized violence. BesD’s counterappeal also framed the Prostitution Act of

¹⁵⁶ „‘Ach, du Scheiße’ sagte [Journalist]. ‘Das schreibt jeder. Ihr müsst sofort handeln! Ihr müsst sofort eine Gegenaktion machen. Macht eine Gegenaktion pro Sexkauf, Unterschriftenaktion, und zwar sofort! Die Pressemitteilung muss heute noch raus, die muss morgen bei den allen auf dem Schreibtisch liegen, ansonsten ist es zu spät.’... Ok...!? Ja, wir haben uns dann nachts hingesetzt und was geschrieben, zu dritt hier, mit zwei Flaschen Wein, und haben das an alle unsere Pressekontakte und an dpa und was man so recherchiert hat im Internet.“ (Melanie)

2001 as a vital step towards improved working conditions, social acceptance, and professional recognition for sex workers. Moreover, activists rejected the generalized victimization of migrant sex workers as discriminatory. Rather than the German legal framework, they identified “global inequalities, restrictive migration laws and the lack of rights of trafficked persons” as the main issues faced by these groups, necessitating “comprehensive structural reforms at the global level and a human rights-based approach” to human trafficking. Activists’ countercampaign also called “for the strengthening of rights and improvement of living and working conditions of people in sex work.” BesD rejected the expansion of police powers and criminalization of prostitution in any form, requested the “involvement of sex workers in all political processes concerning prostitution,” demanded education and training programs, destigmatization campaigns, and respect, as well as “right of residence, compensation and comprehensive support for victims of human trafficking” (BesD, 2013). With this appeal, BesD not only opposed anti-prostitution campaigners’ claims, but publicly delineated its central political positions for the first time, and mirrored the politics of the international sex worker movement.

BesD then sent its counterappeal to central German media agencies on the same morning that EMMA’s anti-prostitution campaign was to be launched. Melanie recalls the tremendous public response their counterappeal had:

The phone rang non-stop. Within 14 days, we somehow had 4.000 signatures in favour of sex work (...). For us, it was great because we suddenly had an incredible amount of press contacts. We were suddenly being talked about, ‘Oh, there’s a professional association!?’¹⁵⁷

The counterappeal generated sudden public exposure for BesD, which accumulated press contacts and supportive signatures. The counterappeal also spurred sex workers’ self-organization: “Of course, as a result, we also got a lot of new members, also people who wanted to contribute. So you can say Alice Schwarzer actually helped us a lot!”¹⁵⁸ Melanie continues with a laughter. Through its counterappeal, BesD generated public visibility and increased its membership. The association became known as the collective representation of sex workers and as an alternative source for journalists. Sex worker activists therefore

¹⁵⁷ „Das Telefon hat nur noch geklingelt. Wir hatten dann innerhalb von 14 Tagen irgendwie 4.000 Unterschriften, die pro Sexarbeit sich bekannt haben, und das hat natürlich auch unglaublich viele... Für uns war es super, weil wir hatten dann plötzlich unglaublich viele Pressekontakte. Wir waren plötzlich im Gespräch, ‘Oh, es gibt einen Berufsverband!?’“ (Melanie)

¹⁵⁸ „Wir haben auch dann dadurch natürlich sehr viele neue Mitglieder bekommen, auch Leute, die mitarbeiten wollten. Also kann man sagen, Alice Schwarzer hat uns eigentlich sehr geholfen!“ (lacht) (Melanie)

succeeded in turning the political threat posed by anti-prostitution campaigners into a political advantage, and established themselves as political actors within the field of prostitution politics.

The counterappeal is descriptive of the antagonistic dynamic between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners which would continue to characterize their relationship thereafter. Sex worker activists identify anti-prostitution campaigners as a central political adversaries and hold them accountable for the prevalent victimization of sex workers and the shift towards repressive legislation. As such, activists saw themselves compelled to counter the increased activities anti-prostitution campaigners undertook. Shortly after the counterappeal, activists protested the launch of Schwarzer's book "Prostitution – A German Scandal" in Berlin on the 14th of November 2013. Here, like at many events to come, activists found that anti-prostitution campaigners spread misinformation about sex work and "pulled out individual fates" (*Einzelchicksale rausgezerrt*) of abused sex workers to perform "sweeping generalisations" (*Pauschalisierungen*) to all experiences in sex work. Having attended several events by an anti-prostitution campaigners, Katharina subsumes they "have nothing to do with a scientific talk or critique."¹⁵⁹ In her view, they consist of decontextualized quotes, unsubstantiated figures on the sex industry, and absurd logics:

One of the arguments is that if you got money and didn't have to sleep with people, would you just take the money or would you still sleep with people? Yes, I mean, if I were a baker and either just got money, or got money and still had to bake buns, then I would just take the money and not bake buns.¹⁶⁰

Exhibiting such ignorance of sex work and working people in general, Katharina sees anti-prostitution campaigns as nothing more than "propaganda". Still, she recognizes a necessity to respond to these campaigns, "because you don't want to let that opinion stand like that either."¹⁶¹ Sex worker activists were unable to simply disregard anti-prostitution campaigners and consequently began to strategically oppose and debate them in the public sphere. Even though BesD initially drew political gains from countering anti-prostitution campaigners, sex worker activists increasingly struggled to compete with the latter in this arena.

¹⁵⁹ „(...) nicht wirklich tragbar, weil das hat mit nem wissenschaftlichen Vortrag und mit ner Kritik nichts zu tun“ (Katharina)

¹⁶⁰ „Eines der Argumente (...) ist auch, ja wenn du jetzt Geld bekommen würdest und dafür nicht mit den Menschen schlafen würdest, würdest du das Geld nehmen oder würdest du trotzdem mit dem Menschen schlafen? Ja, ich meine, wenn ich ein Bäcker bin, und dann Geld bekommen würde, oder Geld bekommen und noch Brötchen backen, dann würde ich ja trotzdem das Geld nehmen und nicht Brötchen backen.“ (Katharina)

¹⁶¹ „(...) weil man die Meinung so eben auch nicht stehen lassen möchte“ (Katharina)

6.2 “I Just Don’t Want to Give the Impression of a Hysterical Whore” – Resisting

Emotionalization

Following BesD’s counterappeal, sex worker activists began to strategically counter anti-prostitution campaigners in public discussion rounds and panels, in interviews on TV, radio and in print media, or on social media. Although they had initially benefitted from this antagonistic dynamic, sex worker activists found themselves more and more unable to compete with the efficacy of anti-prostitution campaigners’ “affective strategies” (Sauer, 2019) in an emotionalized political field.

According to Nicky, anti-prostitution campaigners produce “blatantly violent pornographic images” (*krass gewaltpornographische Bilder*) in order to support their claims against sex work. Subject of these images are excessive portrayals of sexual practices and sex workers’ supposedly ill health. Anti-prostitution campaigners claim that sex workers suffer from a range of physical damages due to sex work, Alexandra summarizes:

(...) urinary incontinence because they have to endure 30 johns per day (...), hipbones all worn out because guys are always lying on top of them (...), [and] vitamin D deficiencies because they can’t get out of the whorehouse and are only kept in the cellar.¹⁶²

Such shocking descriptions serve to illustrate the grave bodily harms which sex work produces according to anti-prostitution campaigners. Additionally, sex worker activists recount the disrespectful terminology used by the latter:

(...) expressions like ‘fuck till you drop’ and ‘penetrate body orifices’ and all that kind of stuff.¹⁶³ (Andrea)

(...) they talk about the ‘50 unwashed cocks per day’ that a poor sex worker has to put in her mouth (...).¹⁶⁴
(Barbara)

These graphic images emotionally affect audiences with little knowledge of sex work. Activists find that public talks delivered by anti-prostitution campaigners “function according to the principle of brain-washing”¹⁶⁵ and effectively “wash over” (*berieseln*) and “wear down” (*weichkochen*) audiences. “But the problem is,” Katharina claims, “for people on the outside

¹⁶² „(...) Blasenschwäche, weil die ja 30 Freier am Tag über sich ergehen lassen müssen (...) die Hüftknochen, das ist ja alles ausgeleiert weil ständig die Typen auf ihnen liegen (...) Vitamin D Mangel, weil die kommen ja aus dem Puff nicht raus und werden nur im Keller gehalten.“ (Alexandra)

¹⁶³ „(...) Ausdrücke wie ‘ficken bis zum Abwinken’ und ‘Körperöffnungen penetrieren’ und lauter solche Sachen.“ (Andrea)

¹⁶⁴ „(...) da von den 50 ungewaschenen Schwänzen pro Tag die Rede ist, die eine arme Sexarbeiterin dann in den Mund nehmen muss (...).“ (Barbara)

¹⁶⁵ „(...) funktionieren nach dem Prinzip der Gehirnwäsche (...).“ (Alexandra)

it's impossible to contextualize this."¹⁶⁶ Despite anti-prostitution campaigners' descriptions being "untenable" (*nicht tragbar*), activists find that they leave a lasting effect on the general public. "That's just what gets stuck in the heads of people who don't examine the issue closely,"¹⁶⁷ Silke claims. By producing images of sex workers' suffering, anti-prostitution campaigners "simply have arguments that go to the soul, to the heart,"¹⁶⁸ Melanie states. According to her, anti-prostitution campaigners' rhetorical strategies also "work incredibly well in the media and unfortunately we live in a media world that influences our thinking."¹⁶⁹ Sex worker activists thus notice the impact of anti-prostitution campaigns on uninformed publics and their functionality in sensationalized media reporting.

Anti-prostitution campaigner's affective strategies also influence sex worker activists themselves, and many interviewees state they battle with strong emotions in situations of encounter. "Ey, I went nuts,"¹⁷⁰ Alexandra remembers from an event, and Barbara tells anti-prostitution campaigners' graphic descriptions of violence "really make your skin crawl."¹⁷¹ Being blamed for this violence, Simone says, "that's when I got really upset. It irritated me. I think it's totally mean and unfair."¹⁷² Nicky emphasizes that these events can also invoke memories of traumatic experiences: "for some people, this is actually one entire trigger-event,"¹⁷³ she explains. "Facing the discussion" (*sich der Diskussion stellen*) with anti-prostitution campaigners in direct encounters is therefore emotionally challenging for activists.

Activists try to manage these negative emotions evoked in encounters with anti-prostitution campaigners in various ways. Maya explicitly tried to remain calm and conduct a fact-based discussion during her first participation in a public panel, because she had anticipated the strong emotionalization:

Since I had already noticed on social media how some of my colleagues had been attacked in a really nasty way and then responded quite aggressively, I decided I wouldn't do that. I want to stay calm. I want to have

¹⁶⁶ „(...) aber das Problem ist, dass für außenstehende Leute das überhaupt nicht einordenbar ist“ (Katharina)

¹⁶⁷ „Das ist halt das, was sich festsetzt in den Köpfen von so Leuten, die sich nicht so ausführlich damit befassen.“ (Silke)

¹⁶⁸ „Die haben einfach Argumente, die in die Seele gehen, also ins Herz.“ (Melanie)

¹⁶⁹ „Es funktioniert medial unglaublich gut, und leider leben wir in einer Medienwelt, die unser Denken beeinflusst.“ (Melanie)

¹⁷⁰ „Ey, ich hab den Föhn gekriegt“ (Alexandra)

¹⁷¹ „(...) da sträuben sich einem ja wirklich die Nackenhaare (...).“ (Barbara)

¹⁷² „Da hab ich mich total aufgeregt. Das hat mich irritiert. Finde ich total gemein und unfair.“ (Simone)

¹⁷³ „Das ist eigentlich eine einzige Triggerveranstaltung für manche Menschen.“ (Nicky)

a fact-based discussion and not let myself be lured into a trap, so to speak, I just don't want to give the impression of a hysterical whore.¹⁷⁴

Having observed emotionalized clashes between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners, Maya consciously sought to resist existing stereotypes about "the hysterical whore" and present herself as rational and composed. Nevertheless, Maya found herself get angry during the panel, but repressed the feeling for the duration of the talk: "I had resolved to stay calm, and that's why I gritted my teeth and waited until the break (...),"¹⁷⁵ she explains. Having received criticism from colleagues for seeking to engage anti-prostitution campaigners respectfully, Maya claims she can understand other activists' avoidance and lack of compassion: "many colleagues (...) don't want to meet these people at eye level and with respect and empathy, because most of them don't do that either."¹⁷⁶ In addition, not all activists manage to control their emotions in the way Maya did. Andrea tells of an instance where she found the debate with anti-prostitution campaigners so emotionally challenging she left the room crying:

I then stood up and said goodbye, and said I am no longer prepared to discuss under such conditions, because it's unfair, and because that not only hurts me but the target group for which I am sitting here. (...) I cried a little, because it was also very exhausting, it was not without its difficulties. You have to imagine, there were about 150 people. (...) I would have preferred to walk naked through the [main city square] and I would not have liked doing that. But that was really horrible!¹⁷⁷

For Andrea, being exposed to anti-prostitution campaigners' affective strategies in the public arena is worse than the imagined public shame of "walking naked" through her city. Other activists completely avoid encounters with anti-prostitution campaigners because they feel they could not control their emotions:

I don't handle it well. I would lose it. (...) I would have beaten them!¹⁷⁸ (Leo)

¹⁷⁴ „Da ich vorher schon über Social Media immer wieder mitbekommen hatte, wie einige Kolleginnen von mir richtig übel angegangen wurden und dann auch ziemlich aggressiv geantwortet haben, hatte ich mir vorgenommen, das mache ich nicht. Ich will da ruhig bleiben. Ich will eine sachliche Diskussion führen und mich nicht sozusagen in eine Falle locken lassen, ich will halt nicht das Bild einer hysterischen Nutte abgeben.“ (Maya)

¹⁷⁵ „Ich hatte mir vorgenommen, ruhig zu bleiben, und deshalb habe ich quasi die Zähne zusammen gebissen und bis in die Pause gewartet (...).“ (Maya)

¹⁷⁶ „(...) ich kann verstehen, dass (...) viele Kolleginnen (...) das nicht wollen, auf Augenhöhe und mit Respekt und Empathie den Leuten zu begegnen, weil die tun's ja meist auch nicht.“ (Maya)

¹⁷⁷ „Ich bin dann aufgestanden und hab mich verabschiedet und hab gesagt, ich bin nicht mehr bereit unter solchen Voraussetzungen zu diskutieren, weil das unfair ist, und weil das nicht nur mich verletzt sondern die Zielgruppe, für die ich hier sitze. (...) Ich habe ein wenig geweint, weil es war auch sehr anstrengend, es war schon nicht ohne. Du musst dir vorstellen, da waren so um die 150 Leute. (...) Ich wäre lieber nackt durch den [Stadtattraktion] gelaufen und das hätte ich nicht gern getan. Aber das war jetzt wirklich schrecklich!“ (Andrea)

¹⁷⁸ „Ich kann damit nicht gut umgehen. Ich würde ausrasten (...) ich hätte die geschlagen!“ (Leo)

That's not my thing. I would get so angry that it wouldn't help our movement, because then they would totally tear me apart. So: choose your battles.¹⁷⁹ (Nina)

Activists estimate that losing control over their emotions and showing anger and aggression would further expose them to anti-prostitution campaigners' attacks and harm their own political cause. This illustrates that affective strategies are not available to sex worker activists in the same way they are to anti-prostitution campaigners, as these would reinforce prejudices against sex workers as deviant and irrational, and threaten their recognition as political actors. Nicky says she avoids encounters out of self-preservation as a worker and activist: "because it makes me sick and I would like to keep my job long term, and it is also important for the community that I function long term,"¹⁸⁰ she explains. Because activists like Nicky experience encounters with anti-prostitution campaigners as "exhausting and nerve-racking" (*anstrengend und nervenaufreibend*), avoidance presents a strategy to preserve resources, and the image of sex worker activists as rational and deliberate political actors. At the same time, avoidance cedes public spaces to anti-prostitution campaigners, and increases their dominance in this sphere. Scarlet seeks to prevent antagonistic encounters and still maintain access to public arenas by influencing the structure and composition of events:

The first step I always take is to approach the organisers and say I don't want to sit on a panel with anti-prostitution campaigners. Because I can only lose (...). That's why my key condition is always that the event is at least respectful towards sex work. And if opposing voices get a chance to speak there, then so be it.¹⁸¹

By making public appearances dependent on "respectful" interactions and the absence of anti-prostitution campaigners, Scarlet manages to skew power relations more in her favour. Nevertheless, avoiding emotionalized antagonistic encounters with anti-prostitution campaigners often proves impossible for activists since confrontative interviews and panels are heavily requested by journalist. In Maya's experience, the emotionalization created in such specifically orchestrated stand-offs present a journalistic "manoeuvre" (*Manöver*) to appeal to audiences. Resisting emotionalization permits activists like Maya to exert agency within these power relations.

¹⁷⁹ „Das ist nicht mein Ding. Da würde ich so wütend werden, dass das unserer Bewegung nicht hilfreich wäre, weil mich dann total auseinandernehmen würden. Also: choose your battles.“ (Nina)

¹⁸⁰ „(...) weil mich das krank macht und ich meinen Job gerne wirklich langfristig halten will und das auch wichtig für die Community ist, dass ich langfristig funktioniere.“ (Nicky)

¹⁸¹ „Also in der Regel versuche ich ganz ruhig und überlegt, mit diesen Leuten zu diskutieren, wenn ich es nicht vermeiden kann. Der erste Schritt, den ich immer mache ist, ich trete an die Veranstalterinnen heran und sage ich möchte nicht mit Sexarbeitsgegnern auf dem Podium sitzen. Weil ich kann da eigentlich nur verlieren (...) Deswegen ist meine Schlüsselbedingung immer, dass es mindestens eine wertschätzende Veranstaltung für Sexarbeit ist. Und wenn dann dort gegnerische Stimmen zu Wort kommen, dann ist das so.“ (Scarlet)

At the same time, many activist learn that rational and composed argumentation fail in comparison to the affective strategies of anti-prostitution campaigners. Melanie explains the sheer impossibility for sex worker activists to refute these shocking narratives of victimization:

‘The poor women, and all this is happening on our doorstep! They are tortured there, they are enslaved there, and it can’t be that something like that exists here in Germany!’ ... Nobody wants that! I don’t want that either. And then I come and say, ‘No, I don’t want that either, but...!’ and I lost already. That is very, very difficult.¹⁸²

As Melanie’s experience shows, activists struggle to counter the potency of anti-prostitution campaigners’ affective strategies on audiences through nuanced argumentation. “That is a difficult field to argue in,” Thomas agrees. “Because the facts are often simply ignored. Or it is ignored that there are no facts!”¹⁸³ Within these emotionalized and fact-resistant debates, anti-prostitution campaigners then declare client criminalization as a panacea to the presented harms, Thomas finds:

(...) it is relatively comfortable to say you are in favour [of client criminalization], because that sounds so good at first. And the less informed citizens can also comfortably follow the arguments.¹⁸⁴

While the simple political solution offered by anti-prostitution campaigners assuages the shock which their affective strategies produce, sex worker activists’ countering explanations offer no such resolution. These strategic difficulties which sex worker activists face under emotionalized conditions are then exacerbated by anti-prostitution campaigners’ hegemonic position in the field of prostitution politics.

6.3 “Their Voices Are Really Dominating the Conversation” – Fighting on Uneven Terrain

Further complication sex worker activists’ encounters with anti-prostitution campaigners are the epistemic and structural inequalities which characterize their relationship.

On the one hand, sex worker activists operate from an inferior epistemic position due to their stigmatized subjectivities and prevalent victimization. According to Scarlet, anti-

¹⁸² „Die armen Frauen, und das alles passiert bei uns vor der Haustür! Die werden da gequält, die werden da versklavt, und das kann doch nicht sein, dass es bei uns in Deutschland so etwas gibt! ... Keiner will das! Das will ich auch nicht. Und dann komme ich und sag, 'Ja, ne, das will ich auch nicht, *aber...*!' Schon verloren. Das ist ganz, ganz schwierig.“ (Melanie)

¹⁸³ „(...) das ist ein schwieriges Feld, da dann zu argumentieren. Weil die Fakten oft einfach ignoriert werden. Oder es wird ignoriert, dass es keine Fakten gibt!“ (Thomas)

¹⁸⁴ „(...) es ist relativ bequem zu sagen, man ist dafür [für ein Verbot], weil das klingt erst mal so gut. Und die weniger informierten Bürger können den Argumenten auch bequem folgen.“ (Thomas)

prostitution campaigners frame sex workers as “fundamentally traumatised because they are victims of violence,”¹⁸⁵ and allege a high prevalence of mental health issues among sex workers. Narratives of traumatization are then utilized to deny sex workers’ capacity to understand their own situation and act on it, Scarlet explains:

There is a direction in psychotherapy that deals with trauma research. Many anti-prostitution campaigners are organized there, and psychotherapists use conventions and congresses to rail against sex work. (...) And that in turn leads to sex workers who say ‘Stop, stop, I am not a victim of violence!’ and denying that they are victims of violence, having their words turned around in their mouths. Which then becomes extremely bizarre when someone says, ‘But I am a psychotherapist. You can’t be offering consensual sexual services!’ This, in principle, is incapacitation par excellence.¹⁸⁶

Informed by biased psychological research, anti-prostitution campaigners deny sex workers’ agency and discredit resistance to victimization as expressions of “false consciousness”. This general pathologization and incapacitation of sex workers also negates their political agency, and compromises sex worker activists’ credibility. Many interviewees thus describe a general inability to reach anti-prostitution campaigners through debate. According to activists, their opponents are “arguing in a closed system”¹⁸⁷, “not interested in criticism” (SWAG, 2021), “completely resistant to advice” (*beratungsresistent*), “relentlessly stubborn” (*gnadenlos verbohrt*), and “completely sealed off” (*völlig abgeschottet*). From his frustrated attempts to discuss anti-prostitution campaigners, Thomas concludes

(...) there is no access. I’ve rarely seen it so radical (...). Completely in their tunnel and no chance of getting through. And, of course, they know almost no prostitutes, except for the three cases of victims they cite again and again, and they know no men who go to brothels, and they don’t go to brothels themselves, which means they actually talk about a world of which they basically have zero idea. (...) their own perception is completely reduced to this narrow field.¹⁸⁸ (Thomas)

¹⁸⁵ „(...) Sexarbeitende grundsätzlich traumatisiert sind, weil sie Opfer von Gewalt sind.“ (Scarlet)

¹⁸⁶ „Es gibt eine Richtung in der Psychotherapie, die sich mit der Traumaforschung beschäftigt. Dort sind viele Gegnerinnen der Sexarbeit organisiert, und da werden Psychotherapeutinnen Convente und Kongresse benutzt, um halt auch gegen Sexarbeit zu wetttern. (...) Und das führt dann wiederum dazu, den Sexarbeitenden, die sagen ‚Halt, stopp, ich bin kein Opfer von Gewalt‘ das Wort im Mund umzudrehen und denen abzusprechen, dass sie nicht Opfer von Gewalt sind, das wird dann extrem bizarr, wenn irgendjemand sagt ‘Ich bin aber Psychotherapeutin. Das kann gar nicht sein, dass Sie konsensuell sexuelle Dienstleistungen anbieten!’ Das ist ja im Prinzip die Mündigkeitseuthauptung per se.“ (Scarlet)

¹⁸⁷ „(...) argumentieren sie in einem geschlossenen System“ (Scarlet)

¹⁸⁸ „Die sind völlig abgeschottet. Also da gibt es kein Durchdringen. Ich hab das selten so radikal erlebt (...) Vollkommen in ihrem Tunnel drin und keine Chance dranzukommen. Und die kennen natürlich auch fast keine Prostituierten, außer die drei Opferfälle, die sie immer wieder neu zitieren, und sie kennen keine Männer, die ins Bordell gehen und sie gehen selber nicht ins Bordell, das heißt sie reden eigentlich über eine Welt, von der sie im Grunde genommen null Ahnung haben. (...) die eigene Wahrnehmung ist völlig auf dieses enge Feld reduziert.“ (Thomas)

In Thomas' perspective, anti-prostitution campaigners are both removed from the realities of sex work and resistant to learn about these from sex worker activists, instead limiting their field of vision to cases of victimization. Faced with such ideological inaccessibility, many activists declare the futility of argumentative strategies:

(...) you don't get anywhere at all on an argumentative level (...).¹⁸⁹ (Lara)

(...) there's nothing you can do (...).¹⁹⁰ (Thomas)

They don't listen to us at all. That's why there is no possibility to talk, because they are sure about it and they don't listen to us.¹⁹¹ (Leo)

You probably can't convince people like that (...), it's a form of bigotry.¹⁹² (Simone)

In addition to ideological inaccessibility, the very set-up of anti-prostitution events at times bars activists from opposing them in the public arena. According to activists, some anti-prostitution speakers allow only written interventions from the audience and carefully select from those. During the events, it is "forbidden to interject, to intervene, otherwise you will be expelled from the room,"¹⁹³ Katharina says. These practices of control are difficult for sex worker activists to circumvent without being excluded from the venue. According to Clio, physical exclusion of sex worker activists from anti-prostitution events "actually has quite a long history." The tactic of "blockading sex workers from getting in," Clio emphasizes, dates back to the US Feminist Sex Wars of the 1960s, where

(...) a lot of academics would refuse to attend conferences if sex workers were allowed in the building. So basically, they would all get together and say, 'If you want any of us to ever speak, you have to ban anyone who's involved in the [sex] industry from having a voice and participating.'

In Clio's view, the explicit ideological and physical exclusion of sex worker activists has thus been an integral part of feminist contestations around sexuality and its commercialization.

In Germany, a rather implicit than explicit form of exclusion seems to characterize the lobbying activities of anti-prostitution campaigners. This is particularly noticeable in the case of the parliamentary working group on prostitution which anti-prostitution campaigner Leni Breymaier co-founded in October 2019. Since sex worker activists had not been invited as

¹⁸⁹ „(...) komplett beratungsresistent, also du kommst auch auf der Argumente-Ebene überhaupt gar nicht weiter“ (Lara)

¹⁹⁰ „(...) da ist nichts zu machen (...)“ (Thomas)

¹⁹¹ „Die hören uns überhaupt nicht zu. Deswegen gibt es keine Gesprächsmöglichkeit, weil die sind sicher davon und die hören uns nicht zu.“ (Leo)

¹⁹² „(...) solche Leute kann man wahrscheinlich auch nicht überzeugen (...), das ist so ne Intoleranz.“ (Simone)

¹⁹³ „(...) ist verboten Zwischenrufe, Zwischenmeldungen zu machen, sonst wird man des Raumes verwiesen.“ (Katharina)

speakers, they only found out about the working group's first session through documents leaked to them. Despite undertaking research, activists could not gather information on the working group's content or on invitation procedures for guest speakers. Leaked documents revealed only in retrospect that the first two sessions had hosted known anti-prostitution speakers like Gerhard Schönborn, head of Christian exit organization Neustart. Their exclusion confirmed sex worker activists' assumption about the biased nature of the parliamentary working group. As activists concluded, the

(...) direction is clear: the initiating members of the *Bundestag* are not interested in an open working group (and certainly not in a multi-layered dialogue with different aspects). (Strich/Code/Move, 2019)

The parliamentary working group's practice and composition highlights the ideological and physical exclusion of sex worker activists by anti-prostitution campaigners.

In addition to that, it illustrates how the political playing field is further skewed by structural power relations which exacerbate sex worker activists' political marginalization. These are expressed in interviewees' descriptions of class distinctions. According to Marie, anti-prostitution campaigners "have their nests feathered" but want to "take the bread and butter"¹⁹⁴ from sex workers:

It's this disparity, once my economic situation and my cultural situation is so cosy, so cushioned, then I can easily point fingers at others, 'Oh, the poor victims, I have to help them.'¹⁹⁵

In a similar fashion, Alexandra characterizes anti-prostitution campaigners as

(...) women (...) who, first of all, have never had to worry much about their finances, who come from a middle-class background, are well off, have a husband, or whatever... are mostly older, people who (...) as a rule also have no idea what factory work means, what piecework means, what construction sites mean, or strawberry fields and things like that, or undignified work in call centres (...).¹⁹⁶

Both Marie and Alexandra thus locate anti-prostitution campaigners in a middle- and upper-class background, where they enjoy financial security and are detached from the economic difficulties of the working-class lives sex workers live. This privileged position allows them to "point the finger" of moralizing judgment, and motivates their charitable intervention on

¹⁹⁴ „(...) haben ihre Schäfchen im Trockenen, (...) wollen uns hier um Lohn und Brot bringen!“ (Marie)

¹⁹⁵ „Es ist dieses Gefälle, in dem Moment, wo meine wirtschaftliche Situation und meine kulturelle Situation so gemütlich ist, so gepolstert ist, dann kann ich gut mit Fingern auf andere zeigen, 'ach, die armen Opfern, denen muss ich helfen'. (Marie)

¹⁹⁶ „(...) Frauen (...), die sich erstens mal noch nie um ihre Finanzen großartig haben Sorgen machen müssen, also die aus gutbürgerlichem Hause kommen, gut situiert sind, einen Ehemann haben, oder was auch immer... meistens auch ältere, also Menschen, die (...) in aller Regel auch keine Vorstellung haben, was Fabrikarbeit bedeutet, was Akkordarbeit bedeutet, was Baustellen heißt, oder Erdbeerfelder und solche Sachen, oder unwürdiges Arbeiten in Callcentern (...).“ (Alexandra)

behalf of sex workers. In this, Barbara sees parallels to bourgeois women's charity and political movements in the 19th and early 20th century:

It always reminds me of the ladies in the Wilhelminian or Victorian era who then stood up for the fallen girls, but who were absolutely not interested in the working conditions of the fallen girls when they were not yet fallen girls (...).¹⁹⁷

In Barbara's view, contemporary anti-prostitution campaigners are equally disinterested in sex workers' living and working realities, and instead concerned with sex workers' social decline due to their violation of gendered moral and sexual norms. Further alluding to charity practices of bourgeois women are interviewees' labelling of anti-prostitution campaigners as "do-gooders" (*Gutmenschen*) who derive personal satisfaction from the idea of "helping" and "rescuing" those in need.

Moreover, activists recognize power inequalities resulting from anti-prostitution campaigners' institutional embeddedness in organizations who receive funding from German state institutions and international NGOs. Activists, for instance, point to the anti-prostitution campaign "#RotlichtAus" (#Redlight-Off) which anti-prostitution organization Sisters and the Women's Council of the federal state of Baden-Württemberg launched just months before the Prostitute Protection Act came into effect in 2017 (Landesfrauenrat Baden-Württemberg, 2017). In 2020, the federal state capital Stuttgart funded the anti-prostitution campaign with a sum of 50.000 Euro to "expand billboard, cinema spots and social media presence" (Kuhn, 2019) – the same year BesD created its emergency fund to alleviate sex workers' precarization by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of their campaign funding, activists find anti-prostitution campaigners are "very well organized" (Leo), "just have more money for lobbying"¹⁹⁸ (Silke) and "are often paid for what they do, unlike we who all do it more or less on a voluntary basis"¹⁹⁹ (Adrian). Moreover, anti-prostitution campaigners are placed in influential positions inside government institutions, Melanie stresses:

¹⁹⁷ „Mich erinnert das immer so an die Damen in der wilhelminischen oder viktorianischen Ära, die sich dann stark gemacht haben für die gefallenen Mädchen, aber die sich absolut null dafür interessiert haben, wie die Arbeitsbedingungen der gefallenen Mädchen waren, als es noch keine gefallene Mädchen waren (...).“ (Barbara)

¹⁹⁸ „(...) weil die einfach mehr Geld für Lobbyarbeit haben.“ (Silke)

¹⁹⁹ „(...) der Unterschied ist auch, dass diese Leute oft bezahlt werden, dafür was sie machen, im Gegensatz zu uns, wo wir das alle mehr oder weniger ehrenamtlich machen. Und das ist natürlich dann schon irgendwie auch ein Machtgefälle, was sich auch abzeichnet.“ (Adrian)

Leni Breymaier sits on all the relevant committees in the *Bundestag*, in the SPD. This is the party that holds the Family Ministry at the moment²⁰⁰ and the Family Ministry is responsible for us. That means that it's highly dangerous, because she's sitting right at the centre.²⁰¹

Apart from occupying strategically relevant and influential positions, sex worker activists struggle with the widespread political presence of their opponents. According to Leo, "they are everywhere and we fight against them everywhere."²⁰² Adrian also observe an unprecedented political susceptibility to anti-prostitution ideas:

In itself, the discussion is nothing new and has been going on for decades. And I don't think the anti-prostitution actors are new either. (...) But I notice that they are now somehow being listened to a lot (...).²⁰³

Long-standing contestations around sex work have recently "found such fertile ground in society,"²⁰⁴ social worker Ruth agrees. Activists thus link anti-prostitution campaigners' hegemonic position to an increasingly welcoming institutional context. As a result, sex worker activists find that anti-prostitution campaigners monopolize public and policy discourses on sex work: "Their voices are really dominating the conversation," Clio states, whereas for activists it is "hard to get the message out."

The dominance of anti-prostitution campaigners is then reinforced by the withdrawal of sex worker activists from public encounters. "Not everybody wants to expose themselves to such a power imbalance,"²⁰⁵ Maya explains. In Maya's view, this holds particularly true for multiply marginalized activists, such as migrant sex workers. Over the course of my research, I however also witnessed sex worker activists with comparably high resource endowments (e.g. language skills, citizenship, outed status) decline invitations to interviews and events during which they were expected to discuss anti-prostitution campaigners. At times, their withdrawal creates a chain reaction: supporting feminist activists or social workers then cancel their participation because they feel discomfort over being the sole representatives of sex work perspectives without having lived experience of sex work themselves. With journalists and event organizers struggling to recruit both sex worker activists willing to speak

²⁰⁰ The SPD was in charge of the respective ministry until the parliamentary elections in 2021, and has since been led by the Green Party.

²⁰¹ „(...) Leni Breymaier sitzt in allen zuständigen Ausschüssen im Bundestag, in der SPD. Das heißt, das ist die Partei, die das Familienministerium im Moment innehat und das Familienministerium ist für uns zuständig. Das heißt, das ist brandgefährlich, weil sie sitzt direkt am Nabel.“ (Melanie)

²⁰² „Die sind überall und wir kämpfen gegen die überall.“ (Leo)

²⁰³ „An sich ist die Diskussion nichts Neues und gibt es ja schon seit Jahrzehnten. Und ich glaube auch die Akteure unter den Prostitutionsgegnern sind keine neuen. (...) Aber ich merke, die treffen jetzt irgendwie auf viel Gehör (...).“ (Adrian)

²⁰⁴ „(...) so einen Boden gefunden in der Gesellschaft.“ (Ruth)

²⁰⁵ „Es möchte sich auch nicht jeder antun, sich einfach in so ein Machtgefälle reinzusetzen.“ (Maya)

in such confrontative settings, as well as supporting activists willing to speak without sex workers present, these public spaces often see a majority of anti-prostitution speakers. In the following subchapter, I delineate how these exclusionary processes are aggravated by the outright attacks and hostilities which anti-prostitution campaigners direct against sex worker activists.

6.4 “A Battle on the Front” – Facing Attacks and Hostilities

In addition to struggling with anti-prostitution campaigners’ affective strategies and hegemonic position in the field of prostitution politics, sex worker activists faced targeted attacks and hostilities by this political opponent. Interviewees frequently describe confrontations through martial images, and label them as “lion’s den” (*Höhle des Löwen*), “trap” (*Falle*), “war” (*Krieg*), “battle on the front” (*Kampf an der Front*), “street fight” or “like being thrown in at the deep end” (*Sprung ins kalte Wasser*). Hostilities in fact characterized the relationship from early on, as anti-prostitution campaigners responded to sex workers’ self-organization by othering, vilifying and shaming them.

“An Atypical, Negligible Minority” – Othering, Vilification, and Shaming

Sex workers’ self-organization and their appearance in prostitution politics in 2013 prompted hostile reactions by anti-prostitution campaigners. These are exemplified by several articles through which the magazine EMMA responded to the foundation of BesD and sex worker activists’ counterappeal. Here, EMMA framed sex worker activists as a “laughing stock” (*Lachnummer*) insignificant in numbers and as an “atypical, negligible minority” (*atypische, verschwindend kleine Minderheit*) that spoke “only for a few percent of German prostitutes” (EMMA, 2014a). This minority, EMMA maintained, stood “in contrast to the estimated 400.000 women working as prostitutes” which the magazine said were mainly poor, Eastern European migrants (EMMA, 2014a). According to EMMA, sex worker activists held no representative political function because of their small numbers and their supposedly characteristic distinction from the mass of victimized migrant sex workers. In addition to othering activists because of their German nationality, EMMA delegitimized them on grounds of the type of sex work they engage in. This applied in particular to sex worker activists

working in BDSM, some of which run their own studios. EMMA asserted that these activists did not engage in sex work at all, and instead “let other women prostitute themselves” for their own gain (EMMA, 2013c). As such, they lacked lived experience of sex work and any authority on the subject. Moreover, EMMA asserted that the experience of these “well-earning” sex workers stood in opposition to the “hundreds of thousands of nameless, poverty-stricken prostitutes, who earn less than the minimum wage and who, in most cases, do not even speak German” (EMMA, 2013c). EMMA hence othered sex worker activists as a small, privileged, German minority which did not engage in “real” or any sex work at all, and dismissed their perspectives as unrepresentative and irrelevant. EMMA instead claimed to speak for the supposedly “typical” majority of vulnerable migrant sex workers the magazine constructed.

Moreover, EMMA othered activists from the historical origins of sex workers’ self-organization in Europe. According to the magazine, prostitutes who had organized in France in the 1970s were “indeed very brave” (*in der Tat sehr tapfer*) but had rejected the term “whore” and “fought for their rights – not for those of pimps and brothel operators” (EMMA, 2014a). The magazine thus ignored the historical relevance of these protests for sex worker movements across Europe, and the reappropriation of the word “Hure” (whore) by the German whore movement in the 1980s. The othering of sex worker activists from their historical predecessors served to further deny the political legitimacy of their current self-organization.

In addition to framing activists as an unrepresentative, privileged minority and separating them from their political history, anti-prostitution campaigners vilified them. Through the article titled “Who are these ‘sex workers’ really?” (*Wer sind die ‘Sexarbeiterinnen’ wirklich?*) (EMMA, 2014a), EMMA created doubt over sex worker activists’ actual identities. Specifically, the magazine investigated into the personal, political and professional background of BesD founding members Johanna Weber and Fabienne Freymadl in order to present them as “questionable figures” (*fragwürdige Figuren*). The article outed Weber with her real name and framed her previous involvement in women’s, LGBTQ and leftist leisure time activities as proof for her significant political experience, which supposedly explained the “pompous” (*hochtrabend*) statement BesD submitted to the political hearing for the Prostitute Protection Act in 2014 (EMMA, 2014a). Furthermore, the magazine disparaged sex worker activists: rather than “voluntary prostitutes” (*freiwillige Prostituierte*), EMMA claimed activists were

“perpetrators or accomplices” (*Täterinnen bzw. Mittäterinnen*) who “either exploit other women themselves, or contribute to trivializing and propagating prostitution” (EMMA, 2013c). EMMA considered BesD’s calls for decriminalization of sex work and inclusion into policy-making as proof that sex worker activists were in fact “lobbyists of the prostitution industry,” and BesD an organization of predominantly “declared and disguised brothel operators” (EMMA, 2013c). Claiming that sex worker activists “pander to politics and the media at the expense of hundreds of thousands of women,” EMMA interpreted their participation in law-making as a “scandal” and as evidence of the considerable “power and money” (*Macht und Geld*) they derived from a highly profitable sex industry. Thus, EMMA concluded that sex worker activists and their political inclusion “should be stopped quickly” (EMMA, 2014a). Ultimately, EMMA therefore advocated that sex worker activists should be politically excluded and their self-organization opposed.

Such othering, delegitimization and vilification by anti-prostitution campaigners is a common experience for sex worker activists and discussed in many interviews I conducted. Alexandra, for instance, tells of speaking on a public panel where anti-prostitution campaigners framed her as different from historical sex worker activists:

They said, ‘Yes, there used to be the old whore, the proud old whore, those were the ones who fought back then in the 70s,’ but that they wouldn’t exist anymore, that this wouldn’t be the case at all... I’m sitting there and asking myself, (*laughs*) am I not old enough for you now or am I not proud enough for you?²⁰⁶

While her interlocutors acknowledged the historical mobilizations of prostitutes in France in the 1970s, they rejected the legitimacy of Alexandra’s contemporary activism. Thinking back on her public activism, Simone remembers “predominantly positive experiences. You are degraded only in those political contexts where opponents of prostitution are present.”²⁰⁷ Here, anti-prostitution campaigners blame sex worker activists for violence and abuse in the sex industry, Simone tells:

As a sex worker who defends the profession and thinks things are good, you are held responsible for the fact that there is ‘collateral damage,’ that’s what they [anti-prostitution campaigners] called it, that you

²⁰⁶ „Dann wurde geredet, ‘ja, es gab ja früher die Althure, die stolze Althure, das waren die, die auch damals gekämpft haben in den 70er Jahren, aber das gäbe es ja so gar nicht mehr, das wäre so überhaupt nicht mehr der Fall...’ Ich sitze dann da und frage mich so, (*lacht*) bin euch jetzt nicht alt genug oder bin euch jetzt nicht stolz genug?“ (Alexandra)

²⁰⁷ „(...) überwiegend positive Erfahrungen. Abgewertet wird man nur in solchen politischen Kontexten, wo Gegnerinnen von Prostitution anwesend sind.“ (Simone)

accept collateral damage if you are a sex worker yourself and stand up for this profession, and you are responsible for the fact that there is forced prostitution.²⁰⁸

From this perspective, activists pursue sex work at the expense of other sex workers' well-being, and are directly accountable for the violence done to them.

In addition to blaming, sex worker activists experience shaming by anti-prostitution campaigners. This is illustrated by the EMMA article questioning sex worker activists Weber and Freymadl's identities, which also included a section quoting from Weber's professional website:

Her speciality as a dominatrix is "smut". What exactly does she mean by that? She explains on her website: "golden shower" (urinating on men), "caviar" (defecating on men, even directly into their mouths), or "facefarting" (sitting on a man's face and farting into it). (EMMA, 2014a)

Through these detailed and scandalizing descriptions of the fetish services Weber offers, EMMA framed and stigmatized sex worker activists as sexual deviants. Moreover, the fact that both Weber and Freymadl provide BDSM services to a predominantly male clientele led EMMA to conclude that both activists were "man haters" (*Männerhasserinnen*) (EMMA, 2014a). Interestingly, EMMA therefore used a politically delegitimizing accusation often made against feminists in general. The scandalizing descriptions of activists' sexual services and the magazine's framing of BDSM as an expression of gender-based hatred served to expose activists to stigmatization, and simultaneously reveal particular understandings of sexuality in anti-prostitution campaigns. As Alexandra describes, activists working in BDSM are delegitimized because their work supposedly excludes sexual contact:

The thing is, people like me are portrayed as individual cases. 'Dominatrixes don't count anyways, because dominatrixes are buttoned up to the top and only whip and don't touch a man at all, maybe once with gloves, but ideally, it has nothing to do with sex (...).'²⁰⁹

From this perspective, BDSM practices are detached from the workers' body and sexuality, thus constituting something other than "sex" or "prostitution". Even though these conceptualizations distort work realities and ignore many BDSM workers experiences in

²⁰⁸ „(...) und da wird man als Sexarbeiterin, die den Beruf verteidigt und die Dinge gut findet, dafür verantwortlich gemacht, dass es Kollateralschäden, so hat das die benannt, das sind Kollateralschäden, die man in Kauf nimmt, wenn man selber Sexarbeiterin ist und für diesen Beruf einsteht, und man ist dafür verantwortlich, dass es Zwangsprostitution gibt.“ (Simone)

²⁰⁹ „Dann ist die Sache, Leute wie ich werden als Einzelfall dargestellt. 'Dominas zählen ja sowieso nicht, weil Dominas sind ja bis oben hoch geknöpft und peitschen nur aus und fassen einen Mann ja gar nicht an, vielleicht mal mit Handschuhen, aber mit Sex hat das ja im besten Fall noch gar nichts zu tun'...“ (Alexandra)

brothels or escorting, they are utilized to deny activists' lived experience of sex work and political representativity.

Ultimately, anti-prostitution campaigners' strategies of othering, vilification, and shaming had tangible impacts on sex worker activists' ability to influence the legislative process leading up to the Prostitute Protection Act. According to Melanie, anti-prostitution campaigners openly questioned why the ministry in charge of the legislative process "would talk to dominatrixes all the time."²¹⁰ This eventually hampered BesD's ability to reach political stakeholders, Melanie claims:

It went so far that Mrs Schwesig, then Minister for Family Affairs, said, no, she wasn't only talking to dominatrixes. Of course, that was very difficult for us, because then we couldn't really enter into official talks anymore.²¹¹

The ministry's public distancing from the accusation of "only talking to dominatrixes" illustrates the efficacy of anti-prostitution campaigners' strategy in obstructing sex worker activists' access to the legislative arena.

Attacks and hostilities by anti-prostitution campaigners also affected sex worker activists' involvement in the public sphere. Here, representatives of anti-prostitution organizations such as Terre des Femmes or Sisters strategically target sex worker activists' public appearances, Christin explains:

You always have these groups that pop up again and again (...). They are just as few people, but they are just as loud and just as cheeky in taking space and so on, the same usual suspects, a small group of maybe ten or 12 activists at the most, who show up at all the events and just spread their lies.²¹²

Christin's statement is confirmed by my field observations. At events, anti-prostitution campaigners commonly interject the speaking sex worker activists from the audience, or use the time allocated for audience questions to share anti-prostitution views. Sex worker activists thus describe anti-prostitution campaigners as "aggressive" (*aggressive*), "loud" (*laut*), and as "violating personal boundaries" (*übergriffig*), and often only attend in events in

²¹⁰ „(...) was würde das Familienministerium sich denn ständig mit den Dominas unterhalten (...).“ (Melanie)

²¹¹ „Das ging dann so weit, dass Frau Schwesig, damals Familienministerin, sagte, ‚Nein, sie würde sich ja nicht nur mit den Dominas unterhalten.‘ Das war natürlich für uns sehr schwierig, weil wir offiziell da dann gar nicht mehr wirklich ins Gespräch kamen.“ (Melanie)

²¹² „Du hast halt immer diese Gruppen, die immer wieder auftauchen. (...) das sind genauso wenige Leute, die halt aber genauso laut sind, und genauso frech sich ihren Raum nehmen und so weiter, dieselben üblichen Verdächtigen, das ist so ein kleines Häuflein aus vielleicht maximal zehn, 12 Aktivistinnen, die halt dann auch auf allen Veranstaltungen auftauchen und halt einfach auch ihre Lügen verbreiten.“ (Christin)

the company of colleagues. Activists are also targeted on social media, where anti-prostitution campaigners operate at a “very personally attacking level,”²¹³ Christin says:

The same troll stuff applies here that usually applies on the internet. Above all, there are a lot of fake profiles, a lot of double profiles, a lot of anonymous profiles (...), some of which only have the intention of disturbing and spamming.²¹⁴

Sex worker activists engaging in public online spaces say they face overwhelming interference and attacks by anti-prostitution accounts. Lara, for instance, states her social media accounts are being followed by an “army” (*Heerschar*) of anti-prostitution campaigners. Whenever activists address the topic of sex work, these users then “drop in on such discussions and debates like flies on a pile of shit and swarm in and spam,” Christin claims. “With pictures and GIFs and links to some self-referencing blogs (...) in order to be as alarming as possible, to give the impression of being reputable.”²¹⁵ These online tactics remind Christin of right-wing movements:

I feel like, similar to these online campaigns by right-wing extremists, the people who argue against sex work are a very tight bunch who all use the same tactics and the same ‘arguments.’ And to me it seems almost sectarian in organization.²¹⁶

Despite the attacks sex worker activists are exposed to online, Christin engages in online discussions so that colleagues “are not being thrown to the wolves and left alone.”²¹⁷ Other than coming to each other’s defence in social media discussions, activists heavily moderate their content or systematically block belligerent profiles. By doing so, they retain agency over their online presence, yet also limit its public reach.

In addition to verbal attacks which grow more hostile in anonymous online spheres, some interviewees report experiences of physical attacks against their belongings or themselves. Katharina, for instance, describes an altercation at a counterprotest, where anti-prostitution campaigners sought to confiscate and destroy the information material sex worker activists distributed. Especially feminist protest events like the 8th of March present likely sites for

²¹³ „Das wird persönlich auf einer sehr angreifenden Ebene geführt.“ (Christin)

²¹⁴ „(...) hier derselbe Trollkram zutrifft, der sonst im Internet auch zutrifft. Es sind vor allem sehr viel Fake Profile, sehr viele Doppelprofile, sehr viele anonyme Profile (...), die teilweise auch nur das im Sinne haben, zu stören und zu spammen.“ (Christin)

²¹⁵ „Die fallen über solche Diskussionen und Debatten her wie die Fliegen über einen Haufen Kacke und schwärmen da quasi rein und spammen. Einerseits Bildchen und GIFs und Links zu irgendwelchen sich selbst referenzierenden Blogs (...) um so einen Anschein von möglichst alarmierend, einen Anschein von Seriosität zu erwecken.“ (Christin)

²¹⁶ „Mein Gefühl ist ja, ähnlich wie diese Onlinekampagnen von Rechtsextremen handelt es sich bei den Leuten, die gegen Sexarbeit argumentieren um einen sehr engen Haufen, die alle dieselben Taktiken und dieselben ‘Argumente’ ins Feld führen. Und mir kommt das schon fast sektenhaft organisiert vor.“ (Christin)

²¹⁷ „(...) nicht den anderen zum Fraß vorgeworfen werden und alleine gelassen werden.“ (Christin)

clashes: according to the organizers of the March 8 demonstration in Berlin in 2020, “physical transgressions” (Frauen*kampftagbündnis, 2020b) had occurred between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners, whereas activists reported a verbal fight which ended in a bottle being thrown at them. A similar experience is shared by Andrea, who recounts having the book “The Industrial Vagina” by anti-prostitution feminist Sheila Jeffreys “thrown after her” (*hinterhergeworfen*) following a panel discussion with anti-prostitution campaigners. The experience made her question her participation in such events:

That was four years ago now, and I don’t even know if it was smart for me to be there. Because some things are just so messed up that you can’t... Sometimes I’d rather people discuss things among themselves.²¹⁸

As a result of the attacks they experience, activists like Andrea consider withdrawing from panel discussions with anti-prostitution campaigners. At another event, Andrea merely participated in the audience, from which she contributed a comment. “I was then loudly outed across the hall,”²¹⁹ she remembers. Andrea’s experience illustrates that encounters with anti-prostitution campaigners pose a high risk of forceful outing for sex worker activists. According to Clio, anti-prostitution campaigners strategically employ outing against activists at public events

(...) to intimidate sex workers into leaving by filming their faces and putting their faces on the internet and exposing them as sex workers, which could obviously cost them their day job or rights to see their children or a relationship or put them in real harm’s way (...).

To sex worker activists, the serious social consequences of these tactical ostracizations and attacks suggest that anti-prostitution campaigners promote, accept or approve of harms being done to sex worker activists in particular, and to sex workers more generally. Many eventually saw these convictions confirmed by anti-prostitution campaigners’ intensified lobbying for client criminalization, and by the actions they undertook during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

²¹⁸ „Das ist jetzt vier Jahre her, und ich weißt noch nicht mal, ob das schlau war, dass ich dort war. Weil manche Sachen sind halt so verfahren, dass man dort auch nix... manchmal wäre mir lieber, die Leute diskutieren mit sich selber.“ (Andrea)

²¹⁹ „Ich bin dann (...) lauthals geoutet worden über den Saal hinweg.“ (Andrea)

“They Want Violence to Be Done to Us” – Denials of Solidarity

To sex worker activists, hostilities became again more explicit following the Prostitute Protection Act’s adoption and anti-prostitution campaigners’ concerted lobbying efforts through the parliamentary working group on prostitution. Just a few months after the working group held its first session in October 2019, the weekly newspaper “Die Zeit” published an interview conversation with sex worker activist Kristina Marlen and anti-prostitution campaigner Leni Breymaier in January 2020 (Lau & Parnack, 2020). In response to Marlen’s accusation that Breymaier withdrew support from any sex worker not in line with her beliefs, Breymaier responded: “I am not withdrawing my support. You have never had my support” (Lau & Parnack, 2020). Although contestations with anti-prostitution campaigners had been going on for years at that point, sex worker activists were shocked to see a member of parliament and initiator of a supposedly democratic parliamentary process express such an unequivocal denial of solidarity towards a marginalized group.

Furthermore, specifically the Covid-19 pandemic revealed that anti-prostitution campaigners not only supported client criminalization but welcome the general prohibition and repression of sex work – despite the harms this meant for sex workers. At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, sex work was temporarily prohibited across Germany. Whereas many federal states and municipalities closed only sex work venues, some explicitly banned all activities legally defined as prostitution. Stuttgart, the capital of the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, presented one of these cases. Breymaier, whose political constituency lies in the same state, tweeted an approving “geht doch” (there you go) in response to this decision (Breymaier, 2020). This was followed by the statement “Man(n) kann ja schon mal üben,” which translates to both a general “one can already practice” and a specific “men can already practice,” thus signalling that Breymaier saw the prohibition of sex work as both trendsetting for German society and men who use sexual services.

When sex worker activists began protesting for the reopening of sex work venues in line with other businesses in May 2020, Breymaier formed part of a group of 16 MPs (among them health minister Karl Lauterbach) who sent an open letter to the national and state governments. In this letter, the MPs expressed their “sincere gratitude” to the governments which had “so far refrained from permitting the opening of brothels” and urged them “to not allow any further relaxation in the area of prostitution” (Winkelmeier-Becker et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the letter stated that “it should be obvious that prostitution would have the epidemiological effect of a super spreader” and that this “dissemination would quickly involve many johns, their partners, families, friends and colleagues” (Winkelmeier-Becker et al., 2020). This risk, the signatories argued, would justify the permanent upholding of the pandemic-related prohibition of sex work. The open letter was reproduced and supported by various anti-prostitution campaigners and NGOs who considered the pandemic as a “chance” for a paradigm change in German prostitution politics, calling on the national government to institute a permanent “shut-down for brothels” and a seamless transition to client criminalization (EMMA, 2020a; Louis, 2020a; Norak & Kraus, 2020).

From a public health perspective, the labelling of sex work as a “super spreader” of Covid-19 and the demand for its prohibition were untenable. Large-scale infection events which spurred the pandemic in Germany have been documented at beer fests and carnival parties, but never in sex work contexts. The singling out of sex work was particularly inconclusive given that the virus’ transmission route was known to be aerial. Moreover, the framing of sex work as a hotbed of disease contradicts the long-standing sexual health expertise accumulated through the HIV/AIDS pandemic, according to which the risk of contracting STIs is linked to sexual behaviour, not fixed population groups. Sex workers are thus not *per se* at greater risk of contracting infections, and often possess significant knowledge of safer sex practices. Harm reduction measures which support sex workers in implementing these safer sex practices effectively reduce their vulnerability. Stigmatization, criminalization, and repression of sex work are known to instead hinder sex workers’ ability to protect themselves against infection and increase their risk of contracting STIs (Deutsche Aidshilfe et al., 2019). Although this health expertise equally contradicts the claims anti-prostitution campaigners made with regards to Covid-19, sex workers’ stigmatization allowed them to politically “instrumentalize the pandemic, [and] invoke the old narrative of the whore as a plague spreader,”²²⁰ Scarlet contends. Indeed, anti-prostitution campaigners shifted their argumentation in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic: while before, they had mainly reasoned that women needed protection from prostitution, they now claimed that the general public needed safe-guarding from the health risks posed by sex workers. Through this,

²²⁰ „(...) Corona zu instrumentalisieren, also dieses alte Narrativ der Hure als Seuchenschleuder zu bemühen (...)“ (Scarlet)

anti-prostitution campaigners revived the potent historical stigmatization of sex workers as vectors of disease.

Furthermore, anti-prostitution campaigners maintained their advocacy for prohibition despite the evident precarization which the pandemic-related ban had on sex workers. Admitting that migrant sex workers “need the money from prostitution for mere survival” and “had hoped to build a middle-class existence in Germany,” the magazine EMMA still called on the state to “close the brothel of Europe” (EMMA, 2020a), argued that sex work venues should not get “a single euro” (EMMA, 2020c) of state relief for businesses, and considered the increasing closure of sex work venues due to bankruptcy as a “pleasing” indicator of an overall “perishing of brothels” (Louis, 2020b). To sex worker activists, the support for prohibition in the face of a pandemic which brought widespread harms over sex workers substantiated the impression of “Entsolidarisierung” – a complete erosion of solidarity. More than ever before, the pandemic revealed that, for anti-prostitution campaigners, the eradication and repression of sex work took priority over the well-being of sex workers.

The conclusions which activists drew are expressed in their labelling of anti-prostitution campaigners are “sexarbeitsfeindlich” (hostile against sex work) and “hurenfeindlich” (hostile against whores),²²¹ and in the increased framing of hostility against sex workers as a form of “group-based enmity” (*gruppenbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit*) (Frauen*kampftagbündnis, 2020b). The concept of group-based enmity was developed by German sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer and describes processes in which people are “marked as unequal and exposed to hostile mentalities of devaluation and exclusion because of their chosen or assigned group membership” (Heitmeyer, 2005, p. 6). This framing positions hostility against sex workers in line with other group-based enmities such as racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, or antisemitism. Andrea sees a profound enmity felt towards sex workers as the only explanation for anti-prostitution campaigners’ support for demonstrably harmful policies:

²²¹ English-speaking activists also use “whorephobic” analog to other forms of discrimination (e.g. “transphobic”). Except for direct quotes, I use “hostile” as an accurate translation of the German “feindlich”, thus also recognizing criticisms that “phobic” trivializes discrimination as a psychological issue motivated by fear.

Because they want violence to be done to us, they want us to be reprimanded. (...) because otherwise they wouldn't keep coming up with something like that, because actually, it's not about improving the living situation of other people. It's about reprimanding people.²²²

In this view, the harms cause by worsening living conditions, attacks, and criminalization are intended and serve as a "punishment" and corrective measure for sex workers. The impetus behind "reprimanding" sex workers is thus not the need to alleviate harms, but to morally discipline them and correct their deviancy. The view that anti-prostitution campaigners pursue a moralizing and punitive agenda is shared by Thomas:

These arguments on client criminalization put forward under the cloak of feminism and emancipation are simply quite perfidious. Because neither does it work, because there is prostitution even where it is forbidden, nor does it protect women, because if they work illegally they are even more endangered than they are today. It's all about the morals of those who want to impose their lifestyle on others.²²³

In Thomas' words, anti-prostitution campaigners hide their moralizing and punitive agenda under a "cloak" of emancipatory feminist politics, which they however contravene. Similarly, Katharina identifies predominantly restrictive sexual attitudes among anti-prostitution campaigners, and therefore externalizes them from progressive feminist politics:

I would rather locate it in the right-wing milieu, because if you want to return more to these traditional values and so on, you want to control people's sexuality better, and withdraw more into two-person relationships (...).²²⁴

Classifications of anti-prostitution campaigners as conservative and right-wing political actors have been increasingly shared and publicized by sex worker activists, who point out parallels in the hostile attitudes they exhibited against other minorities. In recent years, the association Terre des Femmes, the magazine EMMA, its founder Alice Schwarzer, and MP Leni Breymaier have been heavily criticized for their vocal opposition to trans rights and Muslim women's veiling, and for their framing of Islam, refugees, and migrants as inherently misogynistic, regressive, and violent (e.g. EMMA, 2021b; LSVD, 2021; Queer.de, 2021; A. Ross, 2022;

²²² „Weil die wollen ja, dass uns Gewalt angetan wird, die wollen, dass wir gemäßregelt werden. (...) weil sonst würden die ja nicht ständig mit so was kommen, weil eigentlich, es geht ihnen nicht darum, die Lebenssituation anderer Menschen zu verbessern. Es geht ihnen darum, die Menschen zu maßregeln.“ (Andrea)

²²³ „(...) diese unter dem Mäntelchen von Feminismus und Emanzipation vorgetragenen Argumente in Sachen Sexkaufverbot sind einfach ziemlich perfide. Denn weder funktioniert's, es gibt ja auch da, wo es verboten ist, Prostitution, noch schützt es die Frauen, wenn die nämlich im Illegalen arbeiten sind sie noch gefährdeter als heute. Es geht nur um die Moral derer, die ihren Lebensstil anderen aufzwingen wollen.“ (Thomas)

²²⁴ „Also ich sehe eben die [Anti-Prostitutions-]Bewegungen (...) auch als eine restriktive und eine Überwachungsbewegung, eher so ne rechte, also ich würde das eher dem rechten Milieu so zuschieben, weil man die Sexualität der Menschen besser kontrollieren möchte, wenn man sich mehr zu diesen traditionellen Werten besinnen will und so was, und eben sich mehr zurückzieht in die Zweierbeziehungen (...).“ (Katharina)

Schwarzer, 2017). According to activists of SWAG (2020b), these attitudes attest to a general shift of anti-prostitution feminists to the political right:

While Schwarzer made headlines in the 70s fighting for the right to abortions, she makes headlines today for her racist, islamophobic, transphobic, xenophobic and whorephobic comments.

Other activists try to offer a different explanation for anti-prostitution campaigners' persistent calls for client criminalization. According to Maya, the fight against sex work serves to affirm anti-prostitution campaigners' own social position, intimate relationships, and gender relations:

I think that many opponents of prostitution are not really concerned about the 'poor women from Eastern Europe,' as they so often say, but I think many are concerned about themselves. About themselves and about their husbands and sons and so on and so forth. And about the topic of misogyny in general or sexualized violence in general.²²⁵

From this perspective, anti-prostitution campaigners still pursue feminist politics, but through a short-sighted and simplified approach in which sex work becomes a straw man:

Because then they have a bogeyman, so to speak, which is much, much easier than the complex issue of patriarchy and misogyny, and capitalism also comes into it, migration, these are all things that flow into it. I think they are making it incredibly easy for themselves (...).²²⁶

The eradication of sex work, then, provides a solution to wider social problems. Despite the progressive impetus Maya grants to anti-prostitution campaigners, she contends they are cognizant of the problematics associated with criminalization, but deceive themselves over its ineffectiveness:

I have had nothing to do with prostitution for most of my life, but a lot to do with sexualized violence and misogyny. So, the conclusion that banning prostitution or punishing johns would change anything is so utopian, and I would almost call it delusional. I think it is delusional because people who demand it are not stupid. I think they must be aware that it's useless. That they just don't know anything better and that's why they stick to it. One statement, I think, that this woman of Sisters made to me was 'Yes, it would be cool if

²²⁵ „Ich glaube, dass es vielen Prostitutionsgegnerinnen gar nicht wirklich um die armen Frauen aus Osteuropa geht, wie sie ja so oft sagen, sondern ich glaube, vielen geht es um sie selbst. Um sie selbst und um ihre Männer und Söhne und so weiter und so fort. Und um das Thema Frauenhass insgesamt oder sexualisierte Gewalt insgesamt.“ (Maya)

²²⁶ „Weil dann haben sie ein Feindbild, sozusagen, was viel, viel einfacher ist als das komplexe Thema Patriarchat und Frauenhass, und Kapitalismus kommt ja auch dazu, Migration, das sind ja alles Sachen, die mit da einfließen. Ich glaube, sie machen es sich halt unheimlich einfach (...)“ (Maya)

something were to be done in society as a whole, but I want something to happen now!' That was her reason (...).²²⁷

In this perspective, anti-prostitution campaigners' fight against sex work is knowingly misdirected, but experienced as a feasible short-term goal and empowering political tool in the face of unachievable wider social transformations. The differing reflections and conclusions about anti-prostitution campaigners' politics and motivations reveal sex worker activists' ongoing occupation with a dominant political opponent who initially spurred their self-organization, but ultimately narrowed the sex worker movements' scope and tied up its resources.

"It Takes Away Energy" – Short-Term Gains and Long-Term Losses

Overall, the antagonistic dynamic with anti-prostitution campaigners has a two-fold effect on sex workers' self-organization. On the one hand, the threat posed by anti-prostitution campaigners has repeatedly politicized sex workers into activism and reinforced the movement consistently. According to Katharina, this threat "really moves a lot right now,"²²⁸ and Lara confirms that "(...) the blatant opposition we are confronted with, from these individuals in politics who are lining up against us, has led to this new strengthening of the movement."²²⁹ Because of the hegemonic position of anti-prostitution campaigners, interviewees humorously reframe political hostilities into awards, and consider being personally attacked as a sign of political achievement: "When I answer the phone and Alice Schwarzer is on the line, then I know I'm famous now! She has me on her radar (...),"²³⁰ Kerstin tells mockingly. Feminist activist Valentina explains feeling "proud" when her feminist collective became so prominent it was disapproved of by Schwarzer, describing the moment as a "knightly accolade" (*Ritterschlag*). Being attacked as a political opponent by anti-prostitution campaigners presents a yardstick of public visibility, a recognition of activists'

²²⁷ „Ich hatte den Großteil meines Lebens nichts mit Prostitution zu tun, aber viel mit sexualisierter Gewalt und Frauenfeindlichkeit. Deshalb ist die Schlussfolgerung, dass daran ein Prostitutionsverbot oder eine Freierbestrafung irgendwas ändern würde, das ist sowas von utopisch, und ich würde es schon fast wahnhaft nennen. Ich denke, dass es wahnhaft ist, weil Leute, die das fordern, sind ja nicht dumm. Ich denke schon, dass denen bewusst sein muss, dass es nichts bringt. Dass sie nur nichts Besseres wissen und deshalb daran festhalten. Eine Aussage, das ist glaube ich, die, die diese Sisters Frau mir gegenüber gebracht hat, war 'Ja, es wäre cool, wenn sich generell gesamtgesellschaftlich was tun würde, aber ich will, dass jetzt (haut auf den Tisch) was passiert!' Das war ihr Grund für das schwedische Modell.“ (Maya)

²²⁸ „(...) wirklich viel gerade bewegt.“ (Katharina)

²²⁹ „Man könnte jetzt sagen, durch diese krasse Gegnerschaft auch, mit der wir konfrontiert werden, von diesen Einzelpersonen aus der Politik, die sich so grade gegen uns aufstellen, dass das eben zu diesem neuen Erstarren der Bewegung geführt hat.“ (Lara)

²³⁰ „Wenn ich mal dran gehe und dann Alice Schwarzer am Telefon hab, dann weiß ich, ich bin jetzt berühmt! Sie hat mich auf dem Schirm (...).“ (Kerstin)

relevance as political actors, and as a sign of success in challenging their hegemonic position. Lara imagines further exploiting this political drive to pursue the movement's progressive political goals:

(...) we could turn this situation of being massively attacked into an empowerment. My goal would actually be, out of this situation that they want to ban us, to do something like, pacify the question of sex work once and for all. (*laughs*) My utopia.²³¹

This resonates with the desire of many activists to overcome their defensive position and to attend to their own political agenda, rather than responding to the one set out by their political opponents.

On the other hand, the development and pursuit of a distinct political vision is, however, difficult, as the antagonistic dynamic has narrowed the movements' own politics and drained essential resources. The ongoing political contestations between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners have fortified "black-and-white" (*schwarz-weiß*) positions which drown out the political complexity of the issue, Maya finds:

(...) our side, the 'Oh, but it's great and voluntary and so on' and the problems are hardly addressed, and the others say 'Oh, it's all hell!' ... and I want to somehow address everything in this huge area in between, or from beginning to end. And that's difficult (*laughs*) because it's so complex, too.²³²

According to Maya, anti-prostitution campaigners paint a solely negative picture of sex work, whereas activists gloss over difficult aspects in their emphasis on individual choice and happiness. Here, activists' defensive position has caused them to present a one-sided image of sex work which fails to account for the complexity of sex work. This negligence then presents a weak point to the movement, which anti-prostitution campaigners exploit in their critique, Maya explains:

Not everything that they [anti-prostitution campaigners] criticise is completely fictitious. And I see that many things that are criticised are not proactively addressed by us in public. And I think that's a pity and wrong.²³³

²³¹ „Ja, dass man aus dieser Situation jetzt von so maximal angegriffen zu werden ja auch ein Empowerment machen könnte. Also mein Ziel wäre es eigentlich, aus dieser Situation heraus, dass sie uns verbieten wollen, so was machen, wie, dass man die Frage der Sexarbeit ein für alle Mal befriedet. (*lacht*) Meine Utopie.“ (Lara)

²³² „(...) unsere Seite, die 'Ach, das ist doch aber toll und freiwillig und so weiter...' und die Probleme werden kaum angesprochen, und die anderen sagen 'Och, ist ja alles die Hölle!' ... und ich möchte in diesen riesigen Bereich dazwischen bzw. von Anfang bis Ende alles irgendwie thematisieren. Und das ist schwierig (*lacht*) weil es auch so komplex ist.“ (Maya)

²³³ „(...) es ist ja nicht alles völlig frei erfunden, was da kritisiert wird. Und ich sehe, dass viele Dinge, die da kritisiert werden, werden von unserer Seite nicht proaktiv thematisiert in der Öffentlichkeit. Und das finde ich schade und falsch.“ (Maya)

Other activists agree that anti-prostitution campaigners addresses important grievances of sex work. However, their political instrumentalization of these grievances obstructs sex worker activists from openly discussing these problematics themselves, porn performer Theo Meow stresses in an article:

Many sex workers would like to speak more openly about these grievances. But this is not possible in the midst of a debate that constantly doubts the legitimacy and self-determination of their job. Opponents of prostitution accuse an entire profession. The result is that those affected behave as if they were being interrogated. Everything you say can be used against you (and it is, as the countless personal attacks (...) prove). So sometimes it's better not to say anything at all - or to limit yourself to the 'happy whore' story.²³⁴ (Meow, 2020)

As presented by Theo, anti-prostitution campaigners' hostilities render it impossible for sex worker activists to publicly address the grievances of sex work, even though they wish to do so. In general, the antagonistic dynamic has pushed sex worker activists into a defensive, overly euphemistic, and ultimately undesired political position. In addition, activists report that the continued engagement with anti-prostitution campaigners absorbs the movement's capacities. According to Katharina

It takes away energy, it takes away the time to talk about the more important issues and to tackle the bigger problems that lead to people working precariously, that lead to people from other countries coming to Germany to do sex work (...).²³⁵

Instead of addressing vital political issues such as precarity and migration in sex work, activists drain their resources into countering their political opponent, which according to Nicky "very quickly gets super exhausting"²³⁶ and spurs the "infamous activism burn-out."²³⁷ As Nicky explains further, "in and of itself, it is totally important that we fight it somehow. But the fight at the front (*laughs*) is something no one can keep up for long."²³⁸ Although activists recognize the political importance of opposing anti-prostitution campaigners and could yield short-term

²³⁴ „Viele Sexarbeitende würden gern offener über diese Missstände sprechen. Das kann aber nicht gelingen inmitten einer Debatte, die die Legitimität und Selbstbestimmtheit ihres Jobs permanent anzweifelt. Prostitutionsgegner:innen klagen ein ganzes Berufsfeld an. Das führt dazu, dass sich die Betroffenen dann auch verhalten wie bei einem Verhör. Ganz nach dem Motto: Alles, was Sie äußern, kann gegen Sie verwendet werden (und wird es auch, wie die zahllosen persönlichen Attacken (...) beweisen). Da ist es manchmal besser, überhaupt nichts zu sagen — oder sich auf die Story von der "glücklichen Hure" zu beschränken.“ (Theo Meow)

²³⁵ „Das nimmt Energie, das nimmt die Zeit, uns über die wichtigeren Themen zu unterhalten und die größeren Probleme anzugehen, die dazu führen, dass Menschen prekär arbeiten, die dazu führen, dass Menschen aus anderen Ländern nach Deutschland kommen, um (...) der Sexarbeit nachzugehen (...).“ (Katharina)

²³⁶ „(...) das ist ganz schnell super erschöpfend (...).“ (Nicky)

²³⁷ „(...) berühmt-berüchtigte Aktivismus-Burn-Out (...).“ (Nicky)

²³⁸ „An und für sich insgesamt ist es total wichtig, dass wir irgendwie dagegen ankommen. Aber der Kampf an der Front (*lacht*), das hält keiner lange durch.“ (Nicky)

gains from confrontational encounters, these caused long-term losses for the movement's agenda and resources. Consequently, sex worker activists increasingly desire to escape this dynamic, and envision a strategic reorientation. "We urgently need a different strategy that doesn't burn up so many activists,"²³⁹ Nicky concedes. Since sex worker activists were struggling to compete with anti-prostitution campaigners through debate, counterprotesting presented one alternative tactic which activists could shift their efforts to.

6.5 "My Cunt is Mine" – Public Protesting & Provoking

Public protesting is a fundamental tactic for sex worker activists and thoroughly linked to anti-prostitution campaigners' actions: in fact, the very first public protest sex worker activists staged after the emergence of their self-organization was directed against the launch of Schwarzer's book "Prostitution – a German scandal" in Berlin on the 14th of November 2013. Here, activists first assembled outside the event venue, where they distributed flyers, gave interviews to the press, and held up red umbrellas as well as protest signs reading "Mein Beruf gehört mir" (my job belongs to me) and "Halt die Klappe, Alice!" (shut up, Alice!). During the event, activists participating in the audience denounced the lack of space for intervention and discussion given by Schwarzer. As the debate grew into a heated discussion, activists began interrupting through shouted interjections and booing from the audience, where they opened their umbrellas and tried to unroll protest banners. An activist reportedly stormed the stage on which the speakers were seated and exposed her genitals, just before Schwarzer eventually closed the event (magazin.hiv, 2013).

This very first counterprotest which sex worker activists staged against anti-prostitution campaigners is descriptive of their subsequent use of this strategy. In counterprotesting, activists often select the same arena and tactic as anti-prostitution campaigners do: on the occasion of International Whores Day on the 2nd of June 2020, BesD for instance launched a "#RotlichtAN" (#RedlightON) campaign in direct response to the anti-prostitution campaign "#RotlichtAus" (#RedlightOff), which the organization Sisters had launched in 2017. Sex worker activists' counteraction emulated their opponents' campaign, and encompassed demonstrations, art actions, brothel tours, and information events. The hashtag offered sex

²³⁹ „(...) brauchen wir da dringend eine andere Strategie, die nicht so viele Aktivistinnen verheizt.“ (Nicky)

workers the possibility to anonymously express support on social media, thus also moving counterprotests online in a time of pandemic-related restrictions on public assemblies. At other counterprotests, sex worker activists incorporated delegitimizing accusations: during the first session of the parliamentary working group on prostitution on the 15th of October 2019, activists assembled outside the building and posed with the letters of the word “Lobbyhuren” (lobby whores) spelled out on their exposed chests, thus responding to anti-prostitution campaigners’ framing of activists as a “prostitution lobby”. For Katharina, who participated in the protest, this meant both an appropriation of the derogatory term and a claim to lobbying as a legitimate political activity:

(...) because it simply sends out a good signal that you can accept the word ‘whore’ for yourself, and yes, also do lobbying and lobby work, even without being a large corporation and without having a lot of money.²⁴⁰

From this perspective, self-identifying as a “lobby whore” contained both a historical continuation of the German whore movement’s tactic of linguistic reclamation (Heying, 2019), and a contemporary claim to activists’ legitimacy in influencing policy processes.

In their counterprotesting, sex worker activists in Germany exhibit characteristics specific to sex worker protests in general. First and foremost, activists carry red umbrellas, the symbol of the international sex worker movement, to which the German movement links itself through the reiteration of internationally popular slogans, which activists shout or present on banners. These slogans contain the international movement’s central demands of professional and bodily self-determination (“my job belongs to me,” “get your laws off my body”), political self-representation (“shut up, Alice!”, “*Sprecht mit uns, nicht über uns/nothing about us without us*”), recognition of sex work as work (“sex work is work”, “blowjobs are real jobs”), or the expression of globally shared grievances (“rights not rescue”, “fight poverty, not sex work”, “stigma kills”).

At public protests, activists also strategically use nudity and sex work aesthetics. As exemplified during the Women’s March on the 8th of 2020, activists strategically employ clothing to increase visibility: despite the wintery conditions and the long demonstration route ahead, the activists who assembled in the sex worker block donned platform heels and

²⁴⁰ „(...) weil das einfach auch so ein schönes Zeichen setzt, dass man eben das Wort Hure für sich annimmt, und ja, auch Lobbyismus und Lobbyarbeit machen kann, auch ohne ein Großkonzern zu sein und ohne viel Geld zu haben.“ (Katharina)

lingerie, with some even whipping off their fake fur coats as we started walking. Other items stereotypically associated with sex work, such as fishnet stockings, leopard prints, or latex and leather fetish clothing are consciously added to the picture. Activists also use wigs, make-up and sunglasses to manage the balancing act between visibility and anonymity. Other protests involved dance and drag performances, the use of a human-sized red high heel, inflatable plastic dolls, or a gynaecological chair. Here, parallels to the German whore movement are visible: in 1989, activists of Hydra set up a gynaecological chair in front of the public health department in Berlin and issued certificates of sexual health to all male department officers, in order to protest against the compulsory health consultations sex workers were subjected to (Heying, 2019). Katharina explains the strategic use of these provocative items and aesthetic in today's sex worker protests:

In order to actually be taken seriously as a whore at a protest, you have to somehow also serve the cliché to a certain extent, you see a lot of fishnet stockings and so on, revealing clothing. Even if, normally, people (...) don't necessarily dress like that. But you simply take advantage of it because you know that by being visible, by provoking, you attract more attention. And then you just appropriate that and give it a positive image.²⁴¹

Visually confirming clichés about sex workers hence serves to reclaim and resignify stigmatized clothing, provoke attention, and defer political legitimacy to activists. Playing with the scandalized image of sex work and using the voyeuristic interest of audiences is a potent strategy to generate attention and influence, Lara confirms: "(...) just the fact that you're a whore, (...) that does it. Meaning, you can also use that as a political calculation."²⁴² The strategic inversion of stigma which activists perform through clothing at demonstrations, was also provocatively employed by activists of Sex Workers Solidarity, who issued registration certificates to members of parliament, and the Sex Work is Work. Respect! campaign which offered them to general audiences during protests. In public spaces, the provocative use of sexual explicitness is frequently extended by activists exposing their breasts, whereas the exposition of genitals is rarer and usually confined to semi-public spaces and indoor settings. In addition to rejecting stigma and provoking attention, nudity can be employed to intervene

²⁴¹ „(...) um tatsächlich ernst genommen zu werden als Hure bei einem Protest, muss man irgendwie auch das Klischee ein Stück weit bedienen, da sieht man dann ganz viele Netzstrümpfe und so weiter, freizügige Kleidung. Auch wenn die Leute sich im Normalfall (...) jetzt sich nicht unbedingt so kleiden. Aber man nutzt es einfach aus, weil man weiß, dass man durch Sichtbarkeit, durch provozieren, mehr Aufmerksamkeit erreicht. Und dann eignet man sich das einfach an und besetzt das positiv.“ (Katharina)

²⁴² „(...) alleine die Tatsache, dass du Hure bist, (...) das zieht schon. Das heißt, das kann man auch als politisches Kalkül nutzen.“ (Lara)

in a space closed off to verbal argumentation: as the magazine *Der Spiegel* concluded in its report on Schwarzer's book launch, "there is probably no other way to fight the media steamroller Alice Schwarzer than with hands, feet and naked crotch" (Pilarczyk, 2013). Provocative sexual explicitness intended to shock, upset conservative morals, and highlight grievances is also contained in sex worker activists' protest slogans such as "meine Möse gehört mir" (my cunt is mine) or "der Staat fickt uns, aber zahlt nicht" (the state fucks us but doesn't pay). Strategic counterprotesting outside of anti-prostitution events, the reappropriation of slurs, and the staging of sexually explicit "slut walks" have also been documented for the US sex worker movement (Chateauvert, 2015). Moreover, public undressing and nudity constitute long-standing disruptive tactics of feminist movements, through which activists shock, shame, and draw public attention to issues such as gender-based violence or bodily and sexual self-determination (Barcan, 2002; Gupta, 2017; Jacobs, 2016; Taylor & van Dyke, 2004; S. Young, 2020).²⁴³ At the same time, the use of nudity within protest repertoires is disputed and brings structural inequalities within feminist movements into focus (Hunt, 2018). Overt displays of fetish clothing and stigmatized sexual practices also form part of the tactical repertoires of LGBTQ movements, where activists moreover use drag performances to entertain and deliver political message at the same time (Rupp & Taylor, 2003). Through the use of sexually explicit and provocative tactics at counterprotests, sex worker activists thus located themselves within these movement contexts.

Although the counterprotest to Schwarzer's book launch introduced characteristics typical to sex worker protests, it was singular in so far as it presents one of the few disruptive protests I documented over the course of my research. More frequently, activists' counterprotests take place entirely outside anti-prostitution events and without direct confrontation, such as the counterprotest against the first session of the parliamentary working group on prostitution on the 1th of October 2019, or the vigil which activists held against the anti-prostitution congress in Bonn on the 26th of September 2020, where they silently positioned themselves on the road opposite the building (BesD, 2020a; BSD, 2020b). Sex worker activists thus strategically stage counterprotests "to try and pull people away" (Clio) from anti-prostitution events and to protest their systematic exclusion from these spaces. In some instances, activists also attempted to prevent anti-prostitution events from happening by

²⁴³ This tactic can be used to differing ends in the same political field: the Ukrainian women's group Femen, for instance, uses nudity to protest for the prohibition of sex work.

appealing to organizers or hosting institutions to offer anti-prostitution campaigners “no platform” (SWAG, 2020b).

In the long run, counterprotesting proved to be not only a feasible tactic to oppose anti-prostitution campaigners, but a means to protest state institutions. As the legislative process leading to the Prostitute Protection Act progressed to sex worker activists’ detriment, they extended their counterprotests from anti-prostitution campaigners to government authorities. Activists, for instance, protested against the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act outside the federal parliament in Berlin on the 2nd of June and 7th of July 2016, or highlighted the legal insecurity created by the law’s lacking implementation outside the Schöneberg townhall in Berlin in December 2017. Here, activists tried to collectively register as sex workers using the alias “Alice Schwarzer”, in order to demonstrate the stigmatizing effect of the compulsory registration and to denounce anti-prostitution campaigners’ contribution to repressive legislation.

Over the course of the years, public protesting took on an increasingly central role as a tactic, as institutional channels of lobbying and policy-making proved limited to sex worker activists. With the increased lobbying by anti-prostitution campaigners and the existential threats created by pandemic-related prohibitions, public protests grew in size and frequency: the counterprotests organized against the first session of the parliamentary working group on prostitution on the 15th of October 2019 presented the biggest public protest to that date, gathering about 170 sex worker activists and supporters. These numbers were topped again by the marches the Sex Worker Action Group (SWAG) organized in September 2020, and on International Whores Day in 2021 and 2022. Sex worker activists also strengthened their presence and called for political alliances at other political action days by forming increasingly large sex worker blocks in demonstrations on the 8th of March (International Women’s Day/Feminist Strike), the 1st of May (Labour Day), and at various yearly Pride events in June and July. In Berlin, sex worker activists have been regular participants in demonstrations against sexualized violence (e.g. “Rache am Patriarchat” on the 14th of February), the yearly queer feminist protest actions against anti-abortion marches (*Marsch für das Leben – What the Fuck!?*), or protests against gentrification (Lergenmüller, 2021).

Beyond anti-prostitution campaigners, public protesting therefore targets political stakeholders and the general public. “We need to change the minds not only of the politicians,

but also of the people,”²⁴⁴ Dan explains their participation in protests. To them, public protesting first and foremost contains the demand “please don’t ignore us!” (*Bitte ignoriert uns nicht!*). In order to attract the attention of specific constituencies, sex worker activists’ demonstration routes regularly pass through historical street sex working areas and queer neighbourhoods such as Schöneberg in Berlin, thereby reclaiming spaces which have become sites of gentrification and displacement of sex workers. Spreading such mass protests out over Germany then increases public attention and ultimately political pressure, Kerstin claims:

That’s how you reach the politicians and at some point they have to deal with us, that’s how it is. Because then the pressure comes from the population. When the pressure comes from the population, then they deal with it.²⁴⁵

Given that institutional political channels have proven futile to sex worker activists’ engagement, public protesting serves as a strategic tool to generate public pressure and reach political stakeholders by extension.

Finally, at public protests, sex worker activists merge the struggle for visibility and political inclusion with celebrations of their own movement and communities. Like Casey, who co-organized a demonstration on International Whores Day in 2019, many interviewees describe public protests as “one of the highlights” of their activist engagement. “The energy was just phenomenal,” Casey remembers, and the turnout of people at the march on the 2nd of June particularly high:

I think the 2nd is super important because it commemorates the church in Lyon in France, and it’s for us just a super important day of solidarity and celebration. So I think creating something that also is quite public and says to the public ‘we’re here’. Because I think so much of the time sex workers’ voices are ignored, whether it’s in public discourse and the constant stereotypes, or through policy and not being consulted in laws that affect our livelihood. So I think it’s really important, especially on this day, to be like, you know, ‘we’re here and we demand to be heard’ and to show up.

In addition to creating visibility and appealing to the general public, sex worker protests thus present spaces of celebration, commemoration, and community solidarity, which re-energize activists and strengthen their movement. However, not all activists or members of the wider sex worker community can participate in public protesting in the same fashion, and the tactic contains limitations. Some interviewees indeed emphasize that they neither enjoy, nor

²⁴⁴ „Wir müssen nicht nur die Meinung von den Politikern auch ändern, sondern auch von der Bevölkerung.“ (Dan)

²⁴⁵ „So erreicht man halt auch die Politik und irgendwann müssen sie sich mit uns beschäftigen, das ist so. Weil auch dann der Druck von der Bevölkerung kommt. Wenn der Druck von der Bevölkerung kommt, dann beschäftigen sie sich damit.“ (Kerstin)

partake in public demonstrations and marches. According to Eric, participation in public protests is dependent on individuals' social location:

There's people who do these sex worker protest marches with their red umbrellas and the banners (...) and that's totally important, too. But I don't want to do that. And I think that there's other kinds of activism. I also think there's a certain privilege to be able to do that as a sex worker. You need to be able to be out in the media for that, because even if you're not a sex worker and you're just an ally, some reporter is going to come along and interview you and then call you a whore, or an escort, or a sex worker in the newspaper, with your picture, and everyone's going to see it, including maybe your mother.

In his view, the requirement or risk of outing that comes with the visibility generated at protests can only be handled by "privileged" protesters who are equipped with certain resources, such as personal resistance to stigma or accepting social circles. As a trans man, Eric finds he lacks the privileges ensuring his safety in public spaces, and instead prefers to focus on community organizing. Matters are similar for Dayana, a Black queer person, who reports feeling personally unsafe at public protests and impaired by its mass dynamic:

I am not looking to be one of these people that goes out on the street and does all of this kind of foot work. I've been there, I've done that. It often leaves me in a very vulnerable position and feeling very compromised because I don't always feel like people have got my back, because they're too busy trying to look out for themselves, for good reason! And also, as someone who sees themselves as empathic and spiritual and a very prone to other people's energies kind of person, going out en masse to protest is really compromising for me. So I have to do things in really very different ways.

In addition to lacking safety and the trust in the community's backing, Dayana experiences the "energy" shared at public protests as debilitating rather than invigorating. Instead, Dayana prefers to facilitate workshops, performances and art events as a form of activism. The perspectives of Eric and Dayana illustrate that multiply marginalized sex worker activists face higher obstacles to public protesting, and experience public visibility as endangering rather than empowering.

The differing experiences and needs around public protesting which exist within the activist community contain several dilemmas for the sex worker movement. As the yearly mass demonstrations held on the 8th of March 2020 in Berlin shows, visibility often comes at the expense of safety and inclusivity: in order to increase visibility, activists opted to form a sex worker block in the feminist mainstream march taking place in the centre of Berlin, even though they felt safer at the alternative march organized by migrant, refugee and racialized women in the historically working-class and leftist neighbourhood of Friedrichshain. It was

exactly this heightened exposure at the centrally located mainstream demonstration which prevented vulnerable sex worker activists from participating. “I think the big thing with in real life spaces and barriers to that are people not feeling safe to go because they’re worried about being outed,” Clio explains. In order to mitigate this risk, sex worker activists often mobilize a combination of both sex-working and non-sex working protesters. Although this tactic grants individual anonymity in terms of sex-working status, it does not afford protection to those who are marginalized along the lines of race or gender, and are often visibly underrepresented in public protests. Moreover, the sex worker movements’ attempts to increase visibility, safety, and inclusivity of these activists in demonstrations are limited by general structural discriminations and threats present in the public sphere: recognizing inequalities within sex work activism, SWAG, for instance, sought to centre racialized activists in its demonstration by suggesting they spearhead the march. The concerned activists, however, declined due to safety concerns, which inevitably left the already most visible group of non-racialized activists to dominate the composition of the march. Visibly centring racialized activists also runs the risk of tokenization if their inclusion is not reflected in organizational structures: Dan, a racialized activist, stopped participating in protests which in their view serve only as a “photo campaign” (*Fotoaktion*): “because I feel very exploited (...) as a photo model, so to speak. I don’t want to stand there as a photo model,”²⁴⁶ Dan explains. Their discomfort over protest strategies also extends to the movement’s public reappropriation of the term “whore”, which Dan fears could reinforce stigma rather than defy it. For the same reasons, some activists have opposed the use of inflatable plastic dolls at protests, emphasizing its dehumanizing effect. Adding to these criticisms over activists’ re-stigmatization in public spaces is Scarlet’s perspective, according to which the term “lobby whore” is a futile political tactic because of its inability to politicize other sex workers:

With the term ‘lobby whore’, I can’t go to a brothel and recruit colleagues. You can already see that it’s about an elite in sex work, an elite that also has access to education and that somehow creates such a neologism.²⁴⁷

The strategy of public protesting and provoking remains unavailable for sex workers who lack access to language, education and political circles, and proves inaccessible to those unable to convert internalized stigma into pride. Dankwa et al. (2019), for instance, highlight how

²⁴⁶ „(...) weil ich mich sehr ausgenutzt fühle (...) als Fotomodell sozusagen. Ich möchte nicht als Fotomodell dastehen.“ (Dan)

²⁴⁷ „(...) mit dem Begriff Lobbyhure kann ich nicht ins Laufhaus gehen und Kolleginnen anwerben. Da sieht man schon, dass es um eine Elite geht in der Sexarbeit, um eine Elite, die Zugang auch zu Bildung hat und die solche Wortschöpfung irgendwie schafft.“ (Scarlet)

racialized women are required to negotiate between hypersexualization and hypervisibility on the one hand, and the desexualization and invisibility created by respectability politics on the other hand. The reclaiming of sexual explicitness and vulgarity therefore contains less emancipatory potential, and more dilemmas to these political actors. Interviewees' differing perspectives on these protests tactics then reflect how inequalities in social location among sex worker activists translate into movement practices.

Summary

As I have shown in this chapter, the self-organization of sex workers is inextricably tied to the political efforts of anti-prostitution campaigners. Sex worker activists first and foremost established themselves as political actors in the field of prostitution politics by successfully countering the threat posed by a publicized anti-prostitution campaign (6.1). The antagonistic dynamic which unfolded from this event initially spurred sex workers' self-organization, but eventually impeded it. First, sex worker activists struggled to counter anti-prostitution campaigners' affective strategies (Sauer, 2019) through informed debate (6.2). On the one hand, this inability is detached from sex worker activists and a general feature of the political field of prostitution: according to Wagenaar and Altink's (2012) conceptualization, prostitution politics presents a form of morality politics which is emotionally and ideologically charged rather than influenced by expert knowledge and fact-based analysis. In the time leading up to the Prostitute Protection Act, the attempts of scholars to "add something to the intensified media debate and enrich it with complexity" (Grenz, 2014, p. 203) were equally thwarted. The primarily symbolic function of policy-making within morality politics also elucidates why anti-prostitution campaigners remained unimpaired in their support for criminalization despite its obvious detrimental impact on sex workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, sex worker activists' limitations in countering their opponents' affective strategies are directly related to their location within power relations: as stigmatized and marginalized political actors who are struggling for political legitimacy, affective strategies were unavailable to sex worker activists. Assuming that displays of undesired emotions such as agitation and anger would further disqualify their epistemic authority, activists instead regulated their emotions to adhere to dominant ideals of rationality, and emphasized the scientific grounding of their politics (Jasper, 2011).

In subchapter 6.3, I elaborated my analysis of power relations existing between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners to demonstrate how epistemic and structural inequalities hamper sex worker activists' ability to counter their political opponent. As Goffman (1986) expounded, social stigma is "deeply discrediting" (p.4) to individuals. While all activists deal with the stigmatized subjectivity of being a sex worker, anti-prostitution campaigners enjoy a "'credibility surplus' [which] comes from not being tainted with the stigma of selling sex" (Bee, 2020, p. 4). Sex workers' prevalent victimization and psychological pathologization further detract from activists' epistemic authority. Sex worker activists also struggled with the structural inequalities which exacerbated their political marginalization. These are expressed in interviewees' descriptions of class distinctions, and marked by anti-prostitution campaigners' institutional embeddedness within strategically relevant and influential positions. Anti-prostitution campaigners thus present incumbents within the field of prostitution politics, whose hegemonic position is reinforced by the structuring of the strategic action field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015). As a newly formed political actor with sparse resource endowments, sex worker activists who began self-organizing within BesD occupied the role of challengers who "articulate an alternative vision of the field and their position in it" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015, p. 13). As challengers, sex worker activists also accommodated the field's logic and exploited the opportunities given within it: anti-prostitution campaigners' activities permitted sex worker activists to devise a strategic counteraction and establish themselves as political actors within prostitution politics. In addition to enabling, the interaction with anti-prostitution campaigners subsequently constrained sex worker activists' abilities: sex worker activists were compelled to enter into the same arenas in which anti-prostitution campaigners were active, and had to continuously adjust their tactical repertoire in relation to this incumbent. In the long run, the antagonistic dynamic narrowed sex worker activists' political analysis and occupied their capacities. Because confrontational debates are characterized by unequal power relations and drain activists' resources, they perform a functional role for anti-prostitution campaigners, Bee (2020) finds. Rather than institutional structures, it was therefore the interaction with another "player" (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015) in the arena of prostitution politics which shaped the development of sex workers' self-organization.

From an interactionist social movement perspective, the conflictual relationship between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners is conclusive: both actors present

strategic players operating within the field of prostitution politics, where they seek to impact legislative processes but with differing goals (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015; Fligstein & McAdam, 2015). Sex worker activists' interest in preventing repressive legislation stood in contrast to that of anti-prostitution campaigners, who advocated for the eradication of prostitution through criminal law. Meyer and Staggenborg's (1996) theory on movement-counter movement dynamics captures many aspects of the antagonistic relationship between these two political actors: anti-prostitution campaigners began mobilizing after the German whore movement of the 1890s had consolidated its gains in the Prostitution Act of 2001. Similar to the US abortion conflicts examined by Meyer and Staggenborg (2008), the successes achieved by the whore movement sparked political opposition by an actor who made "competing claims on the state on matters of policy and politics" (p. 1632). When anti-prostitution campaigners' mobilizations inspired renewed legislative plans for the Prostitute Protection Act, sex worker activists again countered these political achievements through their self-organization in 2013. While anti-prostitution campaigners first created a positive opportunity structure for sex worker activists, they later dictated the sex worker movements' agenda and drained its resources. From a movement-counter movement perspective, these two actors' confrontational engagement within the same political arenas and the increasing escalation of their conflicts explains the attacks and hostilities I delineated in subchapter 6.4. Sex worker activists' strategic adjustment to their political opponent is particularly visible in the shift to counterprotesting which I discussed in subchapter 6.5: as a result of the limitations which activists experienced in debating anti-prostitution campaigners, they innovated their repertoire of contention to maintain an oppositional presence within the public sphere. Recently, anti-prostitution campaigners themselves have performed tactical innovations by appropriating important action days of the sex worker movement: in 2021, anti-prostitution campaigners in Berlin organized a rally for client criminalization on International Whores Day on the 2nd of June – a tactic that sex worker activists considered "not only as a brazen provocation, but also as another attempt by our political opponents to hijack the struggles for sex workers' rights" (SWAG, 2021).

The interactionist social movement approaches of Duyvendak and Jasper (2015), Fligstein and McAdam (2015), or Meyer and Staggenborg (1996, 2008) aptly describe the emergence, development and outcomes of sex workers' self-organization in relation to anti-prostitution campaigners. The antagonistic dynamic between these two actors also seems expected, given

that prostitution has cleaved bourgeois and proletarian women's movements, or presented a rift between "radical" and "sexpositive" feminists in the so-called "sex wars" of the 1980s and 1990s (Phipps, 2017). However, my analysis also surfaces some limitations within these interactionist social movement approaches.

First, historical developments complicate the identification of movement-counter movement dynamics and reduce the explanatory value of this approach: exactly because prostitution has been such a long-standing point of contention within feminist politics, it appears arbitrary to fix a temporal starting point for both a movement and a counter movement in prostitution politics, and to determine which of the involved political actor deserves which designation. In other words, if I identified anti-prostitution campaigners as a counter movement to the German whore movement of the 1980s, what would that render the current sex worker movement in Germany? Moreover, only by ignoring the historical continuities between the German whore movement and the current sex worker movement does it seem possible to describe sex workers' self-organization in 2013 as a counter movement to anti-prostitution campaigners' successes. In addition to these far-reaching entanglements, the institutional embeddedness of anti-prostitution campaigners begs the question whether this political actor constitutes a social movement at all (although Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) suggest the existence of social movements initiated by elites which mobilize without mass bases).

Second, contestations between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution actors are not an inevitable reality: sex worker movements which emerged in the 1970s in the Global North framed their demands as labour rights issues, and thus presented an alternative to the polarization between feminist empowerment and dominance narratives within prostitution politics (Phipps, 2017). These sex worker movements considered themselves part of feminist movements, and were explicitly supported by feminist and religious actors who opposed prostitution (Geymonat et al., 2019; Heying, 2016, 2019; Mathieu, 2001, 2003a). Diverging ideas on sexual self-determination and women's liberation also existed between the German whore movement and anti-prostitution feminists in the 1980s (Heying, 2019), yet these differences did not trigger the latter into political countermobilizations. The mere success of the whore movement in impacting legislation cannot sufficiently explain why they did so in the early 2000s, and why they maintained an oppositional stance towards sex worker activists' self-organization from 2013 on.

Third, interactionist social movement approaches fall short in capturing a crucial aspect of the antagonistic dynamic between these two actors: its exclusionary effect on sex worker activists. To some extent, the theoretical perspective accounts for unequal power relations between actors and the reproduction of a political status quo through them, e.g. by addressing incumbents' material and political resources (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015), elite actors' role within countermovements (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996), or variations in players' influence and power (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015). However, these hierarchies are treated as general characteristics of the political field, and the continuous "ebb and flow" (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1644) of interaction between political actors is regarded a regular part of contentious politics. Put differently, these theoretical perspectives refrain from normative assessments of these processes. As such, the epistemic and structural inequalities between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners, and the attacks and hostilities which the former face by the latter, constitute legitimate aspects of political interaction – the common result of which may be that a marginalized political actors fails to achieve political participation or affect social change.

Here, feminist theories of democracy make a vital contribution by centring the ideal of inclusive democratic practice (Fraser, 1990; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Krook, 2020; Marx Ferree et al., 2002, 2002; I. M. Young, 2002). These approaches delineate how political processes in liberal democracies produce and exacerbate the political exclusion of marginalized political actors, and stress that this exclusion contests the legitimacy of democratic decision-making. This shines a different light on the inequalities between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners: these perpetuate injustice in democratic processes in which "privileged people are able to marginalize the voices and issues of those less privileged" (I. M. Young, 2002, p. 45) and undermine "full parity of participation in public debate and deliberation" (Fraser, 1990, p. 66). Confrontational encounters between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners thus reinforced existing hierarchies to the political advantage of the latter. Moreover, the fact that contestations ultimately stunted sex worker activists' participation within the legislative arena and caused their withdrawal from the public sphere counteracts the norm of inclusion feminist theories of democracy set (I. M. Young, 2002). As a result, the democratic quality of these processes and their outcomes are undermined. The relationship between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners exhibits what Young (2002) has termed "external" and "internal" forms of

exclusion: not only are sex worker activists precluded from entering into democratic processes such as the parliamentary working group on prostitution or intervening in anti-prostitution campaigners' public talks. Upon their entry into these spaces, sex worker activists also find that they are "those who are simply not believed because they belong to a discriminated group" (Lombardo & Meier, 2022), and consequently get dismissed as political actors. Because of the inequalities and exclusionary dynamics which characterize the encounters of these two political actors, their strategies only appear to be one and the same: as expounded by Young (2002), disruptive or emotionalized tactics often present one of the few ways in which politically marginalized actors can intervene into exclusionary spaces, and their use by sex worker activists would thus need to be evaluated differently than that of anti-prostitution campaigners.

Finally, whereas interactionist social movement perspectives normalize conflictual encounters between political actors, feminist theories of democracy emphasize that attacks and hostilities do not constitute "part of the political game" (Krook, 2020, p. 76). In her work on violence against women in politics, Krook (2020) conceptualizes hostilities not as a regular part of contentious politics, but as a means to ostracize women from public and political spaces. According to the author,

(...) violence against women in politics is a distinct phenomenon involving a broad range of harms to attack and undermine women as political actors. Its central motivation is thus not to gain the upper hand in a game of partisan competition, but rather to exclude women as a group from public life. (Krook, 2020, p. 4)

Following Krook's (2020) analysis, I understand the hostilities which anti-prostitution campaigners direct against sex worker activists not as strategic efforts to win political contestations around sex work, but as attempts to expel sex worker activists from politics in general. The typology of violence which Krook develops encompasses many of the hostilities sex worker activists are subjected to: on the one hand, individual activists experience degradation and shaming through verbal abuse, reputational harm, and social ostracization. According to Krook (2020), these forms of psychological violence intend to "instill fear, cause stress, or harm their credibility" (p. 13). On the other hand, the political legitimacy of sex worker activists as a group is undermined through semiotic violence: by acts of "vilifying, demonizing, belittling, humiliating, mocking, lampooning, shunning, and shaming" (Krook, 2020, p. 188), anti-prostitution campaigners communicate a "repeated messages of group-based inferiority" (p. 189) to sex worker activists, whose "intelligence, humanity, and morality

as political actors” (p. 198) is denied. In addition to anti-prostitution campaigners’ vilification and shaming of sex worker activists as perpetrators and sexual deviants, the strategic use of outing against sex worker activists can have repercussions on their professional and private lives, and cause unpredictable harms. Applying Krook’s analysis to sex worker activists’ experiences illustrates the centrality of gender to this violence, and its intersectional manifestations for those who are marginalized along various axes: anti-prostitution campaigners target sex worker activists as women who deviate from both gendered and sexual norms.²⁴⁸ By hindering “participation of different social groups in political decision-making” (Krook, 2020, p. 89), these acts of violence not only threaten democracy, human rights and gender equality, but also discipline socially undesired expression of sexuality. Yet, those subjected to violence in politics are not defenseless, and Krook delineates various counterstrategies. Among these are not only the “semiotic reversals” (Krook, 2020, p. 210) which sex worker activists perform through the reappropriation of derogatory terms in counterprotesting, but also public expressions of solidarity by other political actors, which I will address in chapter 8 on coalition building. In the following chapter 7, I first demonstrate how sex worker activists seek to find and forge relations of solidarity within their own communities, and trace the heterogeneous processes of cooperation and contestation within the sex worker movement.

²⁴⁸ I limit this statement to women activists since my data encompasses only hostilities directed against women activists, but no attacks of sex worker activists of other genders (e.g. male, non-binary).

7 Internal Cooperation and Contestations

Like much of social movement research, my work has thus far mainly followed the single-axis focus of a social movement which centres activists' subjectivity and political marginalization as sex workers. However, social movements are no monoliths but constitute arenas of cooperation and contestation in themselves (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015). Moreover, their internal heterogeneity is characterized by power relations which affect the development of collective mobilizations and produce processes of inclusion and exclusion (Ayoub, 2019; Montoya, 2021). To examine these dynamics, Montoya (2021) proposes to study social movements intersectionally through different strategies. One of these is the "intracategorical" approach (Montoya, 2021). In Montoya's words

The intracategorical approach looks within ideal-type movements or a particular movement to examine the heterogeneity that exists, the extent to which it is acknowledged and addressed, and its impact on mobilization. This includes identifying exclusions that leave groups at the margins or outside of movements altogether. (Montoya, 2021, p. 4)

Following this strategy in this chapter, I direct an "intracategorical" lens (Montoya, 2021) onto the sex worker movement, scrutinize its internal diversity, trace collaborative and conflictual interactions among activists, and examine how power relations create exclusionary processes.

In subchapter 7.1, I first explicate the significance of community to sex workers' self-organization: as individualized and stigmatized workers, finding community with other sex workers is a fundamental reason why activists engage in self-organization. Community also presents a basis to sex workers' politicization, a means of survival, and a resource the movement can fall back on in times of crisis. The significance of community within sex workers' self-organization therefore increased again after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act and the continuously deteriorating conditions which followed. Within their efforts to foster community, sex worker activists express appreciation of the diversity in activists' social locations and work to integrate it into the movement.

Sex worker only spaces play a crucial role for the creation of community and constitute safe(r) spaces in which sex workers can find refuge from stigmatization, sex work related discrimination, and a potential outing (7.2). As such, I argue, sex worker only spaces promote inclusion and blur the boundary between non-politicized sex workers and sex worker activists,

as well as the boundary between community care work and political activism. I moreover highlight that community care work is a fundamentally political and increasingly acknowledged practice for social movements emerging out of resource-poor and marginalized communities (Alkebulan, 2007; Hobart & Kneese, 2020). Through grassroots practices of material and immaterial reproduction, activists secure not only the survival of underserviced sex workers and resist the hierarchical relations of welfare systems, they also ensure the survival of their social movement in a resource-draining political context. Yet, like in many other movement contexts, the boundaries, codes of conduct, and utility of sex worker only spaces are subject to continued negotiations between participants.

Forging community and an inclusive movement is challenging for activists in a highly stratified industry where lived experiences are shaped by a variety of power relations. In subchapter 7.3, I therefore delineate existing fragmentations and conflicts within the sex worker movement. Activists struggle in particular to mobilize migrant sex workers, and the “whorarchy” informs demarcation processes in which some forms of sex work are valorized over others. In the context of sex workers’ self-organization against the Prostitute Protection Act, activists working in tantra and sexual surrogacy sought to evade repressive legislation by strategically distinguishing themselves from sex work. After the law’s adoption, sex workers’ legal status constituted a fault line whose strategic utilization reproduced stigmatization and hierarchical power relations. I also show how the political loss incurred through the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act heightened conflicts over movement internal hierarchies and exclusions, which manifested most distinctly within BesD. The diversification of the sex worker movement after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act was therefore accompanied by instances of disintegration and fragmentation.

Political losses can undermine solidarity within social movements and at the same time spur political learning (Beckwith, 2016). Although the defensive position sex worker activists operate from complicates movement internal critiques, I show how learning processes materialize in activists’ examination of their own social locations and the personal privileges originating from them (7.4). I delineate how activists seek to tackle inequalities and foster inclusion by strategically employing personal privileges in the interest of those marginalized within the movement. Finally, I summarize my analysis and contextualize it within the relevant literature. As part of this, I review sex work scholarship which addresses questions of community internal solidarity within legalized contexts where some sex workers can reap

benefits provided by state regulation, while others face more obstacles to do so or are outright excluded from them. Echoing Berg's (2021) analysis of porn workers in the US, I contend that partial professionalization can undermine community solidarity and produce politics of "respectability" which remain limited in their transformative capacity. While van der Poel (1995) concludes that sex worker activists can strategically utilize stratifications among sex workers to achieve gradual political gains, I argue that sex workers' self-organization against the Prostitute Protection Act shows otherwise: here, internal hierarchies were invoked to delegitimize sex worker activists as political actors, and the exclusionary dynamics within the movement produced conflicts and fragmentations which eventually caught up with activists.

7.1 "It Was Just Good to Have That Community" – Finding and Forging Community

For many sex worker activists, finding community presents an important motivation to engage in self-organization. Roxy, for instance, says she got in contact with BesD because she missed the possibility to reflect and exchange on her working reality with colleagues:

I was just basically looking for other sex workers I could talk to about, like the social context and the political context of sex work, which I never had where I worked before. For some reason all the colleagues I had just weren't interested. And so I kind of had to reach out to this organization for sex workers in Germany [BesD]. And I finally found people who reflected on the context that we were working in. So that's kind of, that's how I got into it. And then I just like... yeah, it was just good to have that community. That was my main motivation, to just have that community.

In BesD, Roxy found the community of like-minded sex workers she was searching for. While Roxy could not find these conditions at her workplace because of her "uninterested" colleagues, many other sex workers lack general contact to colleagues, such as those working in independent and often individualized escorting. For these workers, BesD provided important community spaces through an internet forum, local sex worker meet-ups in a variety of cities, sex worker-only spaces at mixed events, or the whole congresses of 2018 and 2019, which were organized "for sex workers by sex workers"²⁴⁹ (Nicky).

For many interviewees, these community spaces provided a basis to their own politicization into sex work activism. Nicky first participated in a local sex worker meet-up

²⁴⁹ „(...) von Sex Workern für Sex Worker.“ (Nicky)

where she says a colleague eventually “kind of talked [her] into”²⁵⁰ participating in the general assembly of BesD and the sex work congress of 2016. From this, Nicky then proceeded to become actively involved in BesD. Simone’s trajectory into sex work activism was similar:

When my colleague asked me if I would like to go to one of these congresses, I said, ‘No, I want to earn money. That doesn’t interest me at all, because it has nothing to do with earning money.’ But because I was a close friend of hers, she convinced me that I should at least come by for an afternoon on one of the three days that the whore congress always lasts. I liked that very, very much. I was really thrilled that it was actually the first time I had the impression that I was really something special because I was a sex worker. Before that, it was always something I kept secret, especially at the beginning.²⁵¹

Despite her initial reluctance towards self-organizing and her prioritizing of sex work as a source of financial stability, Simone eventually participated in the whore congress. The experience made her feel “special” for being a sex worker in a way she hadn’t before. Simone then joined BesD “because I thought it was great to be able to talk about the profession without having to hide.”²⁵² Simone’s statements demonstrates how community with other sex workers functions as a way of overcoming a stigmatized and hidden subjectivity. In addition, it documents sex workers’ politicization and mobilization through colleagues and community meetings: many interviewees recount being mobilized by colleagues to participate in meet-ups, and deepening their participation from there. Now organizing community gatherings themselves, activists spread the information through “word-of-mouth”²⁵³ (Katharina) and try “to get other colleagues involved and to politicise and raise awareness that something is happening and that we all have to stick together” (Christin).

However, this does not signify that community meetings are directly geared towards concrete and public political activism. Many take place without a without a specific agenda and simply offer participants the possibility to meet and spend time with peers. Activists organize community meet-ups where they “just hold space” (Imani), allow sex workers to “talk to people who have similar experiences”²⁵⁴ (Dilan), and create “open discussion rounds

²⁵⁰ „(...) hat mich da irgendwie überredet (...).“ (Nicky)

²⁵¹ „Als mich dann die Kollegin darauf angesprochen, ob ich nicht Lust hätte, auch mal auf so einen Kongress mitzufahren, da hab ich gesagt ‚Ne, also, ich will Geld verdienen. Das interessiert mich ja überhaupt nicht, weil das hat doch nichts mit Geldverdienen zu tun.‘ Aber die hat mich dann dadurch, dass ich mit ihr eng befreundet war, überzeugt, dass ich zumindest einen Nachmittag mal vorbeischaue, von diesen drei Tagen, die der Hurenkongress immer dauert. Das hat mir sehr, sehr gut gefallen. Ich war da wirklich begeistert, dass es eigentlich das erste Mal war, dass ich den Eindruck hatte, ich bin wirklich etwas Besonderes, weil ich Sexarbeiterin bin. Vorher war das immer eher etwas, was ich natürlich auch schon geheim gehalten habe, gerade am Anfang.“ (Simone)

²⁵² „(...) weil ich das einfach toll fand, über den Beruf so sprechen zu können, ohne mich dafür verstecken zu müssen (...).“ (Simone)

²⁵³ „(...) über Mund Propaganda (...).“ (Katharina)

²⁵⁴ „(...) mit Leuten reden, die so eine ähnliche Erfahrung machen.“ (Dilan)

where you can exchange about whatever is on your mind”²⁵⁵ (Adrian). As Dilan explains, the sex work specific experiences shared in these contexts can cover a wide spectrum:

It doesn't have to be bad things, it can be super funny things. It's always fun to tell friends about it, but I also think it's just cool to talk to people who have similar experiences. Or, I don't know, sometimes things happen where you end up feeling totally fooled (*laughs*) and just annoyed forever. It's just nice to talk to other people about it.²⁵⁶

Rather than deliberating on political strategies, activists enjoy simply having encounters and exchanges with others who share the lived experience of sex work.

Community can also provide moments of relief in an otherwise challenging working and living reality. Until the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the main activities of trans*Sexworks consisted of hosting a weekly dinner. Here, migrant trans sex workers had the possibility to cook, eat, do laundry and prepare for work. Liljana, one of the peer organizers at trans*Sexworks, emphasizes the importance this weekly meeting had for this community:

The dinner was this moment of getting together, coming up together, because the work is very hard. So the moment of the dinner was exactly on the contrary, it was the moment when you make jokes and you come closer to each other and you share stuff that you think. (...) The dinner is this moment when people are forgetting about the stress and the difficulties that they have at work, and the moment when they get more freedom, they get free from the bad stuff that they have to carry.

For the participating migrant trans sex workers, the few hours spent over dinner with peers provided a stark contrast to the tough everyday realities of street-based sex work, and offered a period of comfort and respite. In a similar manner, Imani describes the meet-up she organizes for Black sex workers as a “healing space” where participants “let us know how they feel, where they're at.” For sex workers who face arduous working conditions shaped by their intersecting marginalizations, community spaces offering a unique and often singular opportunity for enjoyment, relaxation, and recovery. “For me it's something very nice,” Liljana subsumes. According to Eric, the weekly dinner is “like putting a band-aid on a large gaping wound, but if all you have is a weekly band-aid, the weekly band-aid is better than nothing.” Describing the weekly dinner as a “band-aid on a gaping wound” speaks to both the

²⁵⁵ „(...) offene Gesprächsrunde, wo man sich austauschen kann, was auch immer einem auf dem Herzen liegt (...).“ (Adrian)

²⁵⁶ „Ich glaube, weil man so manche Erfahrungen bei der Arbeit macht, die man vielleicht so einfach teilen möchte oder wo man sich darüber unterhalten möchte. Also es müssen auch nicht schlimme Sachen sein, es können auch so mega lustige Sachen sein. Es ist immer lustig, Freundinnen davon zu erzählen, aber ich finde es auch einfach cool, mit Leuten zu reden, die ähnliche Erfahrungen machen. Oder, keine Ahnung, es passieren auch manchmal Sachen, wo man sich am Ende voll verarscht vorkommt (lacht) und einfach ewig genervt ist. Es ist einfach nett, mit anderen Leuten darüber zu sprechen.“ (Dilan)

relevance and limitations of the few community events dedicated to underserved sex worker populations.

Due to Covid-19 regulations, trans*Sexworks was eventually unable to host the dinner and later lost access to the space after disagreements with the hosting institution. In order to maintain community contact and provide street-based migrant sex workers with basic necessities at a time when most government-funded social services were closed, activists fund-raised for a cargo bike with which they began visiting the street-working areas in Berlin at night. Community is thus a crucial means of survival for sex workers. As Adrian emphasizes,

(...) we are all very ... not dependent on one another, but I would say there is a strong relation to each other, because we just need that for our work and also for our survival, this community.²⁵⁷

In a social and political context where sex workers can depend on little more than one another, the strengthening of interrelations creates resilience. Imani believes that not having had community when starting sex work limited her ability to overcome the adversities she was experiencing as a single mother:

A lot of the things I went through as a young sex worker or young parent or single parent, I realized that had I had more support, I probably could have accomplished so much, but I didn't have... all the support that was out there in the sex worker community, I was always like, if these people were with me, I probably could have really overcome a lot of the stuff that I was going through.

In hindsight, Imani notices the lack of support during times in which she was less connected to sex worker communities. For many interviewees, the sex worker community is the place where they "build strength together" (Adrian) and experience a feeling of "we stick together, we strengthen each other, and we can achieve something"²⁵⁸ (Nina). The community also presents an important resource to activists who have experienced hostility in political spaces. Knowing "that there is someone there and we are not thrown to the wolves and left alone"²⁵⁹ (Christin) is essential for sex worker activists who defend each other against political attacks.

In general, community has gained further importance among sex worker activists with the increased deterioration in working and living conditions caused by the Prostitute Protection Act, growing anti-prostitution campaigning, and the detrimental effects of the Covid-19

²⁵⁷ „(...) wir sind alle sehr voneinander... nicht abhängig, aber ich würde sagen es gibt einen starken Bezug zueinander, weil wir eben das für unsere Arbeit und auch für unser Überleben brauchen, diese Gemeinschaft.“ (Adrian)

²⁵⁸ „(...) wir halten zusammen, wir stärken uns gegenseitig, und wir können was erreichen (...).“ (Nina)

²⁵⁹ „(...) dass es da jemanden gibt, und wir nicht den anderen zum Fraß vorgeworfen werden und alleine gelassen werden.“ (Christin)

pandemic. Efforts to forge community are hence visible in many of the sex worker movements' recent activities. After the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016, BesD organized whore congresses solely for sex workers in both 2018 and 2019, in order to offer sex workers "the opportunity to acquire knowledge, exchange ideas and network with colleagues. This is urgently needed, especially in view of the Prostitute Protection Act" (BesD, 2018), the organizing BesD stated. Recognizing the importance of community for sex workers who are increasingly illegalized and isolated under the Prostitute Protection Act, the sex worker peer project at Hydra counselling centre created a sex worker café in Berlin in 2019. Fittingly titled "together we are stronger" (*zusammen sind wir stärker*), the café welcomes "all people who have experience with sex work" and first and foremost seeks to "create a space where everyone feels comfortable to tell their stories, ask their questions and network with other colleagues" (Hydra Café, 2019). The café also served as a means of resisting the separation between registered and non-registered sex workers under the Prostitute Protection Act. Many interviewees report a connection between the increasing threats and grievances on the one hand, and community building on the other: "of course, external pressure always bonds people together internally,"²⁶⁰ Christin explains. As the sex worker activists who unionized with FAU Berlin after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic stress, they "turned towards what has historically always helped us in times of crisis: our own communities" (Sex Worker Section FAU Berlin, 2022). Hence, community presents a resource through which activists can sustain themselves and their movement.

This resource encompasses not only material goods. Overall, activists' testimonies reflect the emotionally strengthening role that community plays within both their work context and their activism. "It does you good when you spend a few days only with other sex workers and people who just know (...) what the work is like,"²⁶¹ Leo explains. To Andrea, the community experienced at whore congresses re-energizes her to continue activism:

(...) you feel strengthened again because you simply say, 'I came home and suddenly had so much energy again for my work That was good for me.' For two, three months, you again know what you are doing it for.²⁶²

²⁶⁰ „Druck von außen, schweißt der innen natürlich immer zusammen, klar.“ (Christin)

²⁶¹ „Das tut auch gut, dann ein paar Tage nur mit anderen Sexarbeiterinnen zu verbringen und Leuten, die einfach wissen, (...) wie die Arbeit ist (...).“ (Leo)

²⁶² „(...) dann fühlt man sich auch wieder weiter gestärkt, weil man einfach sagt, ich bin nach Hause gekommen und hab so viel Energie auf einmal wieder gehabt, für meine Arbeit... das hat mir gut getan. Dann weißt du wieder mal, zwei drei Monaten, wofür du das tust.“ (Andrea)

Community meetings thus emotionally remotivate activists whose energy has been drained. Similarly, Katharina observes that the positive emotions experienced during community events have a sustaining and mobilizing effect on sex work activism:

We are realising more and more how much richness networking can give you, for example at the sex worker congress or other meetings, you get a super nice experience from that, and I think that also keeps the whole thing alive a bit or just gives it a little push, because when you network more and more and then people say to each other 'Oh wow, that was so nice!', and then they tell others and so on, and then it gets bigger and bigger and that feels really nice.²⁶³

As detailed in Katharina's statement, community represents an emotional resource for marginalized political actors operating in a challenging context. Many interviewees also report feelings of encouragement, empowerment, and connection after attending community events. Lukas says he "met so many great people and somehow perceived so much empowerment"²⁶⁴ at the whore congress. Alexandra shares this experience:

I thought it was just unbelievably great, I was just totally thrilled by all these many, these unbelievably different people, you never imagine what a smorgasbord of the most diverse people there are (...).²⁶⁵

Within community spaces, participants can recognize themselves among peers, and are able to experience the diversity of subjectivities the wider sex worker community encompasses. As Katharina explains, "so far, almost all the people I have met through sex work are somehow interesting and just enrich you with the opinions and skills they have."²⁶⁶ Given this variety, activists emphasize that there is not "one sex worker community" (Hydra Café, 2019) but rather an enriching diversity of people with various perspectives and areas of expertise. Speaking from her experience at the Hydra peer project, Nina reports "experiencing that it's totally possible to join forces across community boundaries and I didn't know it like that before."²⁶⁷ Here, differences in social location among sex workers are experienced as personal and political gains, and activists forge community across these divides. To do so,

²⁶³ „(...) dass wir glaub ich immer mehr feststellen, wie viel Reichtum ne Vernetzung einfach einem geben kann, wie zum Beispiel beim Sexworker-Kongress oder anderen Treffen, kriegt man das dann super schön mit, und ich glaube, dass das auch einfach das Ganze so ein bisschen am Leben erhält oder einfach so nen kleinen Push gibt, weil wenn man sich immer mehr vernetzt und dann sagen sich die Leute 'Oh wow, das war so schön!', und dann erzählen sie das anderen und so weiter, und dann wird das immer größer und das fühlt sich total schön an.“ (Katharina)

²⁶⁴ „(...) hab so viele großartige Menschen kennengelernt und irgendwie so viel Empowerment wahrgenommen (...).“ (Lukas)

²⁶⁵ „(...) fand das einfach unglaublich toll, war einfach auch total begeistert, von diesen ganzen vielen, von diesen unglaublich unterschiedlichen Menschen, das stellt man sich so überhaupt nicht vor, was das letztendlich für ein ungleiches Sammelsurium von verschiedensten Menschen sind (...).“ (Alexandra)

²⁶⁶ „(...) bisher sind fast alle Menschen, die ich durch die Sexarbeit kennengelernt habe irgendwie interessant und bereichern einfach einen durch Meinungen und Fähigkeiten, die sie haben.“ (Katharina)

²⁶⁷ „(...) erlebe ich, dass es total möglich ist, über Community-Grenzen hinweg sich zusammenzutun und das kannte ich so vorher nicht.“ (Nina)

activists organize specific sex worker only spaces, which constitute an established practice within the sex worker movement.

7.2 “A Place of Retreat” - Sex Worker Only Spaces as Safe(r) Spaces

From the beginning of their self-organization, sex worker activists created events and spaces designated as “sex worker only”. Participation within these is reserved to individuals with lived experience of any form of sex work – be it past or present. This lived experience constitutes a shared basis of knowledge and understanding among participants. As Dan phrases it, “what we experience, what we need, you can’t just know that unless you have that experience.”²⁶⁸ Specifically on the issue of sex work, Adrian explains, “there is a certain basic consensus”²⁶⁹ within sex worker only spaces. For participants, this first and foremost means not needing to hide, explain or justify their engagement in sex work, as sex workers are often required to in their private lives, Clio tells:

A lot of people can’t tell anyone in their life that they’re a sex worker. So having a sex worker only space allows people to meet other sex workers and build that community in a space where they don’t have to constantly explain their work and their choices and to talk to someone who understands what they’re going through. And it’s also just a space to talk and get together without having to constantly educate people, which I think is probably something that a lot of people don’t have in their lives.

Sex worker only spaces thus provide participants with an understanding and accepting environment they often lack. In particular, sex worker only spaces offer a respite from stigmatization. In Nina’s words,

It’s a place of retreat. A place of retreat where it is not necessary to justify anything to do with work. Sex worker only spaces are first of all a place of retreat and tend to be a place that is relatively - in relation to sex work - free of discrimination, or low in discrimination (...) in the sense of whore-shaming or something like that.²⁷⁰

Sex worker only spaces therefore represent safe(r) spaces in which participants can generally assume to be free from sex work related stigmatization and discrimination.

²⁶⁸ „(...) was wir erleben, was wir brauchen, das kann man nicht einfach so wissen, wenn man diese Erfahrung nicht hat.“ (Dan)

²⁶⁹ „(...) eine gewisser Grundkonsens herrscht.“ (Adrian)

²⁷⁰ „Das ist ein Rückzugsort. Ein Rückzugsort, wo es nicht nötig ist, sich für irgendwas rund um Arbeit zu rechtfertigen. Sex worker only spaces sind zunächst einmal ein Rückzugsort und tendenziell ein Ort, der relativ - in Bezug auf Sexarbeit - diskriminierungsfrei ist, oder diskriminierungsarm (...) im Sinne von Huren-shaming oder so was.“ (Nina)

Safety within these spaces is also created by protecting participants from being outed. According to Adrian, sex worker only spaces are a fundamental “security issue” (*Sicherheitsfrage*) and constitute arenas

(...) where sex workers don’t run the risk of being outed to people, where people know they are among colleagues. (...) You also notice that in open rounds [including non-sex workers] some people don’t show up because they don’t want to show their face or because they don’t want to come out as a sex worker.²⁷¹

Given the social stigmatization of sex workers and the often-detrimental social consequences of an outing, sex worker only spaces shield sex workers from the risk of unwanted exposure existing in mixed settings. As such, sex worker only spaces foster participation by those sex workers who are not outed, politicized or organized, and exist both in physical and virtual settings. As Christin explains,

These are mainly areas where I meet many of the sex workers who are not organised in any collectives or associations. They organise themselves primarily online via exchange forums and secret Facebook groups and stuff like that, to network and so on. It is difficult for them to meet once a week. For example, in Berlin, it is still possible to meet in a café at Hydra or something, but the world is online, WhatsApp groups, Telegram groups and so on. Of course, sex workers also do that, and there are many spaces that are very protected, where I’m only permitted on recommendation and if it’s clear that I’m a sex worker.²⁷²

For physically and socially isolated sex workers, sex worker only spaces provide important networking and community building arenas, and participants put safety mechanisms such as peer-to-peer recommendation in place to control group composition. Participants who violate the rules of the safe(r) space face the consequence of being expelled: within sex worker only spaces, Christin explains, participants “take great care of each other. So if people assault you there, verbally or otherwise, you are quickly kicked out again.”²⁷³ While access by non-sex workers is strictly prevented, participation within the community is fostered: in order to increase their reach, sex worker only spaces are designed to be as accessible or “low-threshold” (*niederschwellig*) for sex workers as possible, social worker Sonja explains:

²⁷¹ „(...) wo Sex Worker nicht Gefahr laufen, irgendwie sich bei Leuten zu outen, dass man weiß, dass man unter Kollegen ist. (...) Man merkt auch, dass bei offenen Gesprächen manche Leute nicht auftauchen, weil sie ihr Gesicht nicht zeigen wollen oder weil sie sich nicht als Sex Worker outen möchten.“ (Adrian)

²⁷² „Das sind vor allem Bereiche, in denen ich viele von den Sexarbeitern antreffe, die so nicht organisiert sind in irgendwelchen Verbänden oder Vereinen. Die organisieren sich in erster Linie halt auch online über Austauschforen und geheime Facebook-Gruppen und so nen Kram, um sich da irgendwie zu vernetzen und so weiter. Also denen fällt es halt schwer so einmal die Woche, zum Beispiel in Berlin geht es ja noch, bei Hydra oder so könnte man sich im Café treffen, aber die Welt ist online, Whatsapp-Gruppen, Telegrammgruppen und so weiter. Das machen Sexarbeiterinnen natürlich auch halt, und das sind vor allem viele Spaces, die sehr geschützt sind, in die darf ich halt nur auf Empfehlung rein und wenn klar ist, ich bin eine Sexarbeiterin.“ (Christin)

²⁷³ „(...) achten sehr auf sich. Also, wenn Leute da übergriffig werden, verbal oder so, fliegt man da auch schnell wieder raus.“ (Christin)

'Low-threshold' is a really overused word (*laughs*), but in the end it just means that everyone feels welcome. And that is of course easier in such an open space, where you simply say, at such and such times you can just drop by and other sex workers are there (...).²⁷⁴

As presented by Sonja, accessibility can mean simply providing a freely available space which guarantees the presence of peers. To foster participation among multiply marginalized sex workers, Hydra café hosts focus groups where participants are financially compensated for their attendance so as to not miss income generating time. Some gatherings also address specific subcommunities and are restricted to migrant, trans or racialized sex workers. These partial spaces existing within sex worker only cater to underserved minority groups whose experiences in sex work are informed by their intersection with other forms of discrimination. Imani, a member of the Black Sex Worker Collective, explains she hosts a "very tight, very close" community space,

(...) just for us, just for pretty much the Black and trans workers. Because I understand that there is, at least in Germany anyway, there's very few Black workers here. But sometimes we want our own space. We just want to have it, even if it's just three of us talking about our experience, because our experience as Black workers is drastically different.

Sharing a particular experience in sex work due to their social location, subcommunities such as Black sex workers again establish spaces within sex worker only spaces which they can take ownership of.

In reaching and congregating multiply marginalized sex workers, peer-led sex worker only spaces are often superior to offers provided by social services. Eric, for instance, works for the peer project trans*Sexworks. Being trans and having engaged in sex work, he explains, allows him to speak from a place of shared understanding and meet the migrant trans sex workers he counsels on a more equal footing – even if he has never done street-based sex work like they do. The fact that facilitators share at least some crucial intersectional experiences with the counselled group sets the peer project apart from other social service offers, Eric says: "I don't feel like there's a lot out there for street workers that doesn't feel somehow like charity or like condescending (...)." According to Eric, differences in social location and unequal power relations between service providers and the counselled sex

²⁷⁴ „(...) niedrigschwellig ist immer so ein Wort, was mega strapaziert wird (lacht), aber es bedeutet ja letztendlich nur, dass sich halt alle willkommen fühlen. Und das ist natürlich einfacher an so einem offenen Ort, wo man einfach sagt, zu den und den Zeiten könnt ihr einfach vorbeikommen und andere Sex Worker sind da (...).“ (Sonja)

workers complicate many other social service offers. Through peer-led sex worker only spaces, sex worker activists attempt to level these inequalities and improve service provision to multiply marginalized sex workers. In the face of sex workers' growing illegalization and individualization through the Prostitute Protection Act, sex worker only spaces often serve as a means to "reach these people at all"²⁷⁵ (Christin) and assess their needs. In their service-providing function, sex worker only spaces blur the boundaries between community care and political self-organization and present spaces of encounter between non-politicized sex workers and sex worker activists.

Finally, sex worker only spaces fulfil a safeguarding function by contributing to sex workers' safety at work. According to Christin,

These are also important places, on the one hand for exchange, and on the other hand for warning. There is a lot of warning about invasive (*übergriffige*) clients.²⁷⁶

Sex workers thus use sex worker only spaces to share information on safety measures and alert colleagues to clients who have been known to violate agreements. This illustrates the role sex worker only spaces and community play in creating safer working conditions for sex workers.

Because of its various protective and community fostering functions, many sex worker activists consider sex worker only spaces as an indispensable part of their self-organization. Notwithstanding their numerous advantages and centrality within the movement, sex worker only spaces are also disputed among sex worker activists. In Nina's words, "it is also a contested thing. It's not just a given, but safe(r) spaces are always being questioned and challenged (...)."²⁷⁷ Activists deliberate on codes of conduct within sex worker only spaces or negotiate their boundaries when discussing distinctions between active and former sex workers, potential exclusions of venue-operating sex workers, or limitations to sex workers in specific industry sectors. More fundamentally, there is an ongoing debate over the need for and use of sex worker only spaces within the sex worker movement. Simone, for instance, stresses that having a sex worker only space is "totally important, (...) you simply need it,

²⁷⁵ „(...) um da überhaupt ranzukommen an die Leute.“ (Christin)

²⁷⁶ „Das sind schon auch so wichtige Orte, einerseits des Austausches, zweitens der Warnung. Dort wird sehr viel über übergriffige Freier gewarnt.“ (Christin)

²⁷⁷ „Das ist schon auch ein umkämpftes Ding. Es ist nicht einfach so gegeben, sondern Rückzugsorte werden immer wieder auch hinterfragt und in Frage gestellt (...).“ (Nina)

everywhere.”²⁷⁸ Lara, on the contrary, finds sex worker only spaces “completely irrelevant” (*komplett bedeutungslos*) and the regular meet-up for escorts which she attends is open to anyone the participants bring along. The reason for this openness, she states, is that sex workers are “not a hermetically sealed-off group” (*keine hermetisch abgegrenzte Gruppe*), but “part of the mainstream” (*Teil des Mainstreams*) and “part of public life” (*Teil des öffentlichen Lebens*). Lucia, who lives with a physical disability, likens the retreat into sex worker only spaces to her experience of being separated from able-bodied people in school and at work. She suspects that both sex workers and disabled people share reasons for this retreat: “I believe the basic fears are very, very similar. Fear of exclusion, fear of humiliation, fear of emotional abuse.”²⁷⁹ As much as she argues for the social inclusion of disabled people, she opposes sex worker only spaces because she “would like sex workers to arrive in society.”²⁸⁰ She thus advocates for more open and mixed events, emphasizing that transgressive behaviours are not limited to sex work and can be addressed collectively when they arise:

What’s the worst that can happen? Out of 100 people, there is one who behaves badly. (...) I’ve seen that in other situations, too, but it has nothing to do with the job. There’s always someone who makes a stupid remark or should have ditched the fourth glass of beer [drank less alcohol]. You have them everywhere. And then you can always say as a host, ‘Please leave now’. The option remains open to you, whether at a wedding or in a whorehouse!

In Lucia’s understanding, the sex worker movement’s proactive and widespread separation into sex worker only spaces is “nonsense” (*Blödsinn*) and “not productive” (*nicht produktiv*) with regards to sex workers’ inclusion into society. “I don’t understand why we are so closed. I think that maybe opening up to society and society opening up to us, that comes from both sides. It can’t be just a one-sided demand,”²⁸¹ she subsumes. Adrian also recognizes the limitations which sex worker only spaces put on coalition building efforts: “you have to make sure that it doesn’t get too exclusive, I think, and that you also have the opportunity to join

²⁷⁸ „(...) total wichtig (...) der muss einfach sein, überall.“ (Simone)

²⁷⁹ „Ich glaube, dass da so die grundlegenden Ängste sehr, sehr ähnlich sind. Angst wirklich vor Ausgrenzung, vor Erniedrigung, vor Übergrifflichkeiten emotionaler Art.“ (Lucia)

²⁸⁰ „(...) wie gerne ich es doch hätte, dass Sex Worker in der Gesellschaft ankommen.“ (Lucia)

²⁸¹ „Ich verstehe nicht, warum man dann so closed ist. Ich glaube, das muss man vielleicht auf dieses sich der Gesellschaft öffnen und dass die Gesellschaft sich uns öffnet, das geht von beiden Seiten aus. Es kann nicht nur eine einseitige Forderung sein.“ (Lucia)

forces with other people,"²⁸² they emphasize. Nicky sees the perspectives of both activists who champion and activists who reject sex worker only spaces:

Some colleagues no longer have any bad experiences of stigma in their private environment, because they have an environment that is totally accepting and supportive, where perhaps other people also do or have done sex work (...). They don't need this sex workers' space because otherwise they would have no other place where they can simply be who they are or talk about issues without fear of being stigmatised or outed or discriminated against. And for them, that is no longer so valuable. And then they rather see the disadvantage. And that is a disadvantage of it, that if we do everything sex worker only, it also prevents or hinders synergy effects with the outside world. Sure! So, I totally understand, I understand both sides, both arguments are right and it's a question of: how important is it for the individual that this space still exists?²⁸³

As explained by Nicky, the need for and use of sex worker only spaces can be tied to individuals' social location, and hold greater value for those sex workers who lack supportive and accepting environments, while this value decreases for those who find acceptance elsewhere. Still, as already illustrated by Lucia's position a preference for sex worker only spaces is not necessarily characteristic to those sex workers who experience multiple forms of marginalization. Similar to the meet-up for escorts attended by Lara, the weekly dinner hosted by trans*Sexworks was generally open to any visitors the participants brought along. As organizer Eric tells,

I think that most of the time we are a sex worker only space. And it's not only sex worker, it's trans sex workers. But since we're making all the decisions ourselves, usually the people who are asking to come are friends or a friend of a friend, and have some sort of reference. (...) I think that none of us feel especially threatened by anyone knowing about our project.

While Eric is content with having potential visitors personally vetted, Liljana believes the dinner's general openness is owed to "the Balkan spirit" of the attending migrant sex workers:

The people are very open and they are all the time like 'Come on, sit down and let's talk, come on, let's eat something together.' The people who are there, they have nothing to lose, but they have more to exchange.

²⁸² „(...) man dann auch schauen, dass es dann nicht zu exklusiv wird, denke ich, und dass man auch noch die Möglichkeit hat, sich mit anderen Leuten zu verbünden.“ (Adrian)

²⁸³ „(...) dass manche Kolleginnen halt mittlerweile in ihrem privaten Umfeld keine bösen Stigmaerfahrungen mehr haben, weil sie ein Umfeld haben, was total akzeptierend ist unter supportend, wo vielleicht auch andere Leute Sexarbeit machen oder gemacht haben (...). Also die brauchen diesen Sex Workers space nicht, weil sie sonst keinen anderen Ort haben, wo sie einfach sein können, wie sie sind oder über Themen reden können, ohne Angst haben zu müssen stigmatisiert oder geoutet oder diskriminiert zu werden. Und für die ist das dann nicht mehr so wertvoll. Und die sehen dann tatsächlich eher den Nachteil. Und das ist ein Nachteil davon, dass wenn wir dann alles Sex Worker only machen, halt Synergieeffekte nach außen auch unterbinden oder erschweren. So, klar! Also ich verstehe total, ich verstehe beide Seiten, beide Argumente sind richtig und es ist eine Frage, wie wichtig ist das für das Individuum, dass es trotzdem dieses spaces gibt?“ (Nicky)

As presented by Liljana, “having nothing to lose” within mixed spaces and “having nothing to gain” from sex worker only spaces can both amount to a reduced relevance of the latter, suggesting that attitudes on safe(r) spaces are not necessarily linked to activists’ social positioning. Moreover, activists are fully aware that sex worker only spaces cannot guarantee general freedom from discrimination. As Dayana says, “no place is 100 percent safe, right? Everybody knows that.” Nina confirms that “of course discrimination also takes place in sex worker only spaces. That’s how people work, that’s how it is.”²⁸⁴ In their attention to sex work related discrimination, sex worker only spaces reflect the single-axis focus which the sex worker movement shares with many other social movements.

Overall, the contestations over the utility and implementation of sex worker only spaces carry both advantages and disadvantages for the sex worker movement. “That’s sometimes productive and moves things forward, and sometimes it’s paralyzing,”²⁸⁵ Nina explains. In Nina’s view, negotiations over sex worker only spaces can benefit the movement “when it comes to making them better places. When it is questioned, how do we do it best? How does it serve us? How do we keep the boundaries?”²⁸⁶ By being challenged, sex worker only spaces are continuously adjusted to better serve participants’ needs. At the same time, Nina finds these contestations turn ineffective

when there are dogmatic discussions where it is no longer about the ‘how’, but about ‘I’m right and you’re wrong.’ That’s unproductive, and its equally unproductive when certain decisions in groups are questioned again and again and cannot simply stand for a while (...).²⁸⁷

From this perspective, the rules and boundaries of sex worker only spaces are never absolute but always relative. Activists’ negotiations demonstrate that the practice of sex worker only spaces is undergoing constant phases of change and consolidation within the sex worker movement. These processes mirror broader political contestations around safe(r) spaces for marginalized groups, and illustrate the challenge of creating both protective and inclusive communities at the grassroots level. In the following subchapter, I trace fault lines and frictions within the sex worker movement to examine where sex worker activists have been

²⁸⁴ „Aber natürlich finden auch in sex worker only spaces Diskriminierungen statt. So funktionieren Menschen, also das ist so.“ (Nina)

²⁸⁵ „(...) das ist manchmal produktiv und bringt weiter, und manchmal ist es lähmend.“ (Nina)

²⁸⁶ „wenn es darum geht, sie zu besseren Orten zu machen. Wenn hinterfragt wird, wie machen wir das am besten? Wie tut es uns gut? Wie halten wir die Grenzen?“ (Nina)

²⁸⁷ „(...) wenn es zu irgendwelchen dogmatischen Diskussionen kommt, wo es nicht mehr um das ‚Wie‘ geht, sondern um das ‚Ich hab Recht und du nicht‘. Das ist unproduktiv, und unproduktiv ist es auch, wenn in Gruppen bestimmte Beschlüsse immer wieder hinterfragt werden und nicht einfach erst einmal stehen können (...).“ (Nina)

struggling – or failed – to create an inclusive social movement across their different intersections.

7.3 “Constructive Criticism Within the Movement is Difficult” – Fragmentations and Conflicts

Beyond efforts to foster community and build inclusive safe(r) spaces, an examination of the sex worker movement’s heterogeneity reveals internal power relations and the fragmentations and conflicts which derive from these.

A major deficit which many interviewees identify within their movement is the scarcity of migrant sex worker activists. “It is very difficult to involve migrant women,”²⁸⁸ states Andrea, who cites the workers’ financial pressure to remit money to their families as the main reason. Other activists consider language obstacles, internalized stigma, racism, repressive migration regimes, and the lack of secure residence status as predominant obstacles for migrant sex workers to engage in activism. “For such people it is difficult to be politically active because they have to survive first,”²⁸⁹ explains Dan, whose community meetings for a specific group of racialized sex workers have been attended very sparsely so far. Gina and Roxy explain their mostly Eastern-European colleagues “weren’t interested” in joining the Berlin Strippers Collective after its creation “because they’re here in Germany part time, they’re not going to stay very long.” For migrant sex workers in particular, sex work is often a temporary occupation and many do not feel or seek connection to the wider sex worker community. In Christin’s words,

many people don’t look for a home there [in sex work] and don’t identify with it, but for them it is some form of transitional income, which they for some reason like to do more or less.²⁹⁰

An identification with and sustained commitment to sex work is however seen as a precondition to sex workers’ politicization and self-organization.

Although many interviewees share workspaces with migrant sex workers, they have been struggling to recruit them into the movement. Silke, for instance, found herself unable to mobilize her migrant colleagues at brothels: “They thought it was good that I was politically

²⁸⁸ „(...) es sehr schwierig ist, Migrantinnen einzubinden (...)“ (Andrea)

²⁸⁹ „(...) für solche Leute ist es schwierig, politisch aktiv engagiert zu sein, weil die erst einmal überleben müssen.“ (Dan)

²⁹⁰ „(...) ganz viele suchen sich da ja kein Zuhause und identifizieren sich ja nicht damit, sondern für die ist das irgendeine Form eines Übergangseinkommens, das sie aus Gründen mehr oder weniger gerne ausüben.“ (Christin)

active. But it was impossible to mobilize them in this way. They didn't get involved either."²⁹¹ She deeply regrets that BesD has so far been unable to draw more migrant sex workers into activism:

The professional association has not succeeded in recruiting people from these groups for political work. (...) But if we don't succeed in integrating migrant women, then I'm pessimistic about the future.²⁹²

Given the prevalent victimization of migrant sex workers in prostitution politics and the conflation of sex work with human trafficking, Silke considers the mobilization of migrant sex workers into the movement an essential political gap to fill. Other sex worker collectives encounter similar difficulties despite providing peer-to-peer offers. As a member of the Black Sex Worker Collective, Imani organizes community events for Black and migrant sex workers. Here, she notices

(...) how really difficult it can be to get people out. Sex workers are a very interesting group of people. You know, it's kind of like 'we want rights, we want this, we need that!' and then you offer them services, you're lucky two people show up, you know what I mean? (*laughs*) That's kind of how it is for the most part, trying to pull us together is like herding cats, unless there's a really, really significant thing that happens where we all feel that we need to come together, but then it's very short lived.

According to Imani, sex workers' interest in political improvements and social services conflicts with the low attendance she observes at her events. While Imani finds that political threats spur "short lived" forms of self-organization among sex workers, other activists identify political threats as a reason why the movement has neglected to expand its basis within different communities in the past years. Social worker Sonja states that longstanding sex worker community events have been side-lined over the past years because essential resources were absorbed into defensive forms of activism: "if you are permanently occupied with dealing with such a shitty law and its prevention, you forget that you could do a whore's ball again,"²⁹³ she explains. According to Christin, the focus on preventing national legislation also hampered international community building and networking:

Worldwide, there are extremely well-organized whore movements around us with whom we hardly make contact. This is very neglected. (...) While the English are somehow focused on harm reduction and 'keep all

²⁹¹ „Die fanden das gut, dass ich mich engagiert habe. Und die waren dann aber auch so selber nicht zu mobilisieren. Die haben sich auch nicht engagiert.“ (Silke)

²⁹² „(...) dem Berufsverband in den letzten fünf, sechs Jahren nicht gelungen ist aus diesen Gruppen Leute zu rekrutieren für die politische Arbeit. (...) Aber wenn es uns nicht gelingt, die Migrantinnen zu integrieren, dann sehe ich schwarz für die Zukunft.“ (Silke)

²⁹³ „(...) wenn man dann permanent nur damit befasst ist, sich mit so einem scheiß Gesetz und dessen Verhinderung auseinanderzusetzen, dann geht es auch mal so ein bisschen unter, dass man irgendwie einen Hurenball mal wieder machen könnte.“ (Sonja)

women safe,' the French are very radical and very outward-looking, the Germans are still so much just chumming up to everyone (*anbiedern*) and want to do everything better, but don't listen to anyone. There should be more exchange, international networking, cooperation, coordination.²⁹⁴

In Christin's view, the German sex worker movement failed to forge connections with sex worker movements in less advantageous national contexts and profit from knowledge transfers because activists were committed to defending a legal and political status quo which was comparably beneficial. This also narrowed the movement's perspective to a "respectable" (*bieder*) form of national politics that undermined a more internationalist perspective.

Other movement internal fragmentations which interviewees describe are informed by the so-called "whorarchy". The term "whorarchy" describes hierarchies among sex workers which are established on (actual or perceived) distinctions between e.g. sex industry sectors, income levels, professionalization, or physical proximity to clients. Street-based sex workers, for instance, rank lower in this order than escorts, strippers or BDSM workers do. In the context of sex workers' self-organization against the planned Prostitute Protection Act, a significant hierarchical distinction within the sex worker community ran between tantra workers and other sex workers: in an attempt to strengthen its fight against the Prostitute Protection Act, BesD reached out to the German Tantra Association (*Tantramassage-Verband*). The Tantra Association was however, unwilling to join forces with BesD, Christin explains:

From very early on, there were efforts to somehow bring together all the erotic workers to take action against this law and they resisted this for a very long time and dismissed it condescendingly.²⁹⁵

The reason for this reluctance, Christin states, was that tantra workers "didn't want to have anything to do with us and never believed that they could also be affected"²⁹⁶ by prostitution laws. When it eventually became clear that the Prostitute Protection Act would encompass tantra massages in its definition of prostitution, the Tantra Association petitioned against this inclusion. According to Thomas, they did so largely based on a distinction between "the great

²⁹⁴ „(...) es gibt ja auch um uns herum hervorragend organisierte Hurenbewegungen weltweit, mit denen wir kaum Kontakt aufnehmen. Das wird sehr stiefkindlich behandelt. (...) Während die Engländerinnen sich auf Schadensreduktion und 'keep all women safe' irgendwie einschließen, die Französischen sehr radikal sind und sehr nach außen gehen, biedern sich die Deutschen halt auch immer noch so sehr an und wollen alles besser machen, aber halt auf niemanden hören. Da müsste es mehr Austausch geben, internationale Vernetzung, Zusammenarbeit, Koordination.“ (Christin)

²⁹⁵ „Es gab sehr früh Bemühungen, sämtliche erotisch Arbeitenden irgendwie zusammenzubringen, um gegen dieses Gesetz aktiv zu werden und die haben sehr lange sich sehr dagegen gewehrt und von oben herab das abgetan.“ (Christin)

²⁹⁶ „(...) die wollten mit uns da nichts zu tun haben und haben nie geglaubt, dass sie damit auch betroffen sein könnten (...).“ (Christin)

tantric massage, [and] the evil prostitution.”²⁹⁷ This distinction angered BesD activists, some of which also work in tantra studios. After BesD reached out to the Tantra Association, the petition was withdrawn. As Thomas explains, the Tantra Association however maintained its position

(...) that tantra massage is something other than prostitution, they go through with it, they say we don't register, neither the businesses nor the masseuses, because the law has nothing to do with us!²⁹⁸

Understanding their work as fundamentally different from and superior to sex work, the Tantra Association wanted to neither join sex workers' self-organization nor follow the provisions of the Prostitute Protection Act. For Thomas, this distinction from sex work was had two sides:

I find that super double-edged. I can understand it as a strategy in a local context. If, for example, (...) the building regulations office or the public order office cannot allow prostitution there, for whatever reason, but would be prepared to say, 'you do something else, you do tantra', then I find it completely legitimate to play this card. (...) If I argue on a wider political scale that there is, so to speak, a sophisticated, clean, cultivated form of sex work, namely tantra, (...) and there is of course the other bad area of prostitution, which we have nothing to do with, then I think (...) one stigmatised group is stepping on the other to gain a supposed advantage.²⁹⁹

While Thomas recognizes that a separation from sex work may be strategically useful to avoid being affected by repressive legislation and potential studio closures, he emphasizes that the Tantra Association's position entailed a devaluation of other forms of sex work and a lack of solidarity with other sex workers' political struggles. According to activists, the Tantra Association unfairly sought to gain a political advantage by framing tantra as a highly skilled, wholesome, and virtuous form of sexual labour, and other forms of sex work as crude, unclean, and vulgar. Because of the Tantra Association's valorization of tantra over other forms of sex work, sex worker activists “mockingly call them the tantra saints,”³⁰⁰ Thomas

²⁹⁷ „(...) die tolle Tantramassage, die böse Prostitution (...)“ (Thomas)

²⁹⁸ „Dass Tantramassage was anderes als Prostitution sei, also die ziehen das durch, die sagen, wir melden uns nicht an, weder die Betriebe, noch die Masseurinnen, weil das Gesetz hat mit uns nichts zu tun!“ (Thomas)

²⁹⁹ „(...) das finde ich super zweischneidig. Also ich kann's verstehen als Strategie im lokalen Zusammenhang. Also wenn ich etwa in Köln oder wo, das ist jetzt nur ein gegriffenes Beispiel, weiß, dass das Baurechtsamt oder das Amt für öffentliche Ordnung dort keinen Prostitutionsbetrieb zulassen kann, warum auch immer, aber bereit wäre zu sagen, 'ihr macht ja was anderes, ihr seid ja Tantra'. Dann finde ich es völlig legitim, diese Karte zu spielen. (...) Wenn ich im großen politischen Rahmen argumentier, es gibt sozusagen anspruchsvolle, saubere, kultivierte Sexarbeit, nämlich Tantra, (...) und es gibt natürlich den anderen schlimmen Bereich der Prostitution, mit dem wir ja gar nichts zu tun haben, dann finde ich (...) die eine stigmatisierte Gruppe tritt noch auf die andere um sich einen vermeintlichen Vorteil zu verschaffen.“ (Thomas)

³⁰⁰ „(...) nennen die dann spöttisch die Tantraheiligen.“ (Thomas)

tells. Sex worker activists' designation of tantra workers as "saints" emphasizes the moral distinctions constructed among sex workers in different industry sectors.

Disability rights activist Martin identifies a similar moral distinction in the case of sexual surrogacy. In Germany, sexual surrogacy (or sexual assistance) is a non-standardized professional practice that commonly encompasses workers providing sexual services to clients who are experiencing sexual issues. As such, it legally constitutes a form of prostitution. Sex workers performing sexual surrogacy often work with disabled clients. Because of their clientele, some of these sex workers elevate their work over other types of sex work, Martin finds:

There was and still is this effect that the whore becomes a saint when she serves a disabled person. And that's what many people [sexual surrogates] were riding on at the beginning of the debate. They said that they only work for disabled people and that this is something tantric, something great, beautiful, fantastic. But this dirty prostitution, they have nothing to do with that.³⁰¹

Similar to tantra workers, sex workers offering sexual surrogacy to disabled clients thus sought to distinguish themselves from other sex workers by stressing the therapeutic value of their practices. Since the beginning of sex workers' self-organization, Martin has however observed changes. Now, many sexual surrogates engage in other forms of sex work and participate in sex work activism, he claims:

Today it's completely different. Most of the sexual surrogates and assistants are even active in the sex worker movement (...). Still, this double standard continues. It is much, much more honourable for a person in an institution or even for relatives to book sexual surrogates and not just the whore, not 'Mandy from around the corner.'³⁰²

Despite the growing overlaps between work practices and activist communities, sexual surrogacy is still socially constructed as more respectable than other forms of sex work.

The cases of tantra and sexual surrogacy illustrate how an emphasis on care work characteristics and individual and societal health benefits can present a political strategy for activists to defy stigmatization and repression of certain forms of sex work. However, this strategy of valorization inevitably comes at the expense of other sex workers, who are

³⁰¹ „Es gab und gibt immer noch diesen Effekt, dass die Hure zur Heiligen wird, wenn sie einen Behinderten dann bedient. Und darauf sind viele zu Beginn der Debatte geritten. Die haben eben gesagt, sie arbeiten ausschließlich für Behinderte und das ist was Tantrisches, was Großes, Schönes, Tolles. Aber diese dreckige Prostitution, mit der haben sie nichts zu tun.“ (Martin)

³⁰² „Heute ist das völlig anders. Die meisten Sexualbegleiterinnen und Assistentinnen und Assistenten die sind sogar aktiv in dieser Sexarbeiterinnenbewegung (...). Trotzdem, diese Doppelmoral läuft weiter. Für einen Menschen in der Anstalt oder auch für Angehörige ist es eben viel, viel ehrenwerter Sexualbegleiterinnen zu buchen und nicht eben die Hure, nicht Mandy um die Ecke.“ (Martin)

devalued and restigmatized as a common, contemptible, and inferior subclass – as a “Mandy from around the corner” in Martin’s words.

At the same time, sex worker activists from devalued industry sectors such as street-based sex work may themselves seek to resist a stigmatized subjectivity by establishing distinctions. Here, sex workers’ legal status may serve as a fault line: as a peer organizer at trans*Sexworks, Dillon says he was surprised to learn that some migrant trans sex workers utilize their own registered status to criticize their illegalized colleagues, maintaining that “everybody should register, then the police won’t hassle us as much.”³⁰³ The same separation based on legal status was stressed by sex workers in the famous entertainment district “Reeperbahn” in Hamburg who began to self-organize during the pandemic-related venue closures in 2020. By emphasizing that they “want to give legally working prostitutes an audible voice” (Sexy Aufstand Reeperbahn, 2020), these activists tried to claim self-representation and revalorize their stigmatized subjectivities based on their own legal status. In doing so, they also differentiated themselves from unregistered and illegalized sex workers and reinforced the power relations that the Prostitute Protection Act in particular, and regulatory legal frameworks in general, establish between different groups of sex workers.

Other activists specifically resist the separation which legalized prostitution frameworks cause among sex workers: as a merely “performative” type of erotic work, stripping is not affected by the Prostitute Protection Act. Consequently, strippers are rendered “more legal than other sex workers,” Gina explains. “We don’t have to register, that’s a big thing,” she concedes. Still, she and the other activists of the Berlin Strippers Collective consider themselves implicated in the sex worker movement’s struggles. As Roxy explains,

(...) it’s worth it to pay attention to what’s happening to sex work and even take it seriously that they’re talking about prohibiting other forms of sex work, because if they can do that then we’re next in line, basically, because for a long time it was like, erotic massage in Germany and BDSM was exempt from everything. And then, now all of a sudden, they’re also prostitutes, so we’re like the next prostitutes if we’re not careful (...). It’s something that concerns us as well.

Understanding that strippers could be “next in line” in a political development which increasingly represses all types of sexual labour, Roxy and Gina emphasize commonalities

³⁰³ „(...) alle sollen sich registrieren, dann wird die Polizei nicht so Stress machen (...).“ (Dillon)

rather than distinctions within the sex worker community: “It’s all pretty much under the same umbrella. It always affects us one way or another,” Gina subsumes.

With the political loss that the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016 presented and the subsequent diversification in sex worker activism, activists have increasingly been examining the effects of the “whorarchy” on their own self-organization. When asked about future directions in sex work activism, Adrian explains finding it

(...) important to focus on who is loudly represented in sex worker organizations and whose positions are heard and who tends to be side-lined or neglected. This ‘whorarchy’, which is often combined with other structural discriminations, must also be recognised and dismantled in our own groups.³⁰⁴

Activists thus recognize how the power relations established between different types of sex work intersect with other forms of marginalization, and acknowledge that the exclusionary dynamics they produce within the movement need to be addressed.

According to activists, critiques of internal inequalities have long existed within the sex worker movement but were bypassed in the struggle against the Prostitute Protection Act. The political disillusionment which activists experienced with its adoption, and the continued threats presented by anti-prostitution campaigners and the Covid-19 pandemic intensified these internal criticisms. In recent years, especially BesD has become a site of internal conflicts and moments of disintegration. This is illustrated by an open letter which ten BesD members published on the 28th of March 2021 and through which they declared their resignation from the association. Up until that point, some of these activists had led an internal anti-discrimination working group within BesD. As the letter states, this anti-discrimination group sought to “initiate important changes within the association” by “creating support for members affected by discrimination within the association” (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021). Specifically, the authors of the letter claim that BesD tolerated individual members’ right-wing attitudes and remained inactive on cases of trans hostility and racism within the association. In addition to highlighting these cases, the group engaged in “political education work for a more discrimination-free and aware association” (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021). The anti-discrimination working group thus constituted a body within BesD which was trying to address instances of discrimination,

³⁰⁴ „Wichtig wäre mir einen Fokus darauf zu setzen, wer in Sexworker-Organisationen lautstark vertreten ist und wessen Positionen Gehör finden und wer eher untergeht oder vernachlässigt wird. Diese ‚Hirarchie‘ welche sich oft mit anderen strukturellen Diskriminierungen verbindet, gilt es auch in unseren eigenen Gruppen anzuerkennen und abzubauen.“ (Adrian)

sensitise activists to power relations among sex workers, and promote a more inclusive sex worker movement. However, the concerned activists found that their efforts were stifled and that BesD's "willingness to deal with these issues was unfortunately not as great as [they] had hoped" (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021). When trying to address inequalities and biases within BesD, the concerned activists claim that "a great deal of time and energy was invested in arguments and debates with the only goal to minimize or deny structural discrimination and internalized racism" (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021). In addition to denying and diminishing internal discriminations, the authors claim that BesD ignored "basic democratic structures" and instead took "hierarchizing 'top-down' decisions (...) to prevent debate and criticism" (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021) within the association. The letter specifically mentions the BesD board deleting and banning posts on discrimination from the internal members' forum, and ousting a member who contravened in this process with the justification that the "internal peace was at risk and that a focus on sex work politics was therefore no longer possible" (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021). BesD hence framed the working group's actions as disruptive to the association's work, and understood anti-discrimination politics as separate from sex work politics. BesD's actions ultimately led to a "silencing of experiences of discrimination" (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021) within the association, the concerned activists write. They also expound that BesD's lacking awareness of intersecting power relations among sex workers and its unwillingness to address them have long caused feelings of non-recognition, betrayal, hurt, exclusion, and estrangement among multiply marginalized sex worker activists within the movement. The fact that the concerned activists collectively left BesD as a result of their experiences attests to moments of disintegration within the sex worker movement.

Activists' resignation from BesD and its public denouncement of the association's actions present the most explicit expression of fragmentations and conflicts existing within the sex worker movement after almost a decade of self-organization. Yet, sentiments similar to the ones stated in the open letter are reiterated by some interviewees who express harsh criticisms towards BesD and the broader German sex worker movement. Christin, for instance, sees a great prevalence of "non-inclusive work and also unacknowledged

privileges”³⁰⁵ within the movement. Moreover, she finds that different sex worker collectives compete over the “prerogative of interpretation” (*Deutungshoheit*) within the movement:

On the one hand, you have associations like BesD, which are very far removed from the reality of most sex workers and do things in their ivory tower which are completely opaque to most people (...). It is a very small elite that does a lot of work and always complains that it is always the same people, but on the other hand, they don't create the needed conditions, and also allocate positions to one other. And it is precisely these positions that are interesting for people who are more marginalised, because they cannot afford this political work at this level, financially. But at the same time, they [BesD] tie up a lot of financial energy, so they take a lot of these financial subsidies and don't distribute them further. And on the other hand, you have independent, more radical groups that are almost not officially organised, that somehow meet on a grassroots level and have no structure, and just go under because they somehow can't get beyond this criticism of what others are doing. And basically, the whole movement in Germany is very exclusive. It's not very inclusive, not very open to the marginalized, and the whorarchy is a big problem.³⁰⁶

In Christin's view, the sex worker movement is split between the hegemonic position of BesD and the negligible opposition presented by scattered grassroots collectives: to her, BesD is detached from the living and working realities of most sex workers and operates in undemocratic and intransparent ways, whereas other sex worker collectives lack organizational cohesion and alternative political strategies. In addition, Christin identifies discrimination and exclusion of marginalized community members as major deficiencies of the movement. Other activists share this harsh verdict on cohesion within the sex worker movement:

My experience so far of trying to do stuff with sex workers here, is it's a disaster. Like, it's completely fragmented. Everybody says that they want to work together, but they don't. Everybody's burned out and nobody actually wants to do the work that it takes to be committed to something. So it's a network. It's not a community. (Dayana)

³⁰⁵ „(...) nicht-inklusive Arbeit und auch nicht-reflektierte Privilegien (...).“ (Christin)

³⁰⁶ „Du hast auf der einen Seite Verbände wie den Berufsverband, die sich sehr weit ab von der Realität der meisten Sexarbeitenden bewegen und da irgendwie in ihrem Wolkenhäuschen irgendwas tun, was den meisten völlig intransparent ist (...). Das ist eine sehr kleine Elite, die da sehr viel Arbeit macht und immer ächzt, dass es immer dieselben Leute sind, aber auf der anderen Seite halt auch nicht die Voraussetzungen schafft und die Pöstchen halt auch untereinander zuschießt. Und halt auch gerade die Pöstchen, die interessant werden für Leute, die marginalisierter sind, weil die sich diese politische Arbeit auf diesem Niveau nicht leisten können, finanziell. Und gleichzeitig aber viel, viel finanzielle Energie binden, also sehr viele dieser finanziellen Zuschüsse abgreifen und das nicht weiter verteilen. Und auf der anderen Seite hast du unabhängige, radikalere Gruppen, die fast gar nicht offiziell organisiert sind, die sich so graswurzelmäßig irgendwie zusammen treffen und keine Struktur haben, und halt untergehen, weil sie über dieses Kritik am Machen der Anderen irgendwie nicht hinauskommen. Und grundsätzlich ist die Hurenbewegung in Deutschland sehr exklusiv. Wenig inklusiv, wenig offen für Marginalisierte und Hurenhierarchie ist ein großes Problem.“ (Christin)

I don't feel like there is a whore movement that has a common goal and is working on one thing right now. (...) You don't see the common thread in the work of all the groups. And then they even argue among themselves.³⁰⁷ (Dilon)

Because of the conflicts and fragmentations among sex worker activists, Dayana and Dilon liken sex workers' self-organization to a "network" rather than a community or a social movement pursuing a shared goal. Other interviewees again voice more optimistic perspectives: in Adrian's words, current sex work activism "slightly resembles a patchwork rug, but I do notice that there has been more motivation and also more networking over the last few years."³⁰⁸ Clio's assessment disputes many of her colleagues' critiques:

I think it's quite a cohesive movement here. There are quite a few different groups, but they all kind of communicate with each other. And I think that a lot of the activism here has quite clear goals (...). So it's a broad movement, but I think it's a strong movement with cohesive goals and a clear vision and a lot of willingness to work together across all backgrounds in order to ensure that the big changes that need to happen are eventually going to get pushed through.

In very similar terminology, some activists therefore criticize the lack of cohesion and shared goals within the sex worker movements, while others see growing networks and cooperation between the many collectives and individuals that form the sex worker movement.

Beyond these differing assessments, the data reveals that activists take great caution to publicly criticize their own movement. Like Scarlet, some activists believe that conflicts should be dealt with internally:

(...) it would be better to act in concert and sort things out within our own ranks first, rather than pick on each other (...) because that would open the door for some anti- [anti-prostitution campaigners] to say, 'Look, they're arguing among themselves. Now that's where we'll really tackle them.'³⁰⁹

Scarlet thus prefers presenting a united political front towards the outside since open conflicts expose the movement to further attacks by anti-prostitution campaigners who exploit these weaknesses. A hostile political field indeed complicates movement internal criticism, writes sex worker activist Christian Schmach (2021) in a magazine article:

³⁰⁷ „Ich habe nicht das Gefühl, dass es eine Hurenbewegung gibt, die ein gemeinsames Ziel hat und an einer Sache gerade arbeitet. (...) Man sieht nicht den roten Faden in der Arbeit von all den Gruppen. Und dann haben die noch so Streit untereinander.“ (Dilon)

³⁰⁸ „(...) hat ein bisschen was von einem Flickenteppich, aber ich merke schon, dass es in den letzten Jahren mehr Motivation und auch mehr Vernetzungen gibt.“ (Adrian)

³⁰⁹ „(...) es wäre besser, an einem Strang zu ziehen, und das erst einmal in den eigenen Reihen zu klären, als aufeinander herumzuhacken (...) weil damit öffne ich natürlich irgendwelchen Anti Tür und Tor zu sagen, 'Guck mal, die streiten sich ja untereinander. Da grätschen wir jetzt erst richtig rein.'“ (Scarlet)

Since sex workers who express themselves politically are under a lot of pressure to legitimise themselves, constructive criticism within the movement is also difficult.

Schmacht therefore draws a direct link between sex worker activists' defensive position and struggle for political recognition on the one hand, and the obstacles to movement internal learning processes on the other hand. A hesitation to publicly criticize their own movement was also shared by the activists of BesD's former anti-discrimination group: the concerned members first sought to address discriminations internally before publicly accusing the association of putting "one's own privileges above the interests of precariously working colleagues" (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021). In their statement, they claim to be "aware of the risk that such criticism entails" (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021) given that anti-prostitution campaigners mark sex worker activists as "privileged" in order to delegitimize them as political actors:

This is an accusation that is also repeatedly made by sex work opponents. Precisely for this reason it is essential to be beyond any doubt and to oppose the 'whorearchy' internally, externally and in every daily political decision and action. (AG Antidiskriminierung und Andere, 2021)

Rather than glossing over the power relations which are distributed along the "whorarchy", this perspective stresses the strategic importance of addressing them to resist their political instrumentalization against the sex worker movement. Efforts to tackle internal fragmentations are indeed discernible within the movement: in the following subchapter, I show how they appear among activists who scrutinize their own social locations and who discuss how they can employ the advantages deriving from them to the benefit of those marginalized within the movement.

7.4 "The Responsibility to Stand up for Others" – Examining and Utilizing Privilege

A central theme emerging from my data is activists' discussion of personal privileges and how they inform their activism. Without specific inquiry from my side, many interviewees readily declare they occupy a "privileged" social position in relation to many other sex workers, which attests to the centrality of this issue in current political contestations. Activists connect privilege to a variety of categories which shape their experience: among them are German or European citizenship and secure migration status, a registered status in line with the Prostitute Protection Act, high levels of education or language skills, or expressions of race,

gender, and sexuality which are not structurally discriminated against. Many activists state they also derive privileges from the industry sector they work in, the high levels of income and self-determination over working conditions it offers them, and their accepting social circles which permit them to live an outed existence. Activists hence examine the various intersections which constitute their social location and the associated inequalities among sex workers. They do so in a much more nuanced way than political discourses suggest, where sex workers are commonly separated into binary and oppositional categories: while German sex workers are discursively constructed as self-determined and privileged, migrant sex workers are constructed as victimized and vulnerable, with both groups having supposedly conflictive needs and interests.

However, the variety of intersecting power relations which shape activists' subjectivities means that privilege is not as clear cut in sex work. This is illustrated by the statements of Maya, a disabled German brothel worker currently relying on state aid, and Dayana, a queer, black, and neuro-diverse migrant working in BDSM:

Yes, I am aware that I am privileged, I am sitting here as a White German, as someone fluent in German who went to very good schools. But I am still marginalized, as a severely disabled person, a woman with full invalidity status, a *woman* simply – that's enough – living in poverty, so to speak. Of course, poverty is always relative. But by German standards I am poor.³¹⁰ (Maya)

I am fetishized, I'm eroticized, I'm othered. I am told to be quiet. And I'm also in a country where I'm not speaking the native language, and that's for a couple of reasons. But I'm still very grateful and feel very privileged to be able to be here and do the work that I do (...). (Dayana)

Although both frame themselves as privileged, they associate this status with differing social categories while still emphasizing that they experience marginalization along others. Monolithically attributing privilege to sex workers with German citizenship and language skills (as in the case of Maya), or to BDSM workers (as in the case of Dayana) thus ignores the complexity of activists' social location and the intersecting power relations which shape them.

By addressing individual privileges, sex worker activists not only complicate simplified political discourses and respond to the delegitimizing accusation of being a privileged and thus unrepresentative minority which anti-prostitution campaigners direct at them. Many

³¹⁰ „Ja, mir ist bewusst, ich bin privilegiert, ich sitze hier als Weiße Deutsche, fließend Deutsch Sprechende, war auf ganz guten Schulen. Aber ich bin trotzdem auch marginalisiert, als Schwerbehinderte, voll Erwerbsgeminderte, *Frau*, einfach - das reicht ja auch schon - die ja sozusagen in Armut lebt. Also, natürlich ist Armut immer relativ. Aber für deutsche Verhältnisse bin ich arm.“ (Maya)

activists also discuss their own privileges in order to explicate personal motivations to engage in activism. Katharina is one of these activists:

(...) it is precisely the people who are privileged who have the responsibility to stand up for others. Because to be aware that you are privileged and to have the time and opportunity to somehow get involved in something in your free time is a luxury. And just the fact that we can do this in Germany should be a much bigger issue (...). Especially because we are in a better position, we should help others to improve their situation as well. Because we are better off, we should advocate for improvements for everyone. And it's not an argument to say 'you have no relevance because you don't suffer as much as others do.'³¹¹

In Katharina's words, the advantageous social position afforded by her legal status, financial situation, and disposable time, necessitates and justifies her political engagement for all sex workers rather than invalidates it. In other words, by examining intersectional inequalities, activists reframe privilege from a delegitimizing into a legitimizing and responsabilizing factor. Interviewees frequently connect feelings of personal responsibility, duty or a "moral impetus" to their own social position and activist engagement, like Lara does:

First of all, I'm affected, so it would be stupid not to stand up for my own rights, but I think I was also socialized in such a way that you always have to stand up for the rights of others, and especially when a minority is threatened with stigmatisation, marginalization, or yes, criminalization in that case, that you really have a bit of a civic duty to stand up against it.³¹²

For activists like Lara, personal privileges create the political obligation to resist their own marginalization as well as that of others.

Utilizing personal privileges on behalf of more disadvantaged sex workers is a commonly mentioned intrinsic motivation felt among activists, as the perspective of Christin illustrates:

I'm white, middle-class, I own a BDSM studio, I get by quite well through sex work. These are privileges that I can use. I am outed, I can be outed, I can talk to the media and I have a certain expertise and I think it is important that I do political work for people who do not have these opportunities. (...) Well, that's just one

³¹¹ „(...) dass gerade die Leute, die privilegiert sind, in der Verantwortung sind, sich für die anderen einzusetzen. Weil überhaupt sich dessen bewusst zu werden, dass man privilegiert ist, und die Zeit und Gelegenheit zu haben, sich irgendwie in der Freizeit für irgendwas zu engagieren, ist ein Luxus. Und dass wir das auch alleine in Deutschland machen können, sollte ein wesentlich größeres Thema sein (...). Grade weil man in einer besseren Position da steht sollte man den anderen helfen auch besser da zu stehen. Weil es uns besser geht, sollten wir uns dafür einsetzen damit es allen besser geht. Und das ist kein Argument zu sagen ‚(...) du hast keine Relevanz weil dir geht es nicht so scheiße wie anderen.‘“ (Katharina)

³¹² „Erstens bin ich in der Situation, also es wäre blöd, nicht für meine eigenen Rechte einzustehen, aber ich glaube ich wurde auch so sozialisiert, dass man auch auf jeden Fall immer auch für die Rechte der Anderen eintreten muss, und gerade wenn ne Minderheit bedroht ist, Stigmatisierung zu erfahren, Marginalisierung zu erfahren, oder ja, Kriminalisierung in dem Fall, dass man dann echt ein bisschen die Bürgerpflicht hat, dagegen einzustehen.“ (Lara)

of these motivations, I would say. One of the more important ones is: I owe it to the people who are not as privileged.³¹³

Christin thus feels she “owes” a representative political engagement to those sex workers who lack the many resources and personal privileges she has.

Other activists specifically reject the idea that the sex worker movement should involve more multiply marginalized sex workers. As a first-generation migrant, Katharina is critical of political expectations concerning migrant sex workers:

I always find it difficult when we are asked to find migrant sex workers who speak out for the cause. (...) I mean, quite honestly, no one expects seasonal farm workers from Poland or elsewhere to fight for better working conditions. Everyone has to fight for better working conditions and we should not put this burden on the shoulders of seasonal farm workers or migrant sex workers or other people who are already in a marginalized and vulnerable position.³¹⁴

From this perspective, expecting migrant sex workers to self-organize independently within the sex worker movement and acknowledging only their self-representations as politically legitimate disregards the additional “burden” this places on an already marginalized and resource-poor group. The self-organization of privileged sex workers and their public visibility as activist in fact enables less privileged groups to join the movement, Lara believes:

Well, we are always accused of being privileged enough to do that [activism] because we have a social environment that is very open and does not condemn us for it [sex work]. And because of that, yes, from this privileged position, we simply have the possibility to speak openly about it. But what’s wrong with that? Because you are also empowering all those who are currently not privileged enough to speak in this way. (...) So, in principle you open up the space for others to dare to do the same.³¹⁵

By utilizing their privileged position, sex worker activists thus empower less privileged individuals and generate access to political spaces for them, Lara finds. For her, sex worker activists have an even wider significance: through their public activism, Lara argues, sex

³¹³ „(...) sehe ich das meinem Privileg geschuldet. Ich bin weiß, bürgerlich, mir gehört ein Dominastudio, ich komme mit meiner Sexarbeit ganz gut über die Runden. Das sind Privilegien, die ich einsetzen kann. Ich bin geoutet, ich kann geoutet sein, ich kann mit Medien sprechen und habe da eine gewisse Kompetenz und finde es wichtig, dass ich gerade für die Menschen politische Arbeit tue, die diese Möglichkeiten nicht haben. (...) Gut, aber das ist halt so eine dieser Motivationen, würde ich sagen. Eine der wichtigeren ist: Ich schulde das den Leuten, die nicht so privilegiert sind.“ (Christin)

³¹⁴ „(...) finde ich das immer schwierig, wenn von uns verlangt wird, dass wir migrantische Sexarbeiter finden sollen, die sich da für die Sache aussprechen. (...) Ich meine, ganz ehrlich, es erwartet doch auch keiner von Erntehelfern aus Polen oder so, dass sie für bessere Arbeitsbedingungen kämpfen. Es müssen alle für bessere Arbeitsbedingungen kämpfen und dass nicht diese Last auch noch auf die Schultern von Erntehelfern oder von migrantischen Sexarbeitern oder von anderen Leuten, die auch so schon in ner marginalisierten und vulnerablen Position sind, noch draufpacken.“ (Katharina)

³¹⁵ „Gut, das wird uns immer vorgeworfen, wir sind halt privilegiert genug, das zu tun. Also wir haben ein soziales Umfeld, was sehr offen ist und was uns nicht dafür verurteilt. Und dadurch haben wir, ja, aus dieser privilegierten Position heraus, einfach die Möglichkeit, darüber offen zu sprechen. Aber was ist daran falsch? Weil du empowerst ja damit auch all jene, die momentan nicht privilegiert genug sind, so zu sprechen. (...) Also im Prinzip öffnest du den Raum dann für andere, sich das auch zu trauen.“ (Lara)

worker activists participate in a discursive “field of experimentation” (*Experimentierfeld*) and can form part of a broader “avantgarde” which shapes socio-political transformations. Silke agrees that within social movements “it has always been only a few people, the so-called avantgarde which marches ahead, which leads the way, and the others then join in.”³¹⁶ Still, she stresses this vanguardism is successful “only if you do convincing work, and we can only be convincing if we also have the migrant women on board.”³¹⁷ Silke’s views thus emphasize the need to combine representative activism with mobilizations of a broader movement basis which incorporates less privileged sex workers.

In order to utilize their own privileged position on behalf of multiply marginalized sex workers, activists engage in a variety of activities. Some seek to increase accessibility to the sex worker movement by removing language barriers: Lucia advocates for the usage of “leichte Sprache” (easy language) within the movement (a simplified plain language version of German which is designed to increase accessibility for people with low language competences), while Maya provides translations of movement activities to mobilize migrant sex workers. Others activists counter exclusionary dynamics within the movement by consciously centring disprivileged groups of sex workers in their activism. Within her collective, Dayana claims

(...) we are doing our best to be a reflection of what we want to see. We’re trying very hard to be as inclusive of folks as we possibly can, but understanding there’s a particular demographic that really needs taking care of and needs our attention (...).

In Dayana’s view, creating an inclusive movement means dedicating more resources to disprivileged groups. Maya provides organizational support to activities which promote marginalized perspectives within her local activist community. “I am aware of my privileges and therefore I like to take a step back to give others opportunities,”³¹⁸ she explains. In a similar fashion, Christin tries to diversify the sex worker movement by centring lesser-known activists in the formats she organizes:

³¹⁶ „(...) dass es immer nur wenige Menschen waren, die sogenannte Avantgarde, die voranschreitet, die vorangeht, und die anderen schließen sich dann auch an (...).“ (Silke)

³¹⁷ „(...) aber nur, wenn man überzeugende Arbeit macht und Überzeugung geht nur, wenn wir auch die Migrantinnen im Boot haben.“ (Silke)

³¹⁸ „(...) dass ich das koordiniere und vor allem die Verantwortung an andere gebe (...). Weil ich bin zwar Teil der Community, aber ich bin mir meiner Privilegien bewusst und trete deshalb gerne einen Schritt zurück, um anderen Möglichkeiten zu geben.“ (Maya)

I try to bring in people who are not as well known, meaning, not the same five who always put their faces on TV and are popular as activists, but also the less conspicuous people who do activism or who have been doing it for a long time, but tend to tread more softly, also to show activism and its pitfalls more broadly (...).³¹⁹

Christin's statement also underlines that the diversity within the sex worker movement cannot be determined solely from its public appearance, since many activists engage in political activities which remain out of the public eye.

Activists also connect different subcommunities aided by their own social location. As a worker with experience in various industry sectors, Clio organizes conversations between porn, street-based and brothel workers to raise awareness of

how people in the art porn or feminist porn area could be aware of their privilege and what street-based sex workers and migrant sex workers want them to know about their life and their work.

Through these conversations, Clio seeks to facilitate understanding across different working realities in the sex industry. Dillon, who works in escorting and brothels, consciously structured his political engagement in a similar way: he explains he joined trans*Sexworks because he found it important "to be in a group that deals or works mainly with less privileged people."³²⁰ According to him, this work enriches his activism and helps him to ground wider political debates in the lived experiences of street-based migrant sex workers: "when I see the situation of some of the women there, I can then learn something for myself or think about, what does this discourse actually mean for these people?"³²¹ By specifically catering to migrant trans women who are working in the streets, trans*Sexworks seeks to integrate their perspectives into the broader sex worker movement. In a speech delivered during a demonstration on International Whores Day 2021, the collective highlighted its connection to street-based sex worker communities:

In our project, for example, our main work is community support and improving working conditions on the street. Even if there are only a few street sex workers here today, it doesn't mean that they are not part of our movement. Not everyone can afford to show their face so publicly here. But also on the street our colleagues say: (...) We do not want criminalization. (Trans*Sexworks, 2021)

³¹⁹ „(...) und versuchen, halt auch die Leute ran zu holen, die halt nicht so bekannt sind, also nicht dieselben fünf, die immer ihr Gesicht ins Fernsehen halten und als Aktivistinnen so populär sind, sondern auch die Leute, die Aktivismus machen, die nicht so auffallen oder die schon länger dabei sind, aber halt eher leiser treten, also um auch so breiter gefasst den Aktivismus zu zeigen und die Fallstricke (...)“ (Christin)

³²⁰ „Mir war auch wichtig, in einer Gruppe zu sein, die sich vor allem mit weniger privilegiierteren Personen beschäftigt oder arbeitet.“ (Dillon)

³²¹ „Ich krieg ja diese politischen Gespräche außerhalb von dem Dinner mit und kann dann so für mich selber dazulernen oder halt nachdenken, wenn ich die Situation von einigen von den Frauen da sehe, was bedeutet dieser Diskurs für diese Personen dann eigentlich?“ (Dillon)

By stressing the sex worker movement's interrelations and the shared opposition to criminalization across subcommunities, activists invoke movement unity in the face of political discourses which divide them into binary groups with supposedly opposed interests and dismiss sex worker activists as "too privileged". Activists' examination of their own social locations and their utilization of personal privileges within the sex worker movement thus illustrate internal movement transformations and strategic reactions to the disputes over political legitimacy which sex worker activists continue to encounter in the field of prostitution politics.

Summary

Sex workers' living and working experiences are shaped by intersecting power relations along the lines of gender, citizenship, race, class, or other markers, and repressive prostitution, migration, or welfare regimes affect sex workers in differing ways (Mauer, 2020). These variations in social location and the lived experiences connected to them equally translate into activists' subjectivities and the politics of the sex worker movement. Moreover, social movements in themselves present arenas of collaborative and conflictive interaction between activists (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015). In this chapter, I therefore directed an "intracategorical" lens (Montoya, 2021) onto the sex worker movement, traced the heterogeneous processes of cooperation and contestation among sex worker activists, and highlighted struggles over inclusion and exclusion within the movement.

I first demonstrated how crucial community is to sex workers' self-organization. Before all else, many sex worker activists were motivated to participate in movement activities to find the company of peers with shared lived experiences which they lacked in their private and professional contexts. The community of colleagues provided a means to break the isolation many sex workers face in their professional and private contexts, and to overcome stigmatized subjectivities. It then formed the basis to many activists' politicization into activism. The relevance of community increased again after the implementation of the Prostitute Protection Act: in response to deteriorating political and social conditions, sex worker activists turned inwards and increased their efforts to forge community within the movement. Hence, threats and grievances provide not only incentives to coalition building with external political actors (van Dyke & Amos, 2017) but can foster internal cooperation.

Here, activists experience differences in social location among sex workers as enriching and consider it feasible to bridge them in their efforts to forge community.

Sex worker only spaces are central sites of community building and function as safe(r) spaces. They provide participants with a unique refuge from stigmatization, sex work related discrimination, and the risk of an outing. As such, sex worker only spaces facilitate broader participation of sex workers and their subcommunities within the movement, and constitute arenas in which transitions between non-politicized sex workers and sex worker activists are fluid. Furthermore, sex worker only spaces facilitate exchanges on workplace safety and reach sex worker which are underserved by government institutions. Activists often provide support with basic needs to the most precarious members of their communities. These activities blur the line between community care work and political engagement which Majic (2014) identified among sex workers. Caring for individual and collective well-being is an established practice within feminist and racial justice movements, and its political relevance and radicality is increasingly recognized (Alkebulan, 2007; Hobart & Kneese, 2020). Like many other movements emerging out of socially and politically marginalized communities, the community care work which sex worker activists perform ensures both the survival of other sex workers as well as the survival of the sex worker movement: beyond satisfying material needs, community offers activists the immaterial resources with which they can reproduce themselves under emotionally draining circumstances. As such, community is the backbone to sex worker activists' individual and collective resilience, and constitutes the main asset of an otherwise resource-poor political actor operating in a challenging political context. Community care work also holds political significance because it rejects paternalistic and moralizing modes of charity in favour of horizontal collaborative practices, Hobart and Kneese (2020) find:

(...) care contains radical promise through a grounding in autonomous direct action and nonhierarchical collective work. Instead of only acting as a force for self-preservation, care is about the survival of marginal communities because it is intimately connected to modern radical politics and activism. (p. 10)

By performing community care work, sex worker activists not only respond to material necessities, but also express political agency and strategically ground their movement within collective deliberative practices at the grassroots level.

Despite their centrality within the movement, I have shown that sex worker only spaces are also disputed among sex worker activists who negotiate their boundaries to the outside, their codes of conduct on the inside, and their overall utility. Similar contestations around processes of inclusion and exclusion manifest in the various fragmentations and conflicts which I traced within the sex worker movement. Sex worker activists struggle to mobilize and incorporate in particular migrant sex workers into activism. Activists share this challenge with the German whore movement of the 1980s (Heying, 2019) and wider feminist movements in Germany (Gutierrez-Rodriguez & Tuzcu, 2021; Marx Ferree, 2012). However, the inability to include migrant sex workers is especially problematic in the current political context in which issues of migration are centred within prostitution politics, and in which anti-prostitution campaigners claim to represent these groups' interests.

Furthermore, activists discuss how the structures of the "whorarchy" produce inequalities and exclusions within the sex worker movement. In the course of sex workers' self-organization against the Prostitute Protection Act, hierarchical distinctions surfaced between industry sectors and legal status: activists engaging in tantra or sexual surrogacy, for instance, sought to evade repressive legislation and stigmatization by strategically distinguishing themselves from other forms of sex work and valorizing their professional practices over others. This strategy inevitably produced a degradation and restigmatization of other types of sex work and the individuals engaged in them. Distinctions which some activists draw based on their legal status also illustrate how the legal provisions instituted by the Prostitute Protection Act have a segregating effect on the sex worker community and can undermine solidarity within the movement. The very first institution of sex workers' self-organization eventually became a crucial arena of conflicts and disintegration: due to BesD's inability to address internal hierarchies and exclusionary dynamics, it faced severe criticism and membership loss. The organizationally and politically fragmented landscape of sex work activism causes conflicting assessments of the existence of a cohesive social movement among sex worker activists.

The literature on social movement outcomes indicates that movement failure, like the one sex worker activists incurred through the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act, can weaken internal solidarity but also create opportunities for political learnings (Beckwith, 2016). Looking back, some activists convincingly relate the movements' exclusionary dynamics and limited politics to its institutional context of emergence: the defence of a status

quo which national prostitution laws provided to some sex workers narrowed the movement's political focus, at the same time as activists' struggle for political recognition and the hostilities they faced within the field of prostitution politics hampered internal critiques and learning processes. In her study of porn workers, Berg (2021) indeed finds that solidarity among sex workers can erode with the professionalization of some, and that "respectability can hobble the political imagination" where socially and politically marginalized actors "enjoyed a limited compromise with capital and the state" (Berg, 2021, p. 8) through intermediary institutions. Other sex work scholars have identified intra-communal solidarity as a cause for the failure of sex worker movements in country contexts with legalized prostitution frameworks: according to van der Poel (1995), Dutch sex worker activists' struggles for improved legal and social rights in the 1980s "went smoothly as long as professional prostitutes monopolized image-formation" (p. 41). When activists incorporated the concerns of drug-using sex workers, this increased stigmatization and moralizing political discourses, and eventually caused the movement's failure to achieve legal changes. Van der Poel concludes that solidarity worked as a political "boomerang" and that a political separation of "professional prostitutes" would have yielded achievements for the privileged section of sex workers, who could then have continued to advocate on behalf of the more marginalized ones. The development and outcomes of sex workers' self-organization against the German Prostitute Protection Act strongly dispute these conclusions. My findings show that the "professionalized" appearance of sex worker activists was strategically exploited to negate their political legitimacy and representativity, and that exclusionary dynamics within the sex worker movement later rebounded and caused internal conflicts and fragmentations.

Overall, contestations among activists demonstrate that the sex worker movement itself is not exempt from internal power relations. Hence, the intersecting marginalizations which constitute sex workers' diverse social locations do not automatically produce a superior awareness to power inequalities among sex worker activists or generate intersectional movement practices. As Montoya (2021) writes,

Residing at the intersection of multiple marginalities is not the same as developing an intersectional consciousness or politic. While positionality may provide some degree of epistemological privilege in the recognition of unequal societal structures, intersectional mobilization requires a more agentic orientation to dismantle them, and one that might be adopted more broadly. (p. 5)

Such an “agentic orientation” to address inequalities within the sex worker movement can be observed in activists’ examination of their own social locations and the associated personal privileges. As Ayoub (2019) remarks with regards to the European LGBTQ movement, “being an activist within highly stigmatized organizations requires privilege in and of itself” (p. 20), which equally applies to the German sex worker movement and its institutions. Through practices of “making space” (Ayoub, 2019, p. 22) which decentre dominant groups and foreground marginalized ones, activists seek to utilize their privileges to foster inclusion within the movement. These transformations suggests that “times of crisis” (Ayoub, 2019) can be conducive to the development of intersectional consciousness and practices among sex worker activists. In this chapter, I demonstrated how intersectional consciousness and practices are expressed within social movements by activists who are seeking to forge solidarity across differences in social location. In my analysis, I have found these developments to be less distinct at the meso-level of social movement organizations such as BesD, and more evident at the micro level, where individual activists and localized grassroots collectives pursue intersectional politics to counter exclusionary dynamics within the movement. Ayoub (2019) finds that intersectional consciousness is most pronounced at the macro-level, where LGBTQ activists strategically employ intersectional practices to build coalitions with other transnational political actors. While my research focus remains at the national level, I follow a similar intersectional perspective on social movements and coalition building in the following chapter, where I scrutinize the efforts which sex worker activists undertake to collaborate with other political actors.

8 Coalition Building Efforts

Coalitions with other political actors are fundamental to the development and success of politically marginalized movements (Rucht, 2004; Zorn, 2013), and conditions of political threat are conducive to their formation (van Dyke & Amos, 2017). Moreover, sex workers activists occupy a variety of social locations from which to build coalitions, and sex worker movements have historically and globally allied with feminist, disability rights, labour, LGBTQ, migrants rights, or health movements (ESWA, 2015, 2018b, 2018b; e.g. Garofalo Geymonat, 2019; Geymonat et al., 2019; Hardy, 2010; Kempadoo, 2003; Mathieu, 2003a; van der Poel, 1995; Vijayakumar et al., 2015). In Germany, the cooperation with social workers was essential to the emergence of the whore movement in the 1980s, and its success in impacting legal reforms stemmed from collaborating with the Green Party (Heying, 2019). After the adoption of the Prostitution Act in 2001, labour unions made first attempts to organize sex workers (Mitrović, 2006, 2007).

Given the political threats against which sex workers self-organized from 2013 on and the plurality of possible connections to other movements, I expected coalition building efforts to play an important role for this marginalized political actor. I was thus struck that coalition building efforts remained absent from many interviewees' accounts. When I inquired about cooperative relationships with other political actors, some activists plainly responded that they could not identify any significant coalitions. Others would briefly reflect and then mention various individuals, collectives, or institutions which had at some point and in some way supported sex workers' politics or their self-organization. Yet, these interviewees stressed caveats concerning the political utility of these relationships. Further pursuing these traces through documents and participant observation confirmed the existence of diverse coalition building efforts undertaken by sex workers and other political actors. Often, however, these remained limited in scope, location, and time frame, or were fraught with ruptures and unpredictability.

In the first part of this chapter (8.1), I examine how sex worker activists deal with the simultaneously existing great potential and unpredictability of coalitions. To this end, I delineate the relationship between sex worker activists and political parties, the ambiguous position of church organizations, as well as the spectrum of still minor connections to LGBTQ, migrant, refugee, and racialized movement actors which activists have been trying to expand. As part

of this, I highlight the deterring effect that “stigma by association” (Pryor et al., 2012) has on potential coalition partners. Within the crucial years of mobilization against the Prostitute Protection Act, sex worker activists lacked the support of a government party which could strengthen its claims as a “party-political agent” (Euchner, 2015) within the legislative arena, and struggled with the volatility of party positions on sex work across the political spectrum and the federal states. Some church organizations publicly express criticism of repressive laws and victimizing discourses, as do a variety of health and feminist organizations. Although politically significant to sex worker activists, these shared oppositional stances do not constitute steady cooperative relationships. Interviewees’ initial silence on coalitions therefore attests to how low they judge their impact on sex workers’ self-organization thus far. At the same time, activists recognize the importance of coalitions to “overcome isolation” (Sex Worker Section FAU Berlin, 2022) and see manifold potentials for alliances with other political actors from which they are “soliciting solidarity” (an expression I borrow from a sex worker protest banner). The diverse instances of collaboration between sex worker activists and social movement actors organizing around LGBTQ, migrant, and disability rights, or against racism and gentrification, remain local, temporary, and unilateral. However, the coalition building efforts undertaken by sex worker activists attest to a growth in intersectional consciousness and practices in response to deteriorating political and social conditions (Ayoub, 2019). Sex worker activists seek to build political strength by strategically invoking the threats and grievances they share with other marginalized groups, and the need for cooperation in order to overcome them. Activists’ engagement with LGBTQ, feminist, and labour movement actors also highlights the sex worker movement’s own grappling with intersectional political analyses.

Following this, I address three major coalition building efforts in detail. In subchapter 8.2, I discuss how sex worker activists compete for support in the feminist movement arena. While the hegemony of anti-prostitution campaigners and ideas present a constant impediment to coalition building for sex worker activists, this is particularly prevalent in the feminist movement arena. Instances of explicit support and inclusion by mainstream feminist actors remain rare, and the feminist movement arena presents a risky environment in which sex worker activists face competitive confrontations with anti-prostitution campaigners. Feminist actors’ lacking awareness of the discriminatory and politically marginalizing nature of these contestations disqualifies them as coalition partners to the sex worker movement.

In subchapter 8.3, I then outline the limited support sex worker activists receive from the counselling centres which grew out of the German whore movement of the 1980s. The historical ties which both actors share facilitated coalition building in the face of political threats, and the organizational structures and resources of the institutionalized counselling centres contributed to the politicization and mobilization of sex worker activists. Simultaneously, activists found that counselling centres abandoned their own political engagement due to institutional constraints, resource scarcity, and the executive role they play in the implementation of the Prostitute Protection Act, which ultimately weakened this coalition.

Subchapter 8.4 chronicles the relationship between sex worker activists and labour unions. Sex worker activists have long been struggling with union organizing, which first failed due to the ill-suited approach of the German United Services Trade Union ver.di, and was later undermined by ver.di's tendency towards anti-prostitution ideas. Sex worker activists' efforts to unionize with the anarcho-syndicalist grassroots union FAU were first hampered by disagreements over organizational practices, and later advanced by the grievances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Sex worker activists' unionization with FAU in 2021 presents the most progressed coalition building effort the movement has undertaken since its formation. This chapter thus presents an "intercategorical" approach to studying social movements intersectionally by "locating and identifying the mobilization that occur between and across movements" (Montoya, 2021, p. 4) and the power relations within these. In closing, I relate my findings to the literature on coalition building, and argue that it remains to be seen whether the manifold potentials and manifestations of coalition building processes can develop into durable political alliances in the future.

8.1 "You Can Never Quite Guess Who Is Pro or Who Is Anti" – Potentials & Unpredictability of Alliances

Across the data, coalitions emerged as containing both a manifold potential and a constant unpredictability for sex worker activists: Katharina believes that for sex worker activists, alliances are "tendentially possibly in any direction,"³²² whereas Scarlet finds alliance building

³²² „(...) tendenziell in jeder Richtung was möglich (...)“ (Katharina)

generally “difficult” because “you can’t say that there is any political direction in society where abolitionist [anti-prostitution] positions are not held.”³²³ The prevalence of anti-prostitution ideas is thus experienced as a consistently possible disruption to political coalition building. According to Clio, polarizations on the issue of sex work create a constant unpredictability for alliances between sex worker activists and other political actors:

I think sex workers find support in a lot of different groups. It doesn’t seem to be particular political alliances. You can never quite guess who is pro or anti until they kind of come out as having an opinion either way.

Within the examined time frame, I identified various instances where other political actors “came out either way” and publicly expressed their support for sex worker activists: such points of connection exist between sex worker activists and political parties, church organizations, and social movement actors organizing around LGBTQ, migrant, and disability rights, or against racism and gentrification. Still, these connections are often small-scale, local, and temporary. Moreover, they depend highly on sex workers activists reaching out while dealing with the constant unpredictability of their interlocutors’ position on sex work.

Political Parties

First, this unpredictability is illustrated by the positions of various political parties. The first sex work congress organized by BesD, bufas and researchers in 2014 saw MPs Sylvia Pantel (CDU), Eva Högl (SPD), Cornelia Möhring (the Left) and Ulle Schauws (the Greens) as supportive guests, thus representing all parties constituting the German parliament at that time. However, party positions and power relations in the parliament had shifted since the German whore movement had cooperated with the Green Party to achieve reforms through the Prostitution Act of 2001. During the legislative process which culminated in the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016, the Green Party criticized the one-sided obligations for sex workers, the lack of data protection, and the excessive powers given to state authorities (Bundestagsfraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2016). However, the Green Party was now without governmental power, and its former coalition partner, the SPD, formed the government together with the centre-right CDU/CSU. As Euchner (2015) finds, the SPD furthermore ran the “risk of being accused of fickleness, as it ha[d] changed its position on

³²³ „Schwierig. Man kann nicht sagen, dass es irgendeine politische Richtung in der Gesellschaft gäbe, wo abolitionistische Positionen nicht vertreten werden.“ (Scarlet)

prostitution considerably within 15 years” (p.27). While in government with the Green Party, the SPD had passed the Prostitution Act to strengthen sex workers’ rights and improve their working conditions. Now sharing governmental powers with the CDU/CSU, the SPD was arguing for stricter controls and the combatting of crime within the sex industry (CDU/CSU & SPD, 2013). This was particularly problematic for sex worker activists since the SPD was in charge of the ministry with jurisdiction over the Prostitute Protection Act. During the legislative period in which the Prostitute Protection Act was elaborated (2013 – 2016), the self-organizing sex workers therefore lacked a “party-political agent” (Euchner, 2015) adequately placed to influence the law in their interest.

Moreover, coalition building remained highly fraught for sex worker activists even among the MPs which participated in the first sex work congress organized by BesD in 2014. Sylvia Pantel, MP for the CDU, represented an important political counter position: she opposed anti-prostitution campaigner Leni Breymaier in public debates (Hecht, 2020), was accused of “flirting” (*schäkern*) with the “pro-prostitution lobby” by feminist magazine EMMA (EMMA, 2021a), and publicly disagreed with the women’s association of her party, which in 2020 passed a resolution in support of client criminalization (Frauen Union CDU Deutschland, 2020). Nonetheless, Pantel also backed the compulsory registration of sex workers in the elaboration of the Prostitute Protection Act, and lost further trust among sex worker activists for supporting anti-abortion protests (Schindler, 2020). Eva Högl, MP for the SPD who participated in the 2014 sex worker congress, angered sex worker activists by stating that “the women we do politics for are not sitting here today” (Geitz & Dribbusch, 2014), thereby rejecting sex worker activists as legitimate representatives of an affected group.

Furthermore, party positions on sex work cannot be distinguished along a general political spectrum and exhibit variations within the different states and party associations. As noted by Euchner (2019), Southern states such as Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg handle prostitution in a more restrictive way than the more liberal states of North-Rhine Westphalia or Berlin. Correspondingly, party positions may differ between the national parliament and the various state parliaments. While the Green Party in the national parliament criticized the plans for the Prostitute Protection Act as “incomplete, restrictive and controlling” (Bundestagsfraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2016), its branch in the state of Bavaria supported many of the proposed measures in order to combat “forced prostitution and human trafficking [which] have increased significantly in conjunction with the legalisation and

prevalence of prostitution” (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen Landtag Bayern, 2015). Coalition building with local sections of the Green Party were thus not a given, either.

Neither can sex workers assume general support from the leftist party spectrum: whereas the Left Party opposes the Prostitute Protection Act on the grounds of the rights violations, stigmatization and illegalization it carries for sex workers (Fraktion DIE LINKE. im Bundestag, 2022), various MPs and local youth and women’s chapters of the Left form part of the “Network Leftists for a World without Prostitution” (*Netzwerk LINKE für eine Welt ohne Prostitution*) which advocates for client criminalization (Netzwerk LINKE für eine Welt ohne Prostitution, 2020). The divisions within the Left Party are also reflected within its associated political foundation: While the national chapter of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation co-sponsored BesD’s sex worker congress in 2014, its Bavarian branch hosted an event with anti-prostitution campaigners in 2021, which according to SWAG provided space for “Holocaust relativization, racism and (internalized) misogyny” (SWAG, 2022) as the speakers equated sex work with the situation of women in concentration camp brothels during the Nazi regime. Broad variations on sex work also exist within the conservative political spectrum: in 2021, the CDU in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia successfully motioned for the state parliament to reject client criminalization and “preserve and support the self-determination of voluntary sex workers” (Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2021), thus counteracting the position taken by the CDU women’s association the year before (Frauen Union CDU Deutschland, 2020). In building coalitions with political parties, sex worker activists thus have to deal with the unpredictability of variations between the national and regional level, and with variations existing between political parties and their associations. In addition, cooperation with political parties has been undermined by the disappointing experiences sex worker activists made during the elaboration of the Prostitute Protection Act: like Christin, many activists see a risk in their demands getting “sold out” (*verkauft*) for political compromises, and have thus become more reluctant to engage in coalition building with political parties.

Church Organizations

Equally split in their position on sex work and their involvement in prostitution politics are Christian church organizations and the welfare institutions they fund: The Catholic German

Women's Association, for instance, is a proponent of client criminalization and supporter of the anti-prostitution organization SOLWODI headed by the catholic nun Lea Ackermann. Both SOLWODI and the Berlin-based Christian exit organization Neustart are frequent anti-prostitution participants at public and political events on sex work. "Caritas", the social service organization of the Catholic church, also sponsors the café "La strada" in Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg – a contact point for female sex workers which focuses on sex workers' exit from prostitution. Sabine Constabel, social worker at La strada, again heads the anti-prostitution organization Sisters together with MP Leni Breymaier, illustrating the entanglements between Christian church organizations and anti-prostitution campaigners. Conversely, catholic welfare and women's associations in North Rhine-Westphalia fund the counselling centre "freiRaum" (free space) which is supportive of sex workers' self-determination and opposes client criminalization (Katholisch.de, 2021).

Similarly varied is the engagement of Protestant church organizations in prostitution politics: "Diakonie", the charity organization of protestant churches in Germany, publicly "advocates for better support and counselling services for prostitutes" and "considers a ban on prostitution along the lines of the Nordic countries to be the completely wrong way to go" (Diakonie Deutschland, 2021). Together with the German AIDS Foundation, the German Women's Council (*Deutscher Frauenrat*), the German Women Lawyers Association (*Deutscher Juristinnenbund*), and various counselling centres for sex workers, the Diakonie has issued a joint statement against client criminalization (Deutsche Aidshilfe et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this position is not stable across the Protestant church in Germany or all of Diakonie's subsidiary bodies: during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Protestant church and Diakonie chapter in Mannheim, Baden-Württemberg, have departed from the national organization's line and expressed their support for client criminalization (Diakonie Mannheim & Evangelische Kirche Mannheim, 2020). Moreover, some social workers in Diakonie-financed counselling centres report being "muzzled" (*einen Maulkorb verpasst bekommen*) on political issues by their sponsor. In some local contexts, protestant church organizations also maintain networks with fundamentalist evangelical organizations and free churches who have been criticized for their problematic interventions against prostitution and human trafficking (Andorfer, 2013). While funding for sex work accepting counselling centres and overt political positionings against client criminalization are judged as important by sex worker activists, these complex

entanglements further explain why many do not experience church organizations as potential coalition partners in the most recent political contestations around sex work.

Intersectional Alliances

Potentials and efforts for intersectional coalition building increased with the diversification of the sex worker movement after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016. In particular the demonstrations and events organized by SWAG and trans*Sexworks demonstrate this: in celebration of International Whores Day on the 2nd of June 2021, trans*Sexworks shared an image of a brick smashing through a wall on its social media accounts. The accompanying statement “sex workers gave you queer rights, now return the favour” emphasized the role sex worker activists, in particular trans and racialized women like Martha P. Johnson and Silvia Rivera, played in the Stonewall riots of 1969, which are commonly regarded to have sparked the LGBTQ movement in the US and beyond. The image shared by trans*Sexworks also called on LGBTQ movement actors and queer individuals to reciprocate these political efforts by contributing to the struggle for sex workers’ rights. Beyond the shared history and contribution of sex worker activists to LGBTQ movements, sex worker activists also invoke parallels in ongoing political struggles: during the demonstrations organized by SWAG on the same day, trans*Sexworks activist Caspar reminded audiences that LGBTQ activists used to face defamation as a “homolobby” (Trans*Sexworks, 2021). Today, trans activists and organizations share these disparaging experiences with sex worker activists: in a similar rhetoric to the one used against sex worker activists, the magazine EMMA has questioned whether trans activists are “really trans”, denied their agency in gender transitioning, framed the issue as a psychological-medical problem and a social “trend” harmful to children, and defamed trans activists as a “trans lobby” (Louis, 2019, 2020c). Through the joint use of the acronyms “TERF & SWERF” (trans exclusionary radical feminist and sex worker exclusionary radical feminist), sex worker activists highlight shared experiences of discrimination, exclusion and hostility within the feminist movement arena, and stress that opposition to trans rights and sex worker rights often go hand in hand. The overlap between anti-prostitution and anti-trans positions is further illustrated by protest events where anti-prostitution campaigners simultaneously mobilize trans hostile messages (e.g. the slogan “lesbians only love pussy” documented on the 8th of March 2020), and anti-

prostitution campaigner Breymaier's vocal opposition to the planned German law on gender self-determination (Queer.de, 2021).

Instances of support and solidarity by LGBTQ movement actors can be identified on a very local, temporal scale, where drag artists contribute to sex workers' protests, the Gay Museum (*Schwules Museum*) in Berlin provides space, funding and consultations to sex worker activists' exhibitions, or where Pride events explicitly include sex worker activists. However, this inclusion often depends on sex worker activists reaching out, raising awareness among LGBTQ movement actors, and emphasizing that there can be "no pride without sex workers". Kerstin, who rallied support for sex workers from her local LGBTQ organizations, states the institution "didn't even have it [sex work] on their radar until I came."³²⁴ She also participated in her town's Pride Day, where the mobile home she usually works from was used for an anonymous STI testing offer. However, Kerstin reports, the Pride Day organizers "didn't want it to be public knowledge that this was a sex worker mobile."³²⁵ Kerstin was outraged by this position and confronted the organizers after the event:

I put up with that for the time being and then went to the organizer afterwards and said (...) 'Don't stigmatize me! I won't have it. Or deny me just because I do this job. (...) That shouldn't stand on Pride Day.' And then he accepted that. Yes, they actually reacted positively to it. And now they're doing an event next year on the topic of prostitution (...).³²⁶

Despite her inclusion into the event, Kerstin experienced stigmatization and discrimination as a sex worker. Resisting this overtly, she managed to generate organizer's understanding and a commitment to educating themselves on sex workers' issues through a planned information event. Overall, activists' experiences demonstrate the feasibility of coalition building with LGBTQ movements, but illustrate that these efforts remain in its infancy and are troubled by the lacking awareness on sex work among the wider LGBTQ movement.

The activities which trans*Sexworks and SWAG have undertaken since the passing of the Prostitute Protection Act also showcase selective connections to migrant, refugee, and racialized movement actors, and to those organizing around gentrification or disability rights. For the demonstration on International Whore Day 2021, SWAG invited the Brandenburg-

³²⁴ „(...) hatte das gar nicht auf dem Schirm bis ich kam.“ (Kerstin)

³²⁵ „(...) wollte nicht, dass das öffentlich bekannt ist, dass das ein Sex Worker Mobil ist.“ (Kerstin)

³²⁶ „Das hab ich mir dann erstmal so gefallen lassen und bin dann nachher zu diesem Veranstalter hin und hab halt gesagt (...) ‚Du kannst mich ja nicht stigmatisieren! Das geht ja nicht. Oder mich verneinen, nur weil ich diese Tätigkeit mache.‘ (...) Das dürfte doch nicht mehr an einem CSD-Tag korrekt sein. Und daraufhin hat er das ja auch eingesehen. Ja, die haben eigentlich dann positiv drauf reagiert. Und machen jetzt auch ne Veranstaltung nächstes Jahr zu dem Thema Prostitution, also männliche Prostitution.“ (Kerstin)

based self-organization of women refugees “Women in Exile”, which emphasized in a speech read out on their behalf that refugee women rarely out themselves as sex workers for “fear of being judged or being jailed due to working without permit” (Women in Exile, 2021). Women in Exile demanded decriminalisation of sex work, “full bodily autonomy and agency over our own lives” and called for “a community of solidarity” between refugee women and sex worker movements. Present at the same demonstration was also Migrantifa Berlin, an antifascist group of “Berliners with migrant descent” (Migrantifa Berlin, 2021) which was founded after a right-wing extremist killed nine racialized people in Hanau in 2020. Migrantifa Berlin denounced the “racist, classist, and sexist” policies directed against human trafficking and sex work, and criticized the “victim narrative that serves to mask the actual causes” of these phenomena (Migrantifa Berlin, 2021). The action week organized by SWAG in 2020 also connected sex work activism to political struggles against racism and colonialism (SWAG, 2020a), while trans*Sexworks participated in demonstrations against gentrification with the slogan “sex work is work, being a landlord isn’t” (Lergenmüller, 2021). Moreover, trans*Sexworks protested against the eviction of a homeless people’s camp in Berlin on the 14th of March 2021, in which several trans women sex workers from Bulgaria lived. Finally, SWAG, trans*Sexworks, the Black Sex Worker Collective, and Hydra hosted the first specific “ally day” in Berlin in 2022, and invited potential coalition partners “to build sustainable relationships with them and to bond closer in our intersectional fight for social justice” (SW UnConference, 2022). A panel discussion titled “Common Ground: Empowerment in our Various Intersections” centred disabled sex worker activists and connections to the disability rights movement.

While these examples show a wide range of coalition building efforts undertaken by sex worker activists, Kerstin regrets that these are predominantly one-sided:

I think that very few people come to us, because we sex workers have to take matters into our own hands. Unfortunately, that’s the way it is. Because nobody wants to talk to us. Which is a pity.³²⁷

Whereas Kerstin sees great reluctance among other political actors to enter into contact with sex worker activists, Adrian sounds more optimistic and identifies obstacles to coalition building in the “lack of awareness and visibility of sex workers’ organizations (...)”³²⁸

³²⁷ „Auf uns, denke ich mal, kommen ganz wenige zu, weil wir Sexarbeiter*innen, wir müssen das selber in die Hand nehmen. Das ist leider so. Weil mit uns will ja keiner sprechen. Was sehr schade ist.“ (Kerstin)

³²⁸ „(...) es fehlt so ein bisschen Bekanntheit und auch Sichtbarkeit an Sexarbeiterorganisationen (...)“ (Adrian)

According to Adrian, social movements' single-issue focus further impedes the formation of long-term alliances:

Political groups that specialise in one topic or another, be it antifa or migrant issues, of course quickly fall back into their own subject area. So, I noticed that when you do a protest on a certain topic or work together on a certain topic, the contact is quickly lost again if you don't continue to work together somehow. Nevertheless, it is a big step forward that there is this cooperation and also this positioning, and that you know that the other side is there and you can potentially do something together.³²⁹

Although each movements' commitment to a specific issue complicates intersectional coalition-building, Adrian regards even temporary and localized expressions of solidarity by other political actors as crucial and encouraging for future cooperation efforts. However, those who express solidarity with sex worker activists are affected by "stigma by association" (Pryor et al., 2012), which undermines coalition building.

"One of Those People" – Stigma by Association as an Obstacle to Coalition Building

Within the data, there is evidence that political actors who express solidarity with sex worker activists experience "stigma by association" (Pryor et al., 2012). This concept describes the negative attitudes and behaviours targeted at those who associate with stigmatized communities.³³⁰ Stigma by association expresses itself in various ways. On the one hand, it contains a gendered component. Male supporters run the risk of being marked as clients of sex workers, as the statement by Melanie illustrates:

It is really hard for male MPs to say, '(...) sex work is not so problematic ...!' Because then they get accused, 'He is one of those people, he surely goes to a brothel himself!'³³¹

Expressions of political support by male actors are thus undermined by their stigmatization as sex work clients. This stigmatization can have severe social impacts for the individuals in question, as the case of Oliver shows: I came to interview Oliver after having observed him as a steady but mostly silent participant at sex worker protests and events. Here, he would often

³²⁹ „Politische Gruppen, die sich jetzt auf irgendein Thema spezialisieren, sei es irgendwie Antifa oder migrantische Themen, die verfallen natürlich auch immer schnell wieder zurück in ihren Themenbereich. Also das hab ich gemerkt, dass wenn man dann so einen Protest zu dem Thema macht, oder man arbeitet zu einem Thema zusammen, das dann schnell der Kontakt wieder so ein bisschen verloren geht, wenn man nicht weiterhin irgendwie zusammenarbeitet. Nichtsdestotrotz ist es schon mal ein großer Fortschritt, dass es diese Zusammenarbeit gibt und auch diese Positionierung gibt, und dass man weiß, dass die andere Seite da ist und man potentiell zusammen was machen kann.“ (Adrian)

³³⁰ Hammond and Kingston (2014), for instance, discuss the stigma by association which they experienced as sex work researchers.

³³¹ „Für männliche Abgeordnete ist es total schwer zu sagen, '(...) Sexarbeit, das ist doch gar nicht so problematisch...!' Weil dann wir denen vorgeworfen, das ist ja selber so einer, der geht bestimmt selber in den Puff!“ (Melanie)

assist with holding banners, carrying equipment, or doing other work in the background. Because this triggered my interest, I eventually asked to interview him not knowing which particular social location he occupied as a supporting activist. Very early in our conversation he disclosed that he considered himself a “client in solidarity” (*solidarischer Kunde*). After noticing discrepancies between victimizing public discourses and his own client experiences with the “very confident women” (*sehr selbstbewusste Frauen*) he met in brothels, he began educating himself on sex work and reaching out to sex workers’ organizations. His public support for sex work politics first entailed interventions into everyday conversations, social media debates, and discussions within his own political party. He did so “only from a gut feeling and from what I experienced as a client, of course without saying it,”³³² he told me. Bothered by his own hesitation to take a public stance on sex work for fear of stigmatization, he eventually outed himself as a client of sex work: “(...) at some point I didn’t like holding back anymore, and since then I’ve done it offensively.”³³³ As a result of his public activism as a sex work client, he reports losing friends and political comrades who stated they “don’t want to be friends with a pimp (...).”³³⁴ The stigma against actual or suspected clients can thus cause the loss of social and political circles, rendering overt political support for the sex worker movement risky and costly to male actors. Stigmatization then functions as a deterrent to public expressions of solidarity with sex worker.

On the other hand, stigma by association expresses itself in the hostile behaviours which supporting activists are exposed to. Disability rights activist and sex worker client Martin provides peer-counselling on sexual surrogacy and delivers public talks on the topic of self-determined sexuality together with sex worker activists. Because of this engagement, he tells, he has “sometimes been insulted on the street or at events.”³³⁵ Political actors who express solidarity with sex workers’ struggles or support their self-organization are particularly subjected to hostilities by anti-prostitution campaigners. Counselling centres like the Berlin-based Hydra and the Nürnberg-based Cassandra are regularly labelled as a part of the “prostitution lobby” and anti-prostitution campaigners interpret the funding they receive as evidence that “the German state pays millions” to them (EMMA, 2014b). Feminist activist Valentina reports her collective was “attacked properly” (*richtig angegriffen*) by anti-

³³² „(...) eingemischt (...). Nur vom Bauch her und was ich dann eben so als Kunde erlebt habe, natürlich ohne es zu sagen (...).“ (Oliver)

³³³ „(...) irgendwann hat mir das nicht gefallen, mich da zurückzunehmen, und seitdem habe ich das offensiv gemacht.“ (Oliver)

³³⁴ „(...) dass man mit einem Zuhälter nicht befreundet sein will (...).“ (Oliver)

³³⁵ „(...) ich bin mitunter auf offener Straße beschimpft worden oder auch in ner Veranstaltung.“ (Martin)

prostitution campaigners after joining the Sex Work is Work. Respect! campaign. The magazine EMMA repeatedly defamed sex worker supporting feminist journalists as “career feminists” (*Karriere-Feministinnen*) and “affluent wannabe feminists” (*wohlstandsverwöhnte Möchtegern-Feministinnen*) who have “studied something like cultural studies, scramble in pop culture, and travel on the ‘young feminist’ ticket (...)” (EMMA, 2013c; Louis, 2021), thus marking these feminist as privileged and self-interested individuals and framing support for sex workers as a cultural, class-based and generational divide. The magazine EMMA also listed the names of lawyers, politicians, and NGOs who participated in sex worker events and provided financial support for these (EMMA, 2013c, 2014b). Scholars speaking publicly on sex work and criticizing client criminalization, such as the Swedish historian and feminist Susanne Dodillet, have been discredited for their supposedly “unscientific work” (EMMA, 2021a). Cornelia Möhring, MP for the Left Party, attests that these defamatory discourses also target supportive MPs who are framed as “corrupt politicians bribed by brothel operators” (Möhring, 2021). Supportive political actors thus share experiences of stigmatization and hostility with sex worker activists, which illustrates how these are used strategically against coalition partners of the sex worker movement. Having delineated the potentials and unpredictability of political alliances, as well as the deterring effect of stigmatization, I focus on sex worker activists’ coalition building efforts in the feminist movement arena. In the following chapter, I demonstrate how sex worker activists struggle with the influence of anti-prostitution campaigners in this arena, and the lack of explicit solidarity by other feminist actors.

8.2 “Like Having to Discuss the Pope on Abortion” – Competing in the Feminist Movement Arena

Given the long-standing and varied feminist engagements with the issue of sex work, the feminist movement arena is an important site of political interaction for sex worker activists. In order to illustrate how sex worker activists fare upon their inclusion into this arena, I first describe in detail my field observations from the International Women’s Day demonstration on the 8th of March 2020 in Berlin.

While the yearly marches for International Women’s Day have been cancelled in other countries, the incisive reality of the Covid-19 pandemic has not yet fully arrived in Germany.

On this day, I am therefore joining a group of sex worker activists who are assembling outside an underground rail station in the Berlin neighbourhood of Wedding, where the starting point for the main feminist demonstration (organized by the “Frauen*kampftagsbündnis”, an alliance of feminist collectives) is located. To make themselves visible to those still arriving, sex worker activists have spread out banners and red umbrellas on the ground. When the march begins around 2pm, the group has grown into a small but sizeable sex worker block ready to join the stream of protestors, banners and cars blasting music which is slowly moving by on the opposite street lane. We collectively cross the lane and quickly come to a halt again on a small pedestrian traffic island in the middle of the street. The sex worker activists coordinating our block seem to be unsure about where to enter into the stream of protestors which is now passing directly in front of us. The uncertainty and discussion in the group about “where to get in” is amplified when an organizer of the march arrives to warn sex worker activists about a block of anti-prostitution protestors which has formed further back in the demonstration. These protestors’ anti-prostitution and trans hostile banners violate the demonstration’s consensus, the march organizer explains (Frauen*kampftagbündnis, 2020a). The group has thus been asked to leave the demonstration, but stayed on. Hearing these news, some sex worker activists in our block wish to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the anti-prostitution protestors, since they feel unsafe and fear proximity could provoke an altercation. Others propose we should enter the march right in front of them to counter their presence. While the group deliberates, we remain stranded on the traffic island and huddled together under red umbrellas. Some activists hang their protest banner over the metal banister securing the traffic island from the street. The banner’s bright glitter letters proclaiming “sex work is work” on silky pink fabric draw immediate attention from the passing march and journalists, and become a frequent object of photographs. After hectic back and forth communication with the march organizers and much deliberation within the group, we eventually chose the safest option: we rush alongside the march to catch up with a block of trans activists further ahead, in the vicinity of which the present sex worker activists feel the most welcome and supported. Having finally “found our place” in the demonstration, activists focus on shouting their slogans, raising their banners, and keeping the block together, while still listening for updates on the anti-prostitution protestors’ whereabouts. Later, we hear about an altercation occurring between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution protestors further back in the demonstration, but the details remain unclear

to those of us marching in the block. Activists' enjoyment and vigor thus continue to mix with a palpable tension. Around 4pm, our block finally reaches the end point of the march on the square of Alexanderplatz in central Berlin. Sex worker activists are relieved to have made it without further interruptions and to hear that the group of anti-prostitution protestors has left. As the march disperses, activists nevertheless enter the underground rail in small groups to not let anyone go home alone. The day's events are followed by a public apology to sex workers and trans people which the march organizers issue a week later:

We consider the presentation of content hostile to trans* people and sex workers at the demonstration as a form of group-focused enmity [*gruppenbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit*] which crosses the boundaries of our plurality. For these groups of people, displaying such signs is not only a provocation, it also threatens their safety. The demonstration on International Women's Day must also be a safe(r) space for them. (...) Unfortunately, we have not been able to enforce this in all cases. (...) We very much regret that the confrontation between queer feminist groups and provocateurs led to physical violence. We condemn and distance ourselves from any form of physical violence. We wish for a non-violent demonstration and a respectful coexistence. (Frauen*kampftagbündnis, 2020b)

The feminist alliance thus denounces the hostility shown against sex worker activists and trans activists during the march, regrets it could not ensure their safety, and condemns the physical altercation which occurred.

I trace the events on the 8th of March 2020 in Berlin in such detail because they contain elements which are both exceptional and exemplary for the experiences of sex worker activists within the feminist movement arena. The march was exceptional in so far as it is the only mainstream feminist event I am aware of which explicitly declared its solidarity with sex workers beforehand, demonstrated awareness of the threat that hostilities pose to their political participation and safety in practice, and showed accountability for harmful incidents which occurred. Although solidarity with marginalized groups, their consideration in safe(r) spaces, and the denunciation of discrimination should not require special acclaim within feminist movements, they are rare in the case of sex work. To be sure, many of the sex worker movement's positions are backed by feminist organizations such as the German Women Lawyers Association and the German Women's Council, both of which have repeatedly published critiques of the Prostitute Protection Act and client criminalization (Deutsche Aidshilfe et al., 2019; Deutscher Juristinnenbund, 2015; Deutscher Juristinnenbund et al., 2015). Moreover, sex worker activists receive support from individual feminist journalists and

publicists, Marxist feminist groups such as the “Care Revolution Network”, or the Berlin-based queer feminist collective “What the fuck!” which organizes for sexual and bodily self-determination. Lena, an activist of What the fuck! explains that “there wasn’t really a big controversy”³³⁶ on sex work within the collective:

We are a queer feminist alliance that advocates for people to be able to decide for themselves how they live their lives, with whom they live it, in what forms, and how they handle their bodies within that framework, and for us that also means of course being in solidarity with sex workers who are repeatedly discriminated against and marginalized because of their professional position.³³⁷

The queer feminist collective’s expression of solidarity and consensus on the inclusion of sex workers in feminist politics is however not the norm for sex worker activists: social worker Sonja states she found the position of What the Fuck! “really surprising” because “it’s just not the typical experience of sex work activism in feminism at all.”³³⁸ Sex worker activist Melanie recognizes particularly queer and sex-positive feminists who “stand up for sex workers, or at least don’t reject them,”³³⁹ but considers their support a “tender sapling” (*zarte Pflanze*). Equally judging the scope of these alliances as limited is feminist activist Valentina, who claims that “the fact that individual feminist networks or groups (...) are positioning themselves so clearly is still far too little.”³⁴⁰ For sex worker activist Scarlet, these feminist actors are vital, “yet not present in the same way”³⁴¹ as anti-prostitution campaigners are within the feminist movement arena.

On the contrary, sex worker activists claim they regularly face silence on the issue of sex work and a lack of solidarity by feminist groups. Dilan finds “that in many feminist groups ... often the experience is disappointing because you don’t get any solidarity.”³⁴² Instead, other elements of the described March 8th demonstration are exemplary for sex worker activists’ experiences: uncertainty over inclusion and solidarity, feelings of unsafety, and hostilities by anti-prostitution campaigners. As shown during the 8th of March demonstration, these experiences persist even in the few contexts which are explicitly welcoming to sex worker

³³⁶ „(...) so eine große Kontroverse gab es gar nicht.“ (Lena)

³³⁷ „Wir sind ein queer feministisches Bündnis, was sich dafür einsetzt, dass Menschen selbst entscheiden können, wie sie ihr Leben leben, mit wem sie das leben, in welcher Formen, und wie sie über ihren Körper in dem Rahmen entscheiden, und das bedeutet für uns auch natürlich solidarisch mit Sexarbeiterinnen zu sein, die immer wieder diskriminiert und marginalisiert werden aufgrund ihrer beruflichen Position. Das heißt so eine große Kontroverse gab es gar nicht.“ (Lena)

³³⁸ „(...) krass überraschend (...) es ist halt überhaupt nicht die typische Erfahrung von Sexarbeitsaktivismus im Feminismus.“ (Sonja)

³³⁹ „(...) für Sexarbeitende einsetzen oder zumindest nicht ablehnen.“ (Melanie)

³⁴⁰ „(...) dass da doch auch einzelne feministische Netzwerke oder Gruppierungen (...) sich so klar positionieren, ist noch viel zu wenig.“ (Valentina)

³⁴¹ „(...) aber eben nicht in dieser Weise präsent sind (...)“ (Scarlet)

³⁴² „Ich finde, dass in vielen feministischen Gruppen... da man häufig eine Enttäuschung erlebt, dass da keine Solidarität kommt.“ (Dilan)

activists. In other contexts, Scarlet sees a clear preferential treatment of anti-prostitution campaigners by a “mainstream feminism, which unfortunately is not very reflective.”³⁴³ In other cases again, feminist actors’ widespread silence on sex work and their declared impartiality on the matter indirectly amplifies the hegemonic position of anti-prostitution campaigners within these movement arenas: activists report frequently dealing with feminist actors who treat sex work as a “side issue” (*Randthema*), claim to “have no opinion” (*haben keine Meinung dazu*), or state they “want to listen to both sides” (*beide Seiten anhören wollen*). While for activists, the first two positions reflect ignorance and avoidance, they experience the third as particularly problematic. In an attempt to educate themselves and formulate a position on sex work, feminist actors regularly expect sex worker activists to participate in events that confront them with anti-prostitution campaigners. According to Scarlet, this reveals their stated neutrality on sex work as false:

People are not neutral in this matter. They can say that. But the moment they invite people from the abolitionist wing [anti-prostitution campaigners] and offer them a forum, it is already a positioning in my eyes.³⁴⁴

According to Scarlet, offering space to anti-prostitution campaigners within feminist movement contexts inevitably entails means condoning – or supporting – their positions and actions.

In addition, activists condemn the general equation of sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners in the feminist movement arena. Feminist activist Valentina likens this false equivalency to the equation of right-wing and left-wing politics within the “horse shoe theory” (*Hufeisentheorie*). According to this prominent but disputed political theory, the political spectrum is shaped like a horse shoe, with positions titled “moderate” and democratic lying in the middle and positions titled “extremist” and undemocratic extending to the left and right, where they approximate each other at the horse shoe’s opening. From this perspective, sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners “are somehow all accepted as equal” because other feminist actors “don’t want to be so extreme” in their position on sex work, Valentina claims:

³⁴³ „(...) Mainstream Feminismus, der leider nicht besonders reflektiert (...)“ (Scarlet)

³⁴⁴ „(...) die Leute sind in dieser Sache nicht neutral. Das können die sagen. Aber in dem Moment, wo sie halt Leute aus dem abolitionistischen Flügel einladen und denen ein Forum bieten, ist es schon eine Positionierung in meinen Augen.“ (Scarlet)

[They claim] we are just as extremist as the others. 'If you were a little more understanding, then the others could also be a little more understanding. And actually, if you don't want to talk to each other, then don't demand a solution.' No! This is not the way to achieve labour protection and self-determination, by listening to people and accommodating those who want to curtail my rights! That's like me having to talk to the Pope about abortion and having to understand him! No! There's no way!³⁴⁵

In her opinion, sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners are fundamentally different, since the former organize for human and labour rights, while the latter seek to undermine those rights. Just like contestations around reproductive justice should not accommodate religious positions, she asserts that political struggles for sex workers' rights should not accommodate anti-prostitution positions. For Valentina, feminist actors declaring "we have to accept and put up with all opinions" on sex work therefore exhibit a "misunderstanding of diversity."³⁴⁶ Moreover, their expectation that sex worker activists should openly deliberate with anti-prostitution campaigners shows a lacking understanding of the unethical nature of these encounters, social worker Sonja stresses:

I think it's exactly the same as when, I don't know, Black or people of colour or migrants are expected to discuss on a podium with the AfD [Alternative for Germany]. So for me it's exactly the same thing (...) I think there is a complete lack of awareness that this is not possible!³⁴⁷

Sonja likens expectations for such encounters to the idea of racialized people and migrants having to publicly debate right-wing parties who are hostile against them and negate their human rights. Accordingly, she refuses to partake in confrontations in which sex workers are forced to "discuss [their] own existence (...) in such a pro contra way."³⁴⁸ For Sonja,

That's simply an unacceptable level. (...) I won't discuss that at all! And if that is not somehow clear and consensus, then we won't go there anymore.³⁴⁹

For Sonja, debates which fail to acknowledge sex workers' right to existence and entitlement to human rights lack the minimal common ground on which political interaction can take

³⁴⁵ „Wir sind genauso extremistisch wie die anderen. ‚Seid ihr doch mal ein bisschen verständnisvoller, dann könnten die anderen auch mal ein bisschen verständnisvoller sein. Und eigentlich, wenn ihr nicht miteinander reden wollt, dann dürft ihr auch nicht verlangen, dass wir eine Lösung finden. Nein! Das ist nicht der Weg zu Arbeitsschutz und Selbstbestimmung zu kommen, indem ich Menschen zuhöre und denen entgegenkomme, die meine Freiheitsrechte beschneiden wollen! Das ist so, als müsste ich mit dem Papst über Abtreibung reden und ihn verstehen müssen! Nein! Da gibt's keinen Weg hin!“ (Valentina)

³⁴⁶ „(...) alle Meinungen müssen wir doch akzeptieren und aushalten (...) als Diversität missverstehen (...).“ (Valentina)

³⁴⁷ „Dann finde ich ist das halt genau so, wie wenn von, weiß ich nicht, Schwarzen oder POC Leuten oder migrantischen Leuten erwartet wird, dass sie halt auf einem Podium mit der AfD diskutieren. Also für mich ist das genau das Gleiche (...) ich finde da fehlt halt auch komplett das Bewusstsein, dass das nicht geht!“ (Sonja)

³⁴⁸ „(...) mit denen so pro contra die eigene Existenz diskutieren muss!“ (Sonja)

³⁴⁹ „Und das ist einfach ja überhaupt keine Ebene. (...) darüber diskutiere ich überhaupt nicht! Und wenn das nicht irgendwie klar ist und Konsens, dann kommen wir eben da nicht mehr hin.“ (Sonja)

place. As such, they should be avoided, although Sonja deplors this withdrawal from feminist spaces. “Actually, I wish it was different and that it would be completely self-evident that sex work is a feminist struggle and that we all agree on that,” she states with a sigh, “but even that is missing.”³⁵⁰ Feminist activist Belen believes that feminist actors should go beyond the recognition of sex work as a feminist concern, and make concerted efforts to reach out to sex workers in general:

(...) of course, sex workers have been personally but also collectively as a community, been literally beaten up by feminists for centuries, and (...) very, very rarely anyone has stood up for them, let alone seen them as political allies. Accordingly, I find it completely understandable that feminist activist groups first have to earn that, that sex workers are interested in working with them again, and especially in appearing somewhere publicly and coming out as sex workers.³⁵¹

Given the long history of hostility against sex workers and their marginalization as political actors within feminist movements, feminist actors should first regain sex worker activists’ trust, rather than simply expecting their participation within feminist movement spaces. Having examined the engagement of sex worker activists in the feminist movement arena, I focus on their contemporary relationship to a political actor which has in the past “stood up” for sex workers and formed political alliances with them: namely, social workers and the counselling centres which emerged out of the German whore movement.

8.3 “Our Political Task Is Still There” – The Limited Support of Counselling Centres

Social workers played a fundamental role in the emergence and development of the German whore movement (Heying, 2019). They formed part of the first self-help organizations for prostitutes established in the 1980s, and sex workers benefitted from the know-how, financial and moral support, and the “normalization” as public actors which these alliances brought to their movement. At the same time, this coalition was characterized by recurring contestations

³⁵⁰ „Eigentlich würde ich mir wünschen, es wäre anders und es wäre eigentlich völlig selbstverständlich, dass irgendwie Sexarbeit halt ein feministischer Kampf ist und wir da irgendwie uns alle einig sind. Aber selbst da fehlt's halt.“ (Sonja)

³⁵¹ „(...) dass Sexarbeiterinnen natürlich persönlich aber auch kollektiv als Community, also wortwörtlich jahrhundertlang von Feministinnen fertig gemacht wurden und ganz, ganz selten man sich für sie eingesetzt hat, geschweige denn sie als politische Bündnispartner gesehen hat. Dementsprechend ich es völlig nachvollziehbar finde, dass feministische aktivistische Gruppen sich das erstmal auch verdienen müssen, dass Sexarbeiterinnen wieder Interesse haben, mit ihnen zu arbeiten, und insbesondere irgendwo öffentlich aufzutreten und sich als Sexarbeiterinnen zu outen.“ (Belen)

over political self-representation and the distribution of resources (e.g. paid job positions) within the emerging counselling centres.³⁵²

In light of the historical significance of this coalition, I sought to ascertain the nature of the relationship between counselling centres and the sex worker activists organizing from 2013 on. Heying (2019) documents how the whore movement dissipated after the adoption of the Prostitution Act in 2001, and how the self-help projects institutionalized themselves into state-funded counselling centres which focused on service provision rather than political mobilization. While the author attests an accompanying depoliticization, my data reveals that these counselling centres fulfilled an important political function for the self-organization of sex workers from 2013 on: exactly because of their institutionalization, these counselling centres could provide enduring structures and resources for the renewed politicization and mobilization of sex workers.

The groundwork for these processes was laid at a time when sex worker mobilizations went through a phase of abeyance: in 2009, a group of ten counselling centres formed “bufas” (*Bündnis der Fachberatungsstellen für Sexarbeiterinnen und Sexarbeiter*), the Alliance of the Counselling Centres for Sex Workers in Germany. Bufas constituted itself in order to “add weight to the demands [of the whore movement] and to show that there is a movement reaching into all parts of society” (bufas, n.d.). To this end, bufas explicitly demands “professional and cultural education for sex workers,” raises “awareness for the concerns of sex workers in politics, administration and the general public” (bufas, n.d.), and promotes sex workers’ self-organization. Sex workers also constitute members of bufas’ advisory board. These characteristics distinguish the today 33 members of bufas from other counselling centres for sex workers which operate from an anti-prostitution perspective.

The Bochum-based counselling centre “Madonna” founded in 1991 was one of the bufas members which contributed to the emergence of sex workers’ self-organization. In 2012, Madonna held a conference in celebration of its 20th anniversary. This event provided space for sex workers from across Germany to congregate in specific “sex worker only” meetings.

³⁵² Due to their significant role in sex workers’ self-organization, I here address only counselling centres which emerged out of the German whore movement and are specifically servicing sex workers. It is however important to note that sex worker activists have received support from social workers, counselling centres, and associations operating in other welfare sectors: specifically, the various institutions of the German AIDS Foundation provide funding for sex workers’ counselling centres and political organizing events such as the whore congresses. In addition, anti-human trafficking organizations such as the Berlin-based “Ban Ying” or the German Network against Trafficking in Human Beings (Bundesweiter Koordinierungskreis gegen Menschenhandel), have been vocal critics of the Prostitute Protection Act (KOK, 2016; Riedemann, 2017).

According to sex worker activists, the idea to found an association for sex workers emanated directly from these meetings, and was reinforced at another event shortly after: the “Frankfurter Prostitutionstage” (Frankfurt Prostitution Days) hosted by the Association for the Social and Political Rights of Prostitutes “Doña Carmen” (itself not a bufas member). Both these events provided spaces for sex workers to assemble and deliberate, and thus constituted a crucial base to their politicization and self-organization.

The processes initiated at these meetings in 2012 eventually culminated into the foundation of BesD in 2013. Bufas itself welcomed this development, explains social worker Ruth who worked at one of bufas’ counselling centres for more than 14 years: “the counselling centres were very relieved that, finally, sex workers were speaking out politically again (...) [and] relieved that others could now take over the lead.”³⁵³ Bufas thus recognized the importance of sex workers’ political participation and the primacy of their self-representation in prostitution politics. Bufas and BesD then collaborated closely, for instance through two sex work congresses co-organised in 2014 and 2016. These congresses were created because both organizations “saw a great need for factual information about sex work” and found that the plans for the Prostitute Protection Act “unfortunately missed the reality of life in the [sex] industry completely” (BesD, 2014b). In conversation with researchers and politicians, bufas and BesD sought to develop “concrete measures to improve working conditions in sex work,” which should constitute “a basis for political decision-making” (BesD, 2014b). Bufas also consistently criticised the planned Prostitute Protection Act and the growing debates around client criminalization (bufas, 2015, 2017, 2020).

Several interviewees report that the congresses and the work of counselling centres like Madonna and Hydra (which mobilized politically interested sex workers through its regular information events and meet-ups) were crucial to their own politicisation. Yet, sex worker activists’ relationship to social workers and counselling centres is more complex. In general, activists express great appreciation for the primacy given to service provision, which often exceeds social workers’ job capacities:

³⁵³ „Die Beratungsstellen waren sehr erleichtert, dass es endlich wieder Sexarbeiterinnen gab, die sich politisch äußerten (...), erleichtert, dass jetzt mal andere das Heft übernehmen konnten.“ (Ruth)

(...) a lot of people who work at Hydra, they really work so hard and so many do overtime and so many on the board, the people, they also do a lot of work on a voluntary basis, which I think is really, really great and very much appreciated.³⁵⁴ (Dan)

Like Dan, it is especially migrant activists who emphasize the value of counselling centres which are often missing in other legal or geographical contexts. As Clio stresses, “not every city has something like Hydra Café where they [sex workers] can just go and hang out and meet people and get information. I think that’s actually really quite rare.” Here, the boundaries between service provision and politicization can be blurred and porous: Liljana first received help with immigration issues from social workers at Hydra who then connected her with activists of trans*Sexwork, the project she is now organizing with. Thus, counselling centres’ service provision and support for self-organization can overlap. The appreciation felt towards counselling centres also coexists with some activists’ experiences of stigmatizing, “patronizing” (*bevormundend*) or “infantilizing” (*infantilisierend*) treatment by individual social workers. The contestations over political self-representation and agency which Heying (2019) identified in the German whore movement thus persist in the relationship between counselling centres and the current sex worker movement. Moreover, Ruth finds that counselling centres neglected their own political function while welcoming and supporting sex workers’ self-organization:

(...) they also failed to say, ‘no, our political task is still there’. And it [sex workers’ self-organization] also backfired for the movement, because then the argument came, ‘yes, you can speak well for yourselves, but actually you are super privileged. You belong to that one per cent (*laughs*) who does it voluntarily and the poor women, migrants, women in precarious situations, you don’t represent them at all.’³⁵⁵

According to Ruth, the counselling centres should have taken a political stance when the self-organizing sex worker activists were accused of being a well-spoken, privileged, and politically unrepresentative minority. Here, counselling centres could have used their expertise to counter the delegitimization of activists, the victimisation of precarious sex workers, and the division between these groups, Ruth claims:

³⁵⁴ „(...) viele Leute, die bei Hydra arbeiten, die arbeiten wirklich so hart und so viele machen Überstunden und so viele im Vorstand, die Leute, die machen auch ehrenamtlich sehr viel Arbeit, was ich wirklich sehr, sehr toll finde und sehr schätze ist.“ (Dan)

³⁵⁵ „(...) sie haben dann auch verpasst zu sagen, 'Nee, unsere politische Aufgabe ist nach wie vor da', und es ist ja auch der Bewegung auf die Füße gefallen, weil dann kam das Argument, 'ja, ihr könnt gut für euch reden, aber eigentlich seid ihr super privilegiert. Ihr gehört zu diesem einen Prozent, (lacht) die es freiwillig machen und die armen Frauen, Migrantinnen, Frauen aus prekären Situationen, die vertreten ihr gar nicht'.“ (Ruth)

The counselling centres should have continued to be there, to be present and say, 'they [precarious women] come to the counselling centres, and they know the sex worker [activist]s too. But it's not their job to sit there and help them, it's their job to establish something like a lobby. But we can say something about the women who are in precarious situations, because they also make decisions and are actually aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it.'³⁵⁶

While assigning the task of political self-representation to sex worker activists, counselling centres should have promoted the interests of precarious migrant sex workers. Without them stepping into this role, anti-prostitution campaigners instead claimed advocacy for these groups. Generally, Ruth finds that counselling centres' role exceeds the support of sex workers' self-organization against repression and criminalization:

It is always seen as a support, that we are the ones who support the sex workers in their struggle for professional recognition or social recognition. But I also think that other activists and groups should have a great interest in making sure that this turnaround doesn't happen.³⁵⁷

From this perspective, counselling centres share a broader political interest with sex worker activists, rather than functioning as a merely supportive coalition partner. Here, Ruth invokes the wider social and political commitment of social work. Yet, like many other interviewees, she observes and criticises the increasing depoliticization of social work in state-funded counselling centres where monetary and staff resources are firmly allocated to service provision and the implementation of legal provisions. In her opinion, this limits counselling centres' capacity to initiate and accompany transformative political processes. In order to maintain state funding, counselling centres have adopted and maintained politically established discourses according to which sex workers are in need of protection, Ruth says:

You are eligible for funding if you pursue social goals that are seen as politically legitimate. And counselling centres have increasingly articulated that women in sex work need help. And money was granted when it was about preventing epidemics and when it was about promoting exit [from sex work].³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ „Da hätten eigentlich die Beratungsstellen weiter da sein müssen, präsent sein müssen und sagen, 'In die Beratungsstellen kommen die, und die Sexarbeiterin kennen die ja auch. Aber die haben ja nicht die Aufgabe, da zu sitzen und denen zu helfen, sondern sie haben die Aufgabe, so etwas wie eine Interessenvertretung zu gründen. Aber wir können was aussagen über die Frauen, die in prekären Situationen sind, nämlich auch die fällen Entscheidungen und sind schon sich bewusst dessen, was sie tun und warum sie es tun.'“ (Ruth)

³⁵⁷ „Es wird immer so gesehen, als so ein Support, also dass wir diejenigen sind, die die Sexarbeiterinnen dann unterstützen in ihrem Kampf um berufliche Anerkennung oder gesellschaftliche Anerkennung. Ich denke aber auch, dass andere Aktivisten und Gruppen großes Interesse daran haben müssten, dass diese Kehrtwende nicht eintritt.“ (Ruth)

³⁵⁸ „Förderungswürdig ist man, wenn man gesellschaftliche Ziele, die politisch als legitim gesehen werden, verfolgt. Und die Beratungsstellen haben immer mehr formuliert, dass Frauen in der Sexarbeit Hilfe brauchen. Und Geld wurde gewährt, wenn es darum ging, Seuchen zu vermeiden, und wenn es darum ging, den Ausstieg zu fördern.“ (Ruth)

In Ruth's words, counselling centres' strategic focus on vulnerable sex workers could help attract much-needed funding, but perpetuated victimisation and narrowed the scope of services. Other activists equally consider the depoliticization of counselling centres to be a result of institutional constraints: according to sex worker activist Silke, social workers are unable to publicly criticize the direction of counselling centres because they "fear for their jobs when they open their mouths and take a stance against their employers."³⁵⁹ Over the course of my research, I regularly heard social workers in both state and church-funded counselling centres disclose that their employers ban them from expressing themselves politically, and even set up institutional control mechanisms. Social worker Sonja, however, disagrees with the generalized criticism that state-funding has a depoliticizing effect. She emphasizes that counselling centres like Hydra manage the delicate balance between allocating state-funding and maintaining critical stances:

Of course, it's always a fine line, isn't it? Like, does one then become part of the system? (*laughs*) And how can you still fight against the system if you are part of it? (...) And I think you have to look at the details, what is being done, who is being supported, who is getting the money? And if, for example, something like the café is being set up at Hydra, where mainly sex workers work, (...) where a community is simply being created, then I think to myself, why should anyone else get this money? (*laughs*) (...) And of course there is a kind of dependency, because of course we have to close up shop as soon as the Berlin Senate says we no longer give funding. But that doesn't mean, and it never did, that Hydra, for example, never contradicts any government action in Berlin.³⁶⁰

In Sonja's view, prioritizing the remuneration of sex workers and facilitating community building allows counselling centres to retain political agency within a constrained institutional context.

Interviewees however agree that the Prostitute Protection Act has further exacerbated counselling centres' inability to engage in political work and build coalitions with sex worker activists. According to Ruth, the implementation of the Prostitute Protection Act required the creation of new counselling centres and the hiring of new social workers, both of which lack the political history of the first bufas members. Moreover, counselling centres face an

³⁵⁹ „(...) haben Angst um ihre Jobs, wenn sie den Mund aufmachen, gegen den Arbeitgeber Position beziehen (...)“ (Silke)

³⁶⁰ „Natürlich ist das dann immer ein schmaler Grad, so ne? Mit, wird man dann Teil des Systems? (*lacht*) Und wie kann man noch gegen das System kämpfen, wenn man Teil des Systems ist? (...) Und ich glaube, da muss halt dann auch im Detail geguckt werden, was wird gemacht, wer wird unterstützt, wer bekommt diese Gelder? Und wenn z.B. bei Hydra sowas wie jetzt das Café aufgebaut wird, (...) wo einfach eine Community auch entsteht, dann denke ich mir, wieso sollte dieses Geld irgendjemand anders kriegen? (*lacht*) (...) Und natürlich besteht irgendwie eine Abhängigkeit, weil wir natürlich den Laden zumachen müssen, sobald der Berliner Senat sagt, wir geben keine Fördergelder mehr. Aber das heißt ja nicht, und das heißt es halt auch noch nie, dass deswegen z.B. Hydra niemals irgendwelchem Regierungshandeln in Berlin widerspricht.“ (Sonja)

overwhelming workload with the law's implementation and the increasing precarization among sex workers. As "the queues in front of the doors have become longer and the problems have also become more difficult,"³⁶¹ counselling centres "are all pretty much at the limit anyway"³⁶² and retain little capacities remain for political engagement according to Ruth. The undermining effect which the Prostitute Protection had on the coalition between counselling centres and sex worker activists is illustrated by the cancellation of the sex work congress which bufas and BesD planned for 2018: a year after the Prostitute Protection Act came into effect, its disorganized implementation consumed counselling centres' resources and bufas lacked the capacities for co-organizing the congress.

Moreover, counselling centres' executive function disrupted their relationship to the sex worker movement: according to activists, the very fact that counselling centres have to "make the women register"³⁶³ (Simone) in line with the Prostitute Protection Act "already puts them into conflict"³⁶⁴ (Kerstin) with sex worker activists who oppose the law. According to Ruth, the relationship between counselling centres and sex worker activists has thus "become a bit more distant"³⁶⁵ since the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act.

Sex worker activists also observe an increasing gap to the precarious sex workers which constitute counselling centres' main clientele. Simone, who is both a sex worker activist and social worker, struggles with the impossibility of politicising sex workers in the context of her counselling work:

I wouldn't see my work here at [counselling centre] as political work at all. (...) Here, I counsel women who are very poor, who prostitute themselves for very precarious reasons, who all rather hate the job, who are super embarrassed. Here, I rather have to tolerate not at all mentioning a job that I think is good.³⁶⁶

Although she sees the usefulness of "addressing poverty" through social work, Simone deplores the discrepancy between her own experience and that of the women she counsels. Rather than achieving financial stability, self-determination and self-realisation through sex work like many activists do, her counselling clients' experience is shaped by internalised

³⁶¹ „Die Schlangen vor den Türen sind größer geworden, und die Probleme sind auch schwieriger geworden.“

³⁶² „(...) sind eh alle (...) so ziemlich am Limit.“ (Ruth)

³⁶³ „(...) die Frauen zur Anmeldung bringen (...).“ (Simone)

³⁶⁴ „(...) da kommen sie da schon mal in Konflikt (...).“ (Kerstin)

³⁶⁵ „(...) ist ein bisschen auseinander gegangen (...).“ (Ruth)

³⁶⁶ „(...) als politische Arbeit würde ich meine Arbeit hier bei [Beratungsstelle] überhaupt nicht sehen. (...) Ich berate hier Frauen, die sehr arm sind, die aus ganz prekären Gründen anschaffen, die den Job alle eher hassen, denen das super peinlich ist. Ich muss das eher aushalten, einen Beruf, den ich gut finde, auch hier überhaupt nicht zur Sprache zu bringen.“ (Simone)

stigma, precarity and the intersecting subjection to repressive welfare, migration, and prostitution regimes. In the context of counselling centres, sex worker activists thus found themselves increasingly unable to bridge between the differing subjectivities formed by these conditions. In the next chapter, I demonstrate how union organizing presented an alternative route to mobilizing sex workers of various social locations, and one with which sex worker activists recently achieved some successes.

8.4 “A Ground-Breaking Effort” – The Long Struggle for Union Organizing

Labour issues are at the core of sex workers’ self-organization: activists base their demands for recognition and rights on the framing of sex work as work, and advocate for its destigmatization and normalization in line with other professions. In light of this, it is striking that workplace organizing of sex workers and coalitions with labour unions have long remained rudimentary in Germany.

The first attempts at unionizing sex workers were undertaken after the adoption of the Prostitution Act in 2001, which rendered employment relationships in the sex industry legally possible. On this basis, the German United Services Trade Union “ver.di” (*vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft*), which constitutes the 2nd largest labour union in Germany, attempted organizing sex workers. It did so in its division for “special services” (*besondere Dienstleistungen*) which encompasses other industries characterized by flexibilization and precarious (bogus) self-employment, such as security, call centre or subcontracted workers. Under the leadership of trade unionist Emilija Mitrović, ver.di conducted a qualitative study on the “workplace prostitution” (*Arbeitsplatz Prostitution*), proposed to negotiate standardized employment contracts with venue operators, campaigned for the recognition of sex work as a profession, and understood sex workers as “acting subjects” whose labour rights should be guaranteed regardless of their migration status (Mitrović, 2006, 2007). This is particularly noteworthy because ver.di did so at a time when public discourses were beginning to shift, and sex work was increasingly conflated with human trafficking and violence. To Gall (2007), these unionization efforts reflected sex worker movements’ incipient turn from a focus on civil and political rights towards economic and labour rights. At that time, he considered Germany as one of the most progressed cases of sex worker unionization in the Global North. However, ver.di’s endeavours failed as only few sex workers joined the

union, and sex worker unionization in Germany did not develop beyond the “fragile and embryonic phenomenon” (Gall, 2007, p. 70) the author identified.

Although most of my interviewees did not form part of ver.di’s organizing efforts, they offered explanations to my probing questions on the absence of sex worker unionization in Germany. One of these was that sex worker unionization was a theoretically fruitful approach, yet unattainable in practice: Nicky believes that bringing sex workers into standardized employment was “not such an absurd idea” since it would have “partly addressed such problems as lacking health insurance and social security in general, old-age poverty, the whole spectrum that is so rampant in sex work.”³⁶⁷ Yet, standardized employment relationships were ill-suited to satisfy other needs and interest which many sex workers have, Nicky argues. In her view, unionist Mitrović

(...) underestimated how freedom-loving [sex workers are]. So sex work has historically been a melting point for fallen girls, women who don’t want to submit to other things, like marriage or even a steady job, myself included. So it was presumptuous to think that she would get whores into an employment contract.³⁶⁸

According to Nicky, sex workers commonly prioritize freedom and self-determination over social security. They feared that standardized employment contracts would conflict with these values, as well as interfere with job flexibility, anonymity and the comparably high income levels sex workers found in an industry characterized by self-employment. After Mitrović’s approach had failed, neither ver.di nor the sex worker activists who began self-organizing within BesD from 2013 on made renewed attempts at unionization. “We had so many other things to do that this petered out on our side, too,”³⁶⁹ Melanie explains. Preventing repressive legislation took primacy over union organizing.

In the years leading up to the Prostitute Protection Act, activists then observed a change in ver.di’s attitude towards sex work. This is illustrated by two documents which the labour union issued over the course of little more than a year: in June 2014, ver.di contributed a statement to the first official hearing on the planned Prostitute Protection Act. In this, ver.di demanded basic rights for all sex workers, confirmed its commitment to “the path of

³⁶⁷ „(...) was dann solche Probleme wie keine Krankenversicherung und generell Sozialversicherung, Altersarmut, das ganze Spektrum, was in der Sexarbeit so grassiert, teilweise auch aufgefangen hätte. Also es ist gar kein so ganz bekloppter Ansatz.“ (Nicky)

³⁶⁸ „Aber sie hat unterschätzt, wie freiheitsliebend (...) (lacht) Also Sexarbeit ist historisch ein Sammelbecken für gefallene Mädchen, also Frauen, die sich den anderen Dingen nicht unterwerfen wollen, wie Ehe oder auch ein festes Arbeitsverhältnis, mich eingeschlossen. Also war es vermessen zu glauben, dass sie die Huren in einen Arbeitsvertrag rein kriegt.“ (Nicky)

³⁶⁹ „(...) wir hatten dann auch so viel anderes zu tun, dass es bei uns auch eingeschlafen ist.“ (Melanie)

‘normalisation’ of employment relationships in the sector” and strongly warned against the stigmatization, repression and illegalization of sex workers (ver.di, 2014). In September 2015, ver.di then submitted another statement in response to the first legal draft (ver.di, 2015). Here, ver.di seemed to increasingly agree with the law’s intention to combat crime in the sex industry, and addressed the topics of “poverty prostitution” (*Armutsprostitution*) and human trafficking at length, framing them as threats to “human dignity”. Furthermore, ver.di now formulated separate viewpoints on sex work: on the one hand, the labour union claimed to discuss the issue from the “perspective of the members concerned, who are either in the role of employee or self-employed” (ver.di, 2015). On the other hand, ver.di declared to approach the issue of sex work “from a women’s rights and socio-political perspective” (ver.di, 2015). Framing these perspectives as separate from one another, ver.di now distinguished between the perspectives and needs of “sex workers, prostitutes, occasional prostitutes and poverty prostitutes” (ver.di, 2015). Through this, the labour union created an unprecedented and unspecified categorization of subgroups within the sex industry. Despite acknowledging the lack of reliable quantitative data on the sex industry, ver.di claimed to be “well aware that the overwhelming majority of people working in prostitution does not belong to the group who pursues this occupation in a self-determined and independent manner” (ver.di, 2015). In the declared interest of “poverty prostitutes” (*Armutsp Prostituierete*), ver.di expressed its support for the compulsory registration, mandatory health counselling, and minimum age of 21 for sex workers, and demanded high fines for violations by venue operators (ver.di, 2015). Overall, ver.di’s statements mirrored a turn from an integrative to a restrictive and repressive approach to sex work.

Sex worker activists were bewildered by this shift in ver.di’s positioning, which integrated aspects of anti-prostitution rhetoric and supported measures that activists criticized as discriminatory and stigmatizing. To them, ver.di’s 2015 statement marked an abandoning of solidarity with sex workers’ political struggles: in Melanie’s view, the statement read “as if our own union wants to abolish our profession.”³⁷⁰ While Melanie states that she could not immediately identify the underlying causes, activists now relate this shift to Leni Breymaier’s engagement within the labour union. From 2007 to 2016, Breymaier functioned as ver.di’s regional director in the state of Baden-Württemberg before becoming a member of

³⁷⁰ „(...) als ob unsere eigene Gewerkschaft unseren Berufsstand abschaffen will.“ (Melanie)

parliament in 2017. During this time, Melanie claims, Breymaier became the “self-appointed coordinator for prostitution at ver.di.”³⁷¹ Hearing about the politician for the first time after ver.di had issued its 2015 statement, Melanie now finds the document “clearly carries Leni Breymaier’s mark.”³⁷² Other activists go even further in their assessment of Breymaier’s anti-prostitution activities within ver.di: the activist group SWAG alleges that Breymaier “made sure that the union would not admit sex workers and organised an internal group with the aim of ‘abolishing’ sex work”³⁷³ during her time at ver.di. In activists’ perspective, Breymaier’s influence within ver.di thus explains its shifted positioning.

Ver.di’s 2015 statement and the influential role of Breymaier disqualified the labour union as a political coalition partner to sex worker activists in the crucial years of the legislative process. Moreover, Breymaier’s membership in ver.di continues to deter sex workers from affiliation with the union: “Under Leni Breymaier, it was practically impossible to do anything official with ver.di,” Nicky tells, “and as long as Breymaier is in ver.di, whores don’t want to join either.”³⁷⁴ In Nicky’s view, “individual actors” (*Einzelakteure*) such as Breymaier strongly determine sex worker activists’ relationship to ver.di. This also signifies that new opportunities for coalition building with ver.di have emerged since Breymaier has left her position to join the German parliament in 2017. “This means, they are actually open to us again. Slowly, communication is picking up again,”³⁷⁵ Nicky summarizes sex worker activists’ current relationship to ver.di.

Ver.di was not the only labour union which tried organizing sex workers in Germany. The anarcho-syndicalist grassroots union FAU (*Freie Arbeiterinnen- und Arbeiter-Union*, part of the German Free Workers’ Union federation) began engaging with the issue of sex work in the early 2000s. This engagement is illustrated in an issue of FAU’s magazine “Direkte Aktion” published in 2011 (FAU, 2011). In this, the union reviewed sex worker movements’ historical struggles for workers’ rights, contextualized sex work in “a precarized and globalized working world” (Marcks, 2011), and discussed scandalized media reporting. At the same time, the magazine reiterated unsubstantiated figures on the number of sex workers in Germany and

³⁷¹ „(...) bei ver.di selbsternannte Zuständige für Prostitution (...)“ (Melanie)

³⁷² „(...) das war natürlich die Handschrift von Leni Breymaier.“ (Melanie)

³⁷³ „(...) sorgte sie dafür, dass die Gewerkschaft keine Sexarbeitenden zuließe und organisierte eine interne Gruppe mit dem Ziel Sexarbeit ,abzuschaffen.““ (SWAG tweet May 31st, 2021)

³⁷⁴ „Das war unter Leni Breymaier praktisch nicht möglich, da irgendwie offiziell mit ver.di irgendwas zu machen. Und solange eine Breymaier bei ver.di sitzt, wollen die Huren sich auch nicht (...)“ (Nicky)

³⁷⁵ „(...) das heißt, die sind eigentlich auch wieder offen uns gegenüber. So langsam kommt auch wieder Kommunikation in Gang.“ (Nicky)

presumed a rise following the Prostitution Act of 2001, which it falsely designated as a form of “decriminalization”. Other text passages reveal the impact of anti-prostitution rhetoric and shifting discourses on sex work, as when authors state that “sex work finds its most blatant expression in the form of human trafficking and forced prostitution, which have experienced a significant increase in times of globalization” (Marcks, 2011).

Beyond its conceptual engagement with sex work, FAU sought to establish contact to sex workers in practice. The union’s Berlin chapter, for instance, attempted to reach out to Eastern European migrant sex workers in the city through the help of interpreters. Yet, these attempts were rapidly stifled by practical constraints, explains FAU Berlin member Miriam. Meeting with migrant sex workers in Berlin, Miriam claims the labour union

(...) quickly realised that we were encountering structures that are beyond self-organization in the field of workers’ rights, that are actually criminal and mafia-like structures that cannot be covered by mere trade union work. So, where it’s actually about something like deprivation of liberty, human trafficking, bodily harm and so on and so forth.³⁷⁶

In Miriam’s experience, the living and working conditions of the contacted migrant sex workers were characterized by vulnerability to coercion and violence – issues that FAU was unable to address directly through unionization. In addition, Miriam found that the concerned migrant sex workers explicitly refused to organize:

Apart from this, the women – exclusively women – did not really want to organise themselves, primarily out of fear, they also articulated this very clearly. This was an area of sex work that was not very self-determined, where the women themselves could not decide on their working conditions, and where it was not always clear how voluntarily they were in Germany.³⁷⁷

Low levels of self-determination in sex work and fear of political self-organization thus further impeded FAU’s efforts. As a result of these first experiences, FAU Berlin quickly abandoned its attempt at organizing sex workers, Miriam explains.

The union then saw renewed potential for unionization of sex workers only after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016. In order to inform sex workers on the law,

³⁷⁶ „(...) haben dann relativ schnell festgestellt, dass wir da auf Strukturen stoßen, die jenseits von Selbstorganisation im Bereich von Arbeitnehmerinnenrechten liegen, nämlich die halt eher so tatsächlich kriminelle und mafiöse Strukturen sind und die halt mit so ner reinen Gewerkschaftsarbeit auch gar nicht abzudecken sind. Also wo’s halt um, tatsächlich, so was wie Freiheitsentzug, Menschenhandel, Körperverletzung und so weiter und so fort geht.“ (Miriam)

³⁷⁷ „Abgesehen davon, dass es auch tatsächlich so war, dass die Frauen, es waren ausschließlich Frauen, sich eigentlich nicht organisieren wollten, aus Angst in erster Linie, das haben die auch so ganz klar artikuliert. Das war ein Bereich von Sexwork, der eben wenig selbstbestimmt war, wo die Frauen nicht selbst über ihre Arbeitsbedingungen entscheiden konnten und, wo auch immer nicht ganz klar war, wie freiwillig sind die überhaupt in Deutschland.“ (Miriam)

individual sex worker members of FAU Berlin and the Dresden-based initiative Sex Workers Solidarity created information materials and events (FAU Berlin, 2018). Yet, FAU's hope that these might kick-start a broader unionization of sex workers was dashed by low attendance rates. The grassroots "trade union approach" which Sex Workers Solidarity pursued also ended with the dissolution of the initiative in 2018 – only a year after its foundation (Sex Workers Solidarity, 2018). Further obstacles to sex worker unionization were presented by the union's anarcho-syndicalist approach which necessitates the collective self-organization of workers as a precondition to unionization. Given that only few sex workers had attended FAU's events, its efforts again came to a halt: "Because we simply assume that people will come to us and organise with us, [and] if this first step doesn't happen, then we don't do any organising," Miriam subsumes. Because FAU Berlin rules out cooperation with employers and business owners, a coalition with BesD was impossible in Miriam's view, since the association includes sex workers who run their own venues. FAU therefore precluded an affiliation with the predominant manifestation of sex workers' self-organization from 2013 on.³⁷⁸ BesD itself prioritized unionization with ver.di, which occupies a much more influential political position within the German trade union system. According to Melanie,

The federal government will only hear statements by ver.di. (...) And that's why it's politically smart to keep all doors open, of course, but also to work with the biggest trade union, which is also responsible for us.³⁷⁹

In comparison to ver.di, FAU offered little resources for institutional intervention to the sex worker activists who organized within BesD.

Despite these difficulties, both FAU and sex worker activists continued to share a "great interest" (*großes Interesse*) in unionizing, Miriam claims. Yet, both political actors continued to grapple with the politics of sex worker unionization. On the one hand, FAU's theoretical and practical engagement with sex work exhibit inexperience, conceptual blurring, and political discomforts. These also emerge from my interview with Miriam, who admits that FAU lacks knowledge on the diverse legal, social and economic conditions of sex workers. At the same time, Miriam separates the political recognition of sex work from its practical organization as a form of labour:

³⁷⁸ The only case of workplace organizing among sex workers in the time span covered by my research is the Berlin Strippers Collective, which emerged directly out of an organization of workers who sought to strengthen their bargaining power vis-à-vis strip club managers. However, my data does not indicate that the collective attempted to unionize with FAU after its foundation.

³⁷⁹ „Stellungnahmen für die Bundesregierung wird nur von Ver.di angehört. (...) Und deshalb ist es politisch schlau, sich natürlich alle Türen offen zu halten, aber mit der größten Gewerkschaft auch zusammenzuarbeiten, die ja auch für uns zuständig ist.“ (Melanie)

With campaigns such as ‘sex work is work’, there is the problem that you can promote it as a slogan, but for a trade union it of course raises the question of what that means in practice. (...) there’s also the saying ‘all work is prostitution’, that’s true of course, but through the use of the body and how the body is used when working, this, I think, is somehow still a thing that has to function in a more self-determined way (...).³⁸⁰

As presented here, Miriam theorizes sex work as a form of labour drawing on the classic Marxist view of prostitution as a particular expression of the general condition of workers. Yet, she postulates that sex work necessitates a higher degree of self-determination in comparison to other forms of work due to the specific utilization of the worker’s body. In other words, what sets apart sex work from other forms of labour is not the general usage of the body, but its particular sexual one. This suggests that ideas of sexuality as a unique, personal, and private form of embodiment which is separate from the public sphere of work may still undergird labour union’s political unease with sex work, and constitute an impediment to sex worker unionization.

On the other hand, difficulties in coalition building with labour unions are exacerbated by the sex worker movement’s own ambiguous labour politics. Miriam observes a “slightly uncritical perspective on wage labour”³⁸¹ among sex worker activists who centre personal choice and pleasure in their activism. According to Miriam, this neglects other facets of sex work:

The problem, I find, is that when people so naively foreground this profession as something beautiful and something they have chosen for themselves, they forget that there are other sides to it. And I don’t think that’s entirely fair to people who are in situations where they suffer physically and psychologically and didn’t choose it themselves.³⁸²

In Miriam’s view, an uninformed liberal framing of sex work not only ignores structural conditions, but is also unethical towards sex workers with negative experiences and low levels of self-determination. Similar to ver.di’s 2015 statement, Miriam expresses a political distinction between different groups of sex workers whose needs and interests are positioned as antithetical.

³⁸⁰ „(...) bei so Kampagnen wie ‘Sexarbeit ist Arbeit’ ist natürlich das Problem, als Slogan kann man das vertreten, aber für ne Gewerkschaft stellt sich natürlich die Frage, was bedeutet das praktisch. (...) es gibt ja auch den Spruch ‘Jede Arbeit ist Prostitution’, das stimmt natürlich, aber über den Einsatz des Körpers und wie der Körper beim Arbeiten eingesetzt wird, das, find ich, ist schon noch irgendwie ne Sache, die selbstbestimmter funktionieren muss (...).“ (Miriam)

³⁸¹ „(...) ne bisschen unkritische Sichtweise auf Lohnarbeit (...).“ (Miriam)

³⁸² „Das Problematische daran finde ich einfach, wenn man so unreflektiert diesen Beruf als etwas Schönes und Selbstgewähltes immer wieder so in den Vordergrund stellt, dann vergisst man eben, dass es auch andere Seiten gibt. Und ich finde, das ist auch nicht ganz fair den Leuten gegenüber, die in Situationen sind, unter denen sie körperlich und psychisch leiden und (...) sich nicht selbst dafür entschieden haben.“ (Miriam)

Yet, Miriam's criticism also speaks to an ongoing tension within sex worker movements' politics: the relationship between the two constituting aspects of "sex" and "work". This tension clearly emerges from my data: some activists' narratives focus on sexuality, and personal sexual experiencing, liberation and self-expression. Kerstin, for instance, likens her work to other non-normative sexual practices such as swinging:

Swingers actually live out their sexuality, they just don't take any money for it (...). They also sit down at the bar, then they make arrangements, and when it suits them, they leave. So that's what I do, too, but I just take a financial compensation for it (...). I also live out my sexuality, and I just take money for it. Because we decide for ourselves whether it fits or not, and which service I offer.³⁸³

From this perspective, sex work is stigmatized and discriminated against because of its deviation from gendered norms of romantic, monogamous, and unpaid sexuality. For activists like Kerstin, the defence of liberal ideals like freedom, self-determination, self-realization, and sexual self-expression lie at the centre of sex work politics. Sex workers then constitute transgressive, feminist subjects, as expressed by Marie:

Because they are outside this traditional society anyway, whores are those who have always arranged everything themselves. They have always taken care of their own work, they have always set their own prices for their services (...). And of course they also rebelled! It's easier to revolt when the finger is already pointed at you anyway. There's a nice saying: 'Once your reputation is ruined, you can live in complete freedom!' Yes.³⁸⁴

In Marie's view, sex workers' marginalization positions activists as cultural and political vanguards. Other interviewees like Clio vehemently reject this political emphasis on sexual deviance and liberation:

I think a lot of people don't realise that sex worker rights is a labour movement. It's about workplace rights. It's not about sexual identity or sexual deviancy anyway.

In contrast to Kerstin and Marie, Clio therefore foregrounds a labour perspective on sex work politics. In a similar vein, trans*Sexworks mobilized for the Labour Day demonstration on the 1st of May 2021 with the slogan "Sex work is not a moral issue! It's a worker's rights issue!"

³⁸³ „Swinger machen ja eigentlich, leben ihre Sexualität ja auch aus, nehmen nur kein Geld dafür (...). Die setzen sich auch an die Theke, dann machen sie Absprachen, wenn's passt, dann gehen sie. So und das mache ich auch, nur ich nehm halt ne finanzielle Dienstleistung dafür (...). Ich leb ja auch meine Sexualität aus, und nehm halt nur Geld dafür. Weil wir entscheiden ja selber ob es passt oder ob es nicht passt, die Dienstleistung, die ich anbiete.“ (Kerstin)

³⁸⁴ „Huren sind halt die, die, weil sie sowieso außerhalb dieser Traditions-gesellschaft stehen, schon immer alles selbst geregelt haben. Sie haben sich selber darum gekümmert, dass sie Arbeit hatten, sie haben ihren Preis für ihre Dienstleistung schon immer selber bestimmt, (...). Und sie haben natürlich auch aufbegehrt! Es lässt sich leichter aufbegehren, wenn sowieso schon mit dem Finger auf dich gezeigt wird. Es gibt so nen schönen Spruch: 'Ist der Ruf erst ruiniert, lebt sich's völlig ungeniert!' Ja.“ (Marie)

Workers Unite!“. By de-emphasizing sexual and moral aspects of sex work in favour of a labour perspective, these activists centre structural conditions and accommodate for a spectrum of living and working experiences in sex work. Here, sex worker activists appear as precarious, flexibilized workers struggling for labour rights and inclusion into wider labour movements.

Other activists again seek to merge sexual and labour politics within the movement. Casey’s perspective highlights how dependent on legal and political context these focal points and activist subjectivities are: having engaged in sex work activism in both Germany and the UK, Casey finds that sexual politics dominate the former movement, and labour politics the latter. While she sees the problematic in the German movement’s one-sided celebration of sexual deviance, she finds that the UK movement “can also be alienating to people who don’t have a background in, like Marxist politics or whatever.” Here, Casey presents the integration of sexual and labour politics as a defining characteristic of sex worker movements:

At the end of the day, maybe it’s not one or the other. While I think we should have this ideological commitment to not basing our demand for labour rights and human rights on whether we enjoy our job, I still think if we’re not in any way able to celebrate, then it just becomes really fucking dry. (*laughs*) And I mean, I have friends in the UK who admit this. They’re like, ‘I mean, ideally, any talk I give on sex work would be a PowerPoint presentation. Anything else I will find problematic!’ (*laughs*) Yeah, but this is not sustainable. I don’t want to be part of this movement, you know?

Casey’s statement underlines the importance of advocating for labour rights for all sex workers regardless of individual choice or pleasure. Simultaneously, it stresses that marginalized and stigmatized political actors such as sex worker movements require not only intersectional political analyses and strategies, but celebratory emotions such as pride and pleasure to sustain community and mobilizations.

The coalition-building attempts between sex worker activists and labour unions which I delineated in this chapter were finally crowned with successes: in October 2021, sex worker activists formed a Sex Worker Section within FAU Berlin, which presented “a groundbreaking effort” in the German context (Sex Worker Section FAU Berlin, 2022). Spurred by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and intensified anti-prostitution campaigning, the unionization saw “rapidly increasing membership and a lot of motivation and commitment from those involved as well as the support of FAU Berlin” (Sex Worker Section FAU Berlin, 2022), the organizing sex worker activists stated in their manifesto. Although the section is currently based only in

Berlin, it aims at “establishing nationwide unionization of sex workers” and create “a model of sex worker unionization and labour organizing for the rest of the global community to benefit from” (Sex Worker Section FAU Berlin, 2022). The unionization with FAU Berlin attests to a strengthened mobilization of sex worker activists from a labour rights perspective and presents a significant achievement in the long struggle for union organizing.

Summary

Probing for connections between sex worker activists and other political actors operating in the field of prostitution politics, I found a variety of interactions. In their efforts to build coalitions, sex worker activists could benefit from the manifold potential for alliances, but also faced their constant unpredictability.

First and foremost, the counselling centres which had emerged out of the German whore movement fulfilled an important political function for the self-organization of sex workers from 2013 on: because of their institutionalization, these counselling centres could provide enduring structures and resources for the renewed politicization and mobilization of sex workers after the former whore movement had abated. Coalition building efforts were clearly induced by the political threat of the planned Prostitute Protection Act, whereas historical ties, organizational structures, and resources facilitated cooperation (van Dyke & Amos, 2017). Consequently, the relationship between sex worker activists and counselling centres presents the most established and secure one of all coalitions. Yet, by prioritizing sex workers’ self-organization and self-representation, counselling centres neglected their own political role, and institutional constraints further limited their opportunities for political support. The adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act then exacerbated counselling centres’ inability to engage in political work: resource scarcity and counselling centres’ conflicting role in the law’s implementation weakened the relationship to sex worker activists.

In order to prevent the planned Prostitute Protection Act, BesD tried to mobilize the support of political parties. Unlike the German whore movement, which successfully impacted legislation by cooperating with the Green Party, BesD did not receive the backing of a government party which functioned as a “party-political agent” (Euchner, 2015) in the legislative arena. Because party positions on sex work cannot be distinguished along a general

political spectrum and exhibit variations within the different states and party associations, sex worker activists struggled to rally more than the support of individuals politicians.

Sex worker activists mobilizing from 2013 on have repeatedly received the support of other political actors: activists' criticisms of the Prostitute Protection Act, the deteriorating living and working conditions, and the debates around client criminalization, have been seconded by health, church, or feminist organizations (e.g. Deutsche Aidshilfe et al., 2019, 2019; Deutscher Juristinnenbund, 2015; Deutscher Juristinnenbund et al., 2015; Diakonie Deutschland, 2021). Church organizations, for instance, operate within the field of prostitution politics through the funding of welfare institutions for sex workers and through taking public stances in policy debates. The support of church organizations also played a crucial role for the first collective organization of sex workers in France in 1975, which incited sex worker movements across Europe (Mathieu, 2001). Yet, in contemporary Germany, church organizations of both the Protestant and Catholic denomination are split in their position on sex work, with some accepting sex work as a profession and others pursuing an anti-prostitution approach.

While activists value other political actors' public opposition to repressive laws and anti-prostitution attitudes, these do not amount to steady expressions of solidarity with sex workers' self-organization or produce wider cooperative practices. Interviewees' silence on the issue of coalitions therefore attests to the lack of explicit, reliable, and broader alliances with other movements which exceed individual activists and collectives.

Equally diverse, but local and temporary, are the instances of strategic cooperation between sex worker activists and social movement actors organizing around LGBTQ, migrant, and disability rights, or against racism and gentrification. Here, sex worker activists seek to mobilize intersectional alliances by invoking shared experiences of discrimination or joint histories of marginalization within mainstream social movements. While sex worker activists benefit from the many intersections which constitute their social locations, these intersectional coalition building efforts are often one-sided and activists find they have to "solicit solidarity" from movements which have a common tendency towards a single axis (Montoya, 2021). Neither do commonalities between sex worker activists and LGBTQ movement actors guarantee practices of solidarity, as scholars have shown for the US and Canadian context: despite overlapping communities and politics, mainstream LGBTQ movements still exhibit widespread discrimination against sex workers in their pursuit of

“sexual respectability”, which undermines alliances (Blewett & Law, 2018; Chateauvert, 2015). In other cases, LGBTQ movement actors abandoned solidarity with sex workers’ political struggles, as did gay activists who contributed to sex workers’ criminalization and displacement from a gentrifying “gay village” in Vancouver (B. Ross & Sullivan, 2012). Interactions with LGBTQ, feminist, and labour movement actors illustrate how sex worker activists themselves grapple with the challenge of developing an intersectional analysis that combines sexuality, gender, and labour perspectives. Coalition building thus presents sex worker activists with an opportunity for intersectional praxis (Ayoub, 2019; Montoya, 2021). While these efforts are still in their infancy at the micro- and meso-level of the German sex worker movement, international sex worker movements have been exploring intersectionality as a strategic tool for coalition building (e.g. ESWA, 2015, 2016, 2018a), mirroring the proliferation of intersectional consciousness and practices in coalition building efforts at the transnational level which Ayoub (2019) found in the case of European LGBTQ movements.

Furthermore, my analysis reveals that the hegemony of anti-prostitution campaigners and the prevalence of anti-prostitution attitudes among other political actors present a constant obstacle to coalition building for sex worker activists. Both anti-prostitution campaigners’ strategic mobilization of “stigma by association” (Pryor et al., 2012) as well as the political polarization on the issue of sex work deter other political actors from expressing solidarity with sex worker activists. This is particularly challenging for the coalition building efforts sex worker activists undertake in the feminist movement arena. Here, sex worker activists receive support by individual queer-feminist and Marxist collectives, and are occasionally included into mainstream feminist spaces. Yet, these cooperative interactions present exceptions and mainstream feminist spaces still constitute risky environments for sex worker activists - even where feminist actors are consciously working to create inclusive safe(r) spaces. In other cases, feminist actors equate sex worker activists with anti-prostitution campaigners, and expose activists to competitive clashes which exacerbate their political marginalization. These feminist actors’ declared neutrality on the issue of sex work, false understanding of diversity, and lacking awareness of discriminations erode sex worker activists’ trust in their viability as coalition partners. These does not signify that coalition building between sex worker movements and feminist movements requires ideological congruency: in other historical and

political contexts, feminist actors have supported sex workers' self-organization despite disagreeing with them on the issue of sex work (Geymonat et al., 2019; Mathieu, 2003a).

The most significant success that sex worker activists had in coalition building is the recent affiliation with the grassroots labour union FAU Berlin. Sex worker activists established this cooperation after a long struggle with union organizing: in the case of ver.di, unionization first failed due to incompatibilities between union approaches and work realities in the sex industry, while later cooperation attempts foundered with ver.di's tendency towards anti-prostitution positions. In the case of FAU, collaboration was first impeded by differences in organizational practices. The diversification of sex workers' self-organization beyond BesD and the grievances caused by the Covid-19 pandemic eventually facilitated and spurred unionization. FAU Berlin has recently organized and won labour disputes of workers in other self-employed, flexibilized, and individualized industries (e.g. delivery riders). Its grassroots approach could thus prove more useful in overcoming the obstacles to sex worker unionization which Gall (2007) identified, than the collective bargaining approaches of larger and institutionally favoured trade unions like ver.di. It remains to be seen whether the Sex Worker Section at FAU Berlin can expand unionization, or whether its efforts stay equally limited as the ones ver.di undertook in the early 2000s.

9 Conclusion & Discussion

By 2023, the collective self-organization of sex workers in Germany has spanned a full decade. It took its formal beginning with the formation of BesD in October 2013, and was aimed at preventing the planned Prostitute Protection Act. Since then, sex workers' self-organization has exceeded both BesD and the legislative process which it ultimately failed to influence. These collective mobilizations therefore generated substantial effects: even though sex worker activists could not prevent the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016, they developed a diverse and sustained social movement under conditions of resource scarcity and continuously intensifying threats and grievances. My analysis of the emergence, development, and outcomes of sex workers' self-organization thus illustrates the resilience contained within these processes. By describing sex workers' self-organization as resilient I intend not to "romanticize" (Mahmood, 2011) their resistance in the face of adversities. After all, I showed how they take a severe toll on sex worker activists and their movement, and how they further marginalize them from participation in the political decision-making processes that concern their very existences. Empirically grounding my analysis at the micro- and meso-level of sex worker activists and their grassroot collectives, I instead draw attention to the varied and transforming manifestations which sex workers' resistances take, and delineate how sex worker activists express agency not only in rejecting and subverting power relations, but also through the contradictory ways in which they accommodate and inhabit them in the given context. Through this relational perspective to power and social movements, I expand scholarship which has found mostly obstacles to sex workers' political engagement or proclaimed the fragility and failure of their movements (e.g. Gall, 2007; Majic, 2014; Mathieu, 2003b; van der Poel, 1995; Weitzer, 1991).

To explore the operation of sex workers as activists and their relationships to other political actors within the field of prostitution politics, I developed a research design which focuses on power relations within the theoretical and methodological domain. My conceptual framework merged social movement theory and feminist theory. Feminist and postcolonial scholarship building on Foucauldian conceptualizations of power, resistance, and subjectivity (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1990; Butler, 1988, 1990; Mahmood, 2011) presented a theoretical point of departure which illuminates manifestations of agency and resistance among socially and politically marginalized groups. It shares these strengths with social movement scholarship,

which emphasizes the collective dimension of resistance and empirically demonstrates its expression by marginalized political groups (e.g. Cress & Snow, 1996; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Scott, 1985). To analyze the development of sex workers' self-organization and activists' relationship with other political actors, I utilized a range of social movement concepts focusing on the political process (Almeida, 2018; D. A. Snow, 2013; van Dyke, 2013), resource mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, 2001), emotions (Jasper, 2008, 2011), cooperative and conflictual interactions (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015; Fligstein & McAdam, 2015; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, 2008; van Dyke & Amos, 2017; van Dyke & McCammon, 2010), as well as the analytical value of intersectionality within social movement processes (e.g. Ayoub, 2019; Ciccina & Roggeband, 2021; Montoya, 2021). Where available, I incorporated sex work scholarship to further direct my analytical lens onto sex workers as political actors (e.g. Gall, 2007, 2016; Garofalo Geymonat & Macioti, 2016; Hardy, 2010; Heying, 2019; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Majic, 2013, 2014; Mathieu, 2003b, 2003a). Because social movement theories offer little insights into the power relations at play in the field of prostitution politics, I complemented my theoretical approach with feminist theories of democracy to highlight processes of political exclusion (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Krook, 2020; Marx Ferree et al., 2002; I. M. Young, 2002).

My theoretical approach remained in constant iterative exchange with my methodological framework: here, my examination of power relations in the political process is accompanied by my attention to inequalities in knowledge production. Sex work scholarship has a problematic heritage (see e.g. Jeffreys, 2009; Maggie's Toronto, 2013; NSWP, 2020; Weitzer, 2005a) and activists' critiques of hierarchical and extractive research relationships are mirrored within the field of social movement studies (Evans, 2019; Gaudry, 2011). Ethical considerations thus played a crucial role within my research design. In order to recognize and centre sex worker activists as experts of their own lives and producers of plural and contingent situated knowledges, I based my methodological framework on feminist epistemologies (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986, 2008; Hartsock, 1983). Because Participatory Action Research (PAR) is increasingly favoured by sex worker communities and researchers as a means to mitigate unequal power relations and address ethical challenges (e.g. Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014; O'Neill, 2010; Wahab, 2003), I explored PAR within my research design. After encountering practical obstacles, I developed an alternative methodological approach which retains some of the strengths of PAR while accounting for the institutional constraints

of doctoral work and adjusting to the limited resources on mine and sex worker activists' side: a fusion of feminist constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2006; Olesen, 2007; Plummer & Young, 2010; Wuest, 1995) provided academic rigour, permitted me to delineate the political agency and subjectivities of sex worker activists in their diversity and contradictions, and created opportunities to accommodate participants' needs. Over the course of more than two years of ethnographic field work, I collected rich data through a triangulation of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. My work thus complements critical reviews of the standardization of PAR within sex work research (e.g. Nencel, 2017; Oliveira & Vearey, 2020) and provides alternate routes to addressing methodological and ethical challenges within the field. Since some of these challenges remain ultimately unresolvable, my work can only chip away at hierarchical research practices. I documented the manifold ethical dilemmas which I encountered throughout the research process to offer reflections on issues such as confidentiality, consent, remuneration, and the politicized context sex work researchers move in. In line with research practices of transparency and reflexivity, I discussed how my experiences and perspectives as a researcher are informed by my own positionality within the field.

The German case is a frequent subject of discussion and misrepresentation within international political discourses due to the country's comparably liberal legal framework on prostitution. In order to understand the emergence and development of the German sex worker movement it is crucial to understand its historical, legal, and socio-political context. I therefore provided background knowledge on the political governance and legal regulation of prostitution in Germany, the involvement of different political actors within the field of prostitution politics, and the national manifestations of international developments at the intersection of labour, gender, and migration. The German whore movement which emerged in the 1980s presents a predecessor to the later sex worker movement as it successfully initiated legal and social reforms which were codified through the Prostitution Act in 2001 (Heying, 2019). Political contestations around prostitution continued thereafter, and at a time when international debates were increasingly characterized by the discursive conflation of sex work with human trafficking, intensified anti-prostitution campaigning, and the spread of the policy of client criminalization. As a result, sex workers were increasingly framed as victims in need of state protection. In Germany, these developments merged with moral panics over sex and migration and informed a new legislative process which provided political actors with

a window of opportunity to intervene in prostitution politics. With the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016, Germany performed a profound political shift away from a rights-based approach to prostitution towards one of increased control and repression. It is within this context that the self-organization of sex workers emerged and assumed its shape. My analysis of these processes has produced important insights into new formations of power and resistance within the field of prostitution politics, and the intersectional dynamics which unfold within the sex worker movement as well as between sex worker activists and other political actors.

9.1 New Formations of Power and Resistance

To ground my analysis in material and symbolic realities, I first demonstrated that activists' political agency and subjectivities as skilled workers and right-bearing citizens were informed by the beneficial living and working conditions which they found after the implementation of the Prostitution Act of 2001. Although this law failed to produce comprehensive improvements in the German sex industry (Kavemann & Rabe, 2007; Kavemann & Steffan, 2013), my analysis shows that it had significant effects on the micro-level. Drawing on Foucauldian conceptualization of power (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978), I illustrated how the power relations inherent in prostitution politics produced sex workers as political subjects with agentic capacities whose experiences and self-conceptions stood in contrast to victimizing discourses. Faced with the political threat of the planned Prostitute Protection Act, these sex workers politicized themselves and started their formal self-organization with the formation of BesD in 2013. Although the mobilizations of sex worker activists were aided by the institutionalized "abeyance structures" (Taylor, 1989) of the dissipated German whore movement, activists created an unprecedented form of political self-organization and self-representation of only former and active sex workers in Germany. In order to prevent the implementation of the Prostitute Protection Act and refute their prevalent victimization, sex worker activists engaged in lobbying and public outreach activities. These strategic choices highlight how activists responded to the threats and opportunities presented to them within the political process (Almeida, 2018; D. A. Snow, 2013; van Dyke, 2013), where they gained access to the legislative arena and public sphere through BesD. Yet, sex worker activists faced a lack of epistemic authority and political influence, which are common for sex worker

movements and other political actors who carry the discrediting effect of social stigma (Gall, 2007; Goffman, 1986). These conditions were reinforced by the devaluation of expert authority within prostitution politics and its largely symbolic character as a form of morality politics (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012). Despite scholar's insistence that the development of beneficial prostitution policies requires the substantial political involvement of sex workers (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012), the Prostitute Protection Act was adopted in 2016 and largely ignored sex worker activists' comprehensive political demands. This political loss first thwarted sex workers' self-organization, but also produced strategic adjustments and tactical innovations. The persistence of sex workers' self-organization and its diversification into a sustained social movement were spurred by grievances caused by the law's implementation and the temporary prohibition of sex work during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, these continuously declining legal, political, and social conditions depleted the sex worker movement's scarce resources.

Sex worker activists organized their resistance not only against repressive legislation, but against another increasingly hegemonic political actor within the field of prostitution politics. Anti-prostitution campaigners and their lobbying efforts for client criminalization presented a growing political threat to sex worker activists, who strategically opposed their activities. I demonstrated that these countering efforts first produced political advancements for sex worker activists, who succeeded in gaining public visibility and establishing themselves as political actors in opposition to anti-prostitution campaigners. Eventually, however, the antagonistic dynamic between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners worked to the political exclusion of the former. Sex worker activists resisted emotionalized and moralizing discourses by emphasizing the ideal of rational argumentation, yet could not counteract the efficacy of anti-prostitution campaigners' "affective strategies" (Sauer, 2019). Epistemic and structural inequalities characterized the political positions of sex worker activists as "challengers" and anti-prostitution campaigners as "incumbents" within the field of prostitution politics (Fligstein & McAdam, 2015). Due to their institutional embeddedness and superior material and symbolic resources, anti-prostitution campaigners shaped the political field to their advantage and limited the political opportunities of sex worker activists, who were forced to engage in tactical responses which occupied activists' capacities and narrowed the movement's political focus. Because institutional channels and confrontational public debates with anti-prostitution campaigners proved politically ineffective, sex worker

activists shifted their strategic focus to provocative counterprotesting, thereby mirroring the tactical repertoires of wider feminist and LGBTQ movements and the ongoing contestations around these (e.g. Barcan, 2002; Gupta, 2017; Hunt, 2018; Rupp & Taylor, 2003; Taylor & van Dyke, 2004). I furthermore drew attention to the political significance of the targeted and increasingly overt attacks and hostilities which anti-prostitution campaigners launched against sex worker activists. I argued that these attacks and hostilities do not constitute “part of the political game” (Krook, 2020, p. 76) but forms of political violence which serve to delegitimize sex workers as political actors and oust them from public and political spaces. Drawing on feminist theories of democracy (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021; Krook, 2020; Marx Ferree et al., 2002; I. M. Young, 2002), I showed that antagonistic dynamics between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners exacerbate the formers’ political marginalization, violate the norm of inclusivity, and undermine the democratic quality of political deliberations within the field of prostitution politics. My analysis thus refutes simplified discursive framings which pigeonhole sex worker activists into long-standing feminist polarizations “pro” or “contra” sex work (Phipps, 2017). It moreover complicates the normalizing assessment of political contestations which interactionist social movement approaches make, according to which sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners merely present players vying for strategic advantages within the same political field (e.g. Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015; Fligstein & McAdam, 2015), or countering movements whose conflictual interactions are continuously adapting and escalating in relation to each other (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996).

Political conflicts around the issue of sex work are not new. The particularity of recent contestations lies in sex worker activists’ resistance to state legislation, and in the antagonistic relationship between sex worker activists and anti-prostitution campaigners. It is therefore important to examine why these dynamics unfold in this way in the given political context. By tracing sex workers’ self-organization against both the Prostitute Protection Act and anti-prostitution campaigners, I utilized resistance as a “diagnostic of power” (Abu-Lughod, 1990) to reveal historically changing power formations.

On the one hand, these run between state institutions and feminist actors who employ criminal law to pursue their political goals. When anti-prostitution feminists label sex worker activists as a “privileged minority”, they draw structural inequalities within the sex worker community into focus. In doing so, they invisibilize the unequal power relations between

themselves and sex worker movements, as well as the convergences between feminist actors and state institutions. Rubio Grundell (2021a) links the recent hegemony of anti-prostitution politics within the EU to the involvement of state feminist actors as “norm entrepreneurs” within the “unchallenged velvet triangle” of the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Women’s Lobby. Here, state feminist actors “successfully mobilised gender equality and women’s human rights as European values” (Foret & Rubio Grundell, 2020, p. 1811) and consolidated anti-prostitution positions within EU institutions by creating a specific form of “European morality politics”. Like all gender equality policies, the ones adopted by the EU constitute a reproducing and shifting “codification of power relations” which “fix particular interpretations of gender relations” (Lombardo & Meier, 2022) and exclude others. Where gender equality and sexual self-determination are associated with anti-prostitution ideas, sex worker movements present alternative framings. Moreover, anti-prostitution policies allow neoliberal European nation states to satisfy their security needs “while reasserting their sovereignty and political identity as progressive in gender and sexual terms” (Rubio Grundell, 2021b, p. 1). Adding to this perspective is Sauer’s (2019) analysis of anti-prostitution feminists’ affective strategies, which “run the risk of establishing a disciplinary regime of governing people, of a restrictive, heterosexist norm of sexuality, and of gender inequality” (p. 318). The “affective regime” which feminist mobilizations against prostitution create through state institutions, civil society organizations, and modes of self-governance effectively reinforce both the “self-affirmation of traditional branches of women’s movements” (Sauer, 2019, p. 318) as well as a heterosexual and binary gender order. Anti-prostitution policies and the exclusion of sex workers as political actors are thus functional to both the nation state and traditional feminist movements, and the resistance which sex worker activists exert against these actors reveals underlying power formations.

On the other hand, my analysis showed that new power constellations in the field of prostitution politics are formed between feminist actors and those organizing from a conservative religious or far-right background. According to Cornelia Möhring, MP for the Left Party, the accusation that sex worker activists form part of an influential political and financial “lobby” not only “completely ignores the social reality,” but mobilizes elements of conspiracy theories:

The construction of a superior enemy is an elementary component of conspiracy myths. In anti-feminist narratives, feminism, or rather feminists, are held responsible for certain - supposedly negative - social developments. They are accused of authoritarian behaviour and a desire for domination. (Möhring, 2021)

By framing sex worker activists as a “lobby”, anti-prostitution campaigners perpetuate anti-feminist ideas and mobilize antisemitic narratives which lie at the core of conspiracy theories, thereby creating a “threatening scenario” (Möhring, 2021) which connects feminist actors to those on the conservative and far-right spectrum. Bernstein’s (2010) analysis of “carceral feminism” identifies the long-standing alliances between anti-prostitution feminists and the Christian right in the context of global anti-trafficking campaigns. Whereas scholarship on “backlashes” (e.g. Ayoub & Page, 2020; della Porta, 2020; Faludi, 1991) against gains in women’s or LGBT rights locates these developments mainly in the far-right spectrum and examines “progressive” political actors as targets, my analysis illustrates that mobilizations against sex worker rights merge far-right actors and sections of feminist movements who invoke progressive framings of sexual and human rights. Recent scholarship has identified similar convergences between far-right and feminist actors in mobilization against trans rights (Pearce et al., 2020; Verloo & Vleuten, 2020). Saeidzadeh and Strid (2020) describe the contestations between anti-trans feminists and trans activists as equally intense and hostile as I do in my analysis of the antagonistic relationship between anti-prostitution feminists and sex worker activists, and moreover point to the frequent overlap between anti-trans and anti-sex work positions. These authors also address the exclusion of trans women from political spaces and the disputes around the acronym “TERF” (trans exclusionary radical feminism) within feminist movements (Pearce et al., 2020; Saeidzadeh & Strid, 2020; Verloo & Vleuten, 2020). So far, there have been no scholarly discussions of the parallels and correlations between feminist mobilizations against trans rights and against sex worker rights, and the shared political marginalization which sex worker activists invoke through the combination of the acronyms “TERF & SWERF” (trans exclusionary radical feminism and sex worker exclusionary radical feminism). My analysis of the new formations of power and resistance within the field of prostitution politics connects to this literature and provides additional insights into the engagement of marginalized political actors within wider contestations around gender and sexuality.

9.2 The Challenge of Transformative Solidarity

Sex workers occupy a variety of social locations which inform their subjectivities and agency as activists. In order to depart from the common single-issue focus of both social movements and social movement research, I explored how intersecting power relations constitute a spectrum of activist experiences and produce dynamics of political inclusion and exclusion. Following Montoya (2021), I first directed an “intracategorical” lens onto the sex worker movement to study the heterogeneous power dynamics between activists, and then adopted an “intercategorical” perspective to examine coalition building efforts between sex worker activists and other political actors.

Like any social movement, the sex worker movement is an arena of political cooperation and contestation in itself (Duyvendak & Jasper, 2015). I demonstrated that community plays a crucial role not only for the survival of individualized, stigmatized, and underserved groups such as sex workers, but also presents the basis to their politicization into activism and a resource through which activists can sustain their mobilizations in a challenging political context. I highlighted that sex worker activists find and forge community in particular through sex worker only spaces which represent inclusive and protective safe(r) spaces. The ways in which their boundaries and purposes are continuously negotiated by participants mirror safe(r) space practices within feminist and LGBTQ movements (see e.g. Arao & Clemens, 2013; Bonu, 2022; Hanhardt, 2013; Stengel & Weems, 2010; The Roestone Collective, 2014). Scholars increasingly recognize that these forms of community care work constitute fundamentally political practices and an important asset of otherwise resource-poor social movements (Alkebulan, 2007; Hobart & Kneese, 2020). The growing significance which community took on for sex workers’ self-organization in the face of deteriorating legal, political, and social conditions stresses the political function of care as a “critical survival strategy” which can effect “positive political change by providing spaces of hope in dark times” (Hobart & Kneese, 2020, p. 2). I thus identified community care practices as essential parts of the sex worker movement’s tactical repertoire. In their efforts to forge community, sex worker activists struggle with the inability to mobilize migrant sex workers – a fate that they share with the former whore movement and wider feminist and labour movements in Germany (Gutierrez-Rodriguez & Tuzcu, 2021; Heying, 2019; Marx Ferree, 2012). Moreover, the “whorarchy” within the highly stratified sex industry informs fragmentations within the

movement, which expressed themselves in demarcation processes in which activists sought to resist repressive legislation and stigmatization by strategically elevating the status of certain forms of sex work (e.g. tantra and sexual surrogacy) over others. Distinctions along legal status further reproduced stigmatization and hierarchical power relations within the sex worker community. Here, my analysis shows that legalized and regulatory frameworks on prostitution such as the German one contain a politically divisive element which functions to the detriment of sex worker movements. The legal recognition and the improved working conditions which the Prostitution Act of 2001 created for some sex workers in Germany are certainly preferable to a general lack of rights. After all, gaining rights is not a zero-sum game and their enjoyment by some does not occur at the direct expense of others. However, the picture is different on a political level: since the Prostitution Act of 2001 simply removed some legal discriminations, it created a separation between sex workers who benefited from legal recognition through self-determined work and professionalization, and those who were excluded from it due to repressive migration or welfare regimes (Mauer, 2020). The Prostitute Protection Act of 2016 then deepened distinctions between industry sectors and legal status by defining certain forms of sexual labour as “prostitution” and instituting a compulsory registration. The divisions which both prostitution laws generate among sex workers are then politically utilized to create binary oppositions (e.g. German vs. migrant, self-determined vs. victimized, professionalized vs. precarious) and frame sex worker activists as unrepresentative and illegitimate political actors. Interviewees’ rich personal accounts refute these simplified classifications and illustrate that the manifold intersections which constitute sex workers’ social locations produce a spectrum of agency and subjectivities in sex work and prostitution politics. However, the conflicts which erupted within BesD after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act in 2016 show that sex worker activists are struggling to bridge these divisions and dismantle internal hierarchies and exclusions – a process which is further complicated by the defensive position which sex worker activists occupy within the field of prostitution politics. At the same time, I identified a growing commitment to internal solidarity among activists who scrutinize their own social locations and employ personal privileges to build an inclusive movement at the grassroots level. I hence demonstrated that “times of crisis” (Ayoub, 2019) promoted the development of intersectional consciousness and practices within the sex worker movement.

How sex worker activists grapple with intersectional political analyses is also discernible within the coalition building efforts between the sex worker movement and other political actors. The silence I encountered among interviewees reveals that political alliances were absent or too rudimentary to hold political significance in the process leading up to the Prostitute Protection Act. The support which sex worker activists received from individual politicians, or church, health, and feminist organizations, remained limited in scope, time frame, and location, and did not constitute durable alliances. Nevertheless, my analysis demonstrated that sex worker activists engage in a variety of coalition building efforts. The many intersections which shape sex workers' social location produce manifold potentials for alliances with other social movements. At the same time, the deterring effect of stigma, the prevalence of anti-prostitution ideas across the political spectrum, and existing polarizations on the issue of sex work produce great unpredictability for sex worker activists. I provided an in-depth discussion of the relationships to three other political actors which appear as most significant to sex worker activists: due to shared historical ties and conducive organizational structures, the counselling centres which emerged out of the former whore movement aided in sex workers self-organization from 2013 on. The political engagement of counselling centres was limited by institutional constraints and resource scarcity – conditions which exacerbated after the adoption of the Prostitute Protection Act and weakened cooperation. Moreover, I scrutinized how sex worker activists seek to rally support within the feminist movement arena, but face exposure, silences, and competitive confrontations with anti-prostitution campaigners which heighten their political marginalization.

Finally, I demonstrated how sex worker activists succeeded in unionizing after a long struggle over organizational approaches, labour union's shifting positions on the issue of sex work, and activists' own oscillation between sexual and labour politics. Given that sex worker activists began self-organizing within an increasingly repressive, victimizing, and moralizing political context, the sex worker movement's pronounced liberal and sexual politics are coherent – as is internal criticism over its significantly weaker labour analysis. As Maciotti (2014) points out, a sole reliance on arguments of self-determination and professional fulfilment “would run the risk of automatically reinforcing and reproducing the idea of the ‘unhappy whore’ as a victim and counter-image to the ‘happy whore’” (p. 3). While liberal and sexual politics permit sex worker activists to reject victimization, stigmatization, and state intervention, one-sided counterrepresentations “reproduce dominant ideas about autonomy

in maintaining the distinction between the autonomous individual and those who are driven by social pressures and culture” (Jacobsen & Stenvoll, 2010, p. 284). Still, where activists minimize sexual and moral facets they disregard how deeply these permeate labour politics, too, and how sex work politics inevitably exists at the intersection of these fields. Activists’ negotiations between labour and sexual politics illustrate how their subjectivities and agency remain tied to the power relations they seek to subvert.

My analysis of internal and external processes of collaboration and contestation thus highlights the need for practices of “transformative solidarity” (Ciccia & Roggeband, 2021) to bridge intersecting issues and inequalities within the sex worker movement, as well as between sex worker activists and other political actors. Empirically grounding their conceptualization in feminist coalition work, Ciccia and Roggeband (2021) find that transformative forms of intersectional solidarity are based in long-term interaction, an incorporation of intersecting issues, the recognition of marginalized groups’ perspectives, and the active reduction of material and symbolic inequalities. Although the authors concede that transformative solidarity is difficult to achieve in practice, their concept provides a normative standard against which to measure the power relations in sex worker activists’ internal and external coalition work. The “intracategorical” and “intercategorical” perspectives (Montoya, 2021) I adopted surfaced instances of intersectional consciousness and solidarity, which however stop short of being transformative: coalitions between sex worker activists and other political actors are still emerging (e.g. labour unions), localized and short-lived (e.g. mainstream feminist and LGBTQ protest events), skewed by disparities in resource distribution and representation (e.g. counselling centres), or lacking a deeper political analysis of sex work. Feminist actors constitute particularly “tainted allies” (Ciccia & Roggeband, 2021, p. 12) due to sex worker activists’ long history of marginalization in the feminist movement arena. The ignorance, silence, or declared impartiality on sex work exhibited by many feminist actors precludes a multi-issue analysis and further marginalizes sex worker activists in a political arena in which they are already equipped with fewer material and symbolic resources. The sex worker movement’s own intersectional practices remain limited, instrumental, or pragmatic where the differences in social location among sex workers are subsumed under a political single-issue focus, directed at short-term goals (e.g. to prevent repressive legislation or reject delegitimization as “too privileged”), or where they fail to combine a recognition of power asymmetries with organizational representation and

resource redistribution (as illustrated by the conflicts within BesD). The internal and external processes of political marginalization which I uncovered stress that both the sex worker movement and other social movements need to develop a “repertoire of practices of inclusivity to ensure that less powerful groups are included on equal footing in shaping [their] movements’ goals, strategies and tactics” (Ciccio & Roggeband, 2021, p. 8). In the field of prostitution politics, both the sex worker movement and its potential coalition partners are only beginning to “develop a critical awareness of their own biases” and to exhibit a “politics of accountability” (Ciccio & Roggeband, 2021, p. 8) which actively counteracts exclusionary dynamics. Only if these practices remain grounded in a “deep and sustained engagement with the ‘other’” (Ciccio & Roggeband, 2021, p. 16) and are accompanied by the “relentless work of interrogation and transformation of the material and discursive dimensions of power” (Ciccio & Roggeband, 2021, p. 16) can they assume the transformative potential which intersectional solidarity holds within internal and external social movement coalitions.

9.3 Outlook

Within this thesis, I examined the self-organization of sex workers against the German Prostitute Protection Act and centred sex worker activists as political actors. As such, my analysis contains certain limitations and can be complemented by future research. First of all, I covered the positions of other political actors operating within the field of prostitution politics only in so far as they appear relevant from sex worker activists’ perspective. My analysis of conflictual, cooperative, and ambiguous interactions thus reflects how sex worker activists experience and make sense of them. Findings I drew from their perspectives can be expanded by in-depth studies into the mobilizations undertaken by other political actors, such as labour unions as potential coalition partners, anti-prostitution campaigners as antagonistic opponents, or mainstream feminist movements as contested spaces.

My research design combining feminist constructivist Grounded Theory with methodological triangulation allowed for maximum variation in how participants fill categories such as “activism” with meaning. Nevertheless, my research privileges forms of political self-organization which are collective, public, physical (as opposed to virtual), and concentrated within large urban areas. The diverse ways in which sex worker activists exert political agency in individual, every-day practices, or within online spaces, remain areas to be

explored. As a non-sex working researcher, I could furthermore access mixed spaces and the perspectives shared with me by interviewees. Sex worker activists possess and produce first-hand knowledge of their grassroots political struggles and movement-internal debates. Despite my abandoning of PAR as a research approach for this thesis, I still consider it a useful framework to elaborate under certain conditions: if embedded within an institutionally funded project which ensures mutual resources and long-term engagement between academic and activist partners, PAR can offer a way to the co-production of knowledge which would certainly enrich many of the topics I addressed in this thesis.

Doing research in my own national context afforded me with benefits in terms of understanding and accessibility. At the same time, familiarity can be limiting, and one remains perhaps most critical with the political processes one feels intimately tied to. Perspectives are then expanded and changed through comparisons to other legal, political, and social contexts. Over the course of this project, I frequently had the opportunity to participate in social movement processes in other European countries. Here, I was often amazed by the size and vitality of feminist mobilizations against gendered and sexualized violence, and at the same time painfully aware of the lacking visibility and inclusion of sex worker activists into struggles for sexual and bodily self-determination. The contrasting observations I made in other European contexts where feminist actors and state institutions are increasingly turning to anti-prostitution politics reveal both the shortcomings of the German sex worker movement and the advancements it has made over a decade. Transnational comparisons could thus provide additional insights into the particularity of the studied case, and the overarching complexity of sex worker movements' mobilizations.

It is an often-stated truth that ethnographic field work is never finished, it is only ended. Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I remained attentive to novel developments in the field of prostitution politics and within the German sex worker movement. Transformations in institutional context have so far not produced tangible changes in prostitution politics: the government formed by the SPD, the Green Party, and FDP after the parliamentary elections in September 2021 was read as a social-liberal shift away from the stagnant politics of the grand coalition between CDU/CSU and SPD. However, the topic of sex work has not featured prominently on the agenda of either government party or their coalition. The ongoing evaluation of the Prostitute Protection Act presents the currently most crucial political process. The evaluation is performed by the Criminological Research Institute

of Lower Saxony whose areas of expertise lie in “causes and development of deviant behaviour“, “forms and consequences of deviant behaviour“, and “institutions of social control“. This institutional choice suggests a continued political focus on victimization, violence, and crime, and the intention to address social issues through carceral means.

The evaluation, which is to be completed by the 1st of July 2025, contains a political threat to the sex worker movement. Because activists rightfully expect that the Prostitute Protection Act will be found lacking with respect to its *a priori* misdirected and unattainable goals, the evaluation could provide argumentative grounds to political actors who seek to further criminalize and repress sex work. Prostitution politics in Germany thus contains further momentum for political shifts, and further uncertainty for all sex workers. At the same time, the evaluation process provides a new window of opportunity for the sex worker movement to intervene into prostitution politics. The recent mobilizations undertaken by sex worker activists within different political arenas attests to the continuation, heterogeneity, and deepening intersectional practice of their movement: in 2022, sex worker activists participated in a public hearing on prostitution politics held by the Bavarian state parliament (Bayerischer Landtag, 2022), lobbied for the inclusion of status-based discrimination against sex workers into the German anti-discrimination law (Rebelde, 2022), fund-raised to create the first worker-owned and gender inclusive escort agency (Paramour Collective, 2022), and hosted the “Whoriental Festival” together with queer, racialized, and refugee activists in an attempt to reclaim community practices and knowledges (Queerberg, 2022). These activities show that the self-organization of sex workers in Germany continues to persist and transform, and that sex worker activists are political actors to be reckoned with.

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Appendix

List of Interviews

Sex Workers

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Area of work	Affiliation	Date
1	Nina	female	BDSM	Hydra	28.02.2020
2	Imani	female	stripping	Black Sex Worker Collective	20.03.2020
3	Lara	female	escorting	BesD	08.12.2019
4	Barbara	female	sexual surrogacy, BDSM, webcamming	BesD	20.01.2020
5	Gina, Roxy	female	stripping	Berlin Strippers Collective	21.05.2020
6	Dayana	female	BDSM	independent	08.07.2020
7	Lucia	female	bizarre lady	independent	24.02.2020
8	Nicky	female	escorting	BesD	13.05.2020
9	Andrea	female	sex work	Counselling centre	12.02.2020

10	Dilan	trans male	escorting	trans*sexworks	05.03.2020
11	Adrian	Non-binary	escorting, porn	BesD, SWAG	03.06.2020
12	Lukas	male	escorting	BesD	18.02.2020
13	Clio	Non-binary	full-service sex worker, former porn performer, escort, body worker	trans*sexworks	30.01.2020
14	Christin	female	BDSM	independent	18.03.2020
15	Marion	female	'hobby whore', formerly sugaring	Hydra, campaign "Sex Work is Work. Respect!"	22.01.2020
16	Anouk	female	BDSM	BesD	26.05.2020
17	Eric	trans man	formerly escorting	trans*Sexworks	17.02.2020
18	Liljana	trans woman	street-based sex work	trans*Sexworks	08.10.2020
19	Melanie	female	BDSM, bizarre lady	BesD	07.04.2020
20	Scarlet	female	dominatrix	independent	18.05.2020
21	Leo	trans	sex work	trans*sexworks	06.02.2020
22	Marie	female	sex work	BesD	08.11.2018
23	Alexandra	female	BDSM, tantra	BesD	19.01.2020

24	Thomas	male	tantra massage	BesD	27.12.2019
25	Kerstin	female	street-based sex work	BesD, campaign "Sex Work is Work. Respect!"	01.11.2019
26	Maya	female	escorting, brothel	BesD, Hydra	05.02.2020
27	Dan	Non-binary	BDSM	independent	03.07.2020
28	Casey	female	escorting	Objects of Desire	19.03.2020
29	Silke	female	formerly brothels and escorting	BesD	08.11.2019
30	Simone	female	brothel, home visits	BesD, counselling centre	19.12.2019
31	Katharina	female	table dance, BDSM, brothel, massages & escorting	BesD, bufas	08.11.2019
32	Chiarella, Minx	Non-binary, female	porn	Porn collective	15.05.2020

Others

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Area of work	Affiliation	Date
33	Valentina	female	municipal public health department	Counselling centre	19.12.2019
34	Ruth	female	former social worker	Counselling centre	19.12.2019
35	Sonja	female	social worker	Counselling centre	11.07.2020
36	Miriam	female	trade unionist	FAU	02.10.2018
37	Judith	female	feminist activist	Green Youth	03.07.2020
38	Oliver	male	security	ver.di	02.12.2019
39	Lena	female	feminist activist	What the fuck! Queer feminist alliance	08.06.2020
40	Belen	female	feminist activist	Frauenstreik Bündnis	06.07.2020
41	Martin	male	disability rights activist	Disability rights organization	04.02.2020

Interview Guideline

1. Could you please describe how you started becoming involved in activism around sex work?
Kannst du erzählen, wie du dazu gekommen bist, dich zu Sexarbeit politisch zu engagieren?
2. Could you describe what political activities are you currently doing?
Kannst du beschreiben, was du aktuell politisch machst ?
3. Do you cooperate with others?
Arbeitest du mit anderen zusammen?
4. What is most important to you in your political work?
Was ist dir in deiner politischen Arbeit gerade am wichtigsten?
5. What experiences have you personally made since you've become involved in sex work activism? How do others treat you when you publicly engage in sex work activism?
*Welche Erfahrungen hast du persönlich gemacht, seit du dich zu Sexarbeit politisch engagierst? Wie begegnen dir Andere, wenn du dich als Aktivist*in öffentlich zu Sexarbeit engagierst?*
6. Have you observed changes? Have there been successes or setbacks?
Hast du Veränderungen beobachtet? Gab es Erfolge oder Rückschläge?
7. There are many political organizations or events that are only accessible to sex workers. What role do such sex worker-only spaces play for you?
*Es gibt viele politische Organisationen oder Events, die nur für Sexarbeiter*innen zugänglich sind. Welche Rolle spielen solche „sex-worker-only“ Räume für dich?*
8. Is there a sex worker movement in Germany?
Gibt es in Deutschland eine Sexarbeitsbewegung?
9. What would you like to do politically in the future?
Was würdest du zukünftig gerne politisch machen?
10. If you had a magic button, what would you change about prostitution politics? What would you change about sex work activism?
Wenn du einen magischen Knopf hättest, was würdest du an der Prostitutionspolitik verändern? Was würdest du am Sexarbeitsaktivismus verändern?

Information & Consent Form

Version: english, long

Scuola Normale Superiore

Faculty of Political and Social Sciences Piazza degli Strozzi 1

50124 Florence, Italy

Sex Work Activism and Prostitution Politics in Germany Information and Consent Form

Joana Lilli Hofstetter

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Short project description

In this research project, I investigate how sex workers in Germany currently organize and mobilize politically. I am especially interested in how they do so in a context of changing political debate and new legislation on prostitution. In order to reach this goal, I employ data gathered using different methods, among which in-depth interviews conducted with politically active sex workers and other activists who organize in solidarity with them. The research project is part of a doctoral thesis I am writing at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence, Italy. The research is supervised by Prof. Donatella della Porta und Dr. Alice Mattoni. You can find additional information on me at <http://cosmos.sns.it/person/2530/> or at <https://sns.academia.edu/JoanaHofstetter>.

Information on the interview and other research materials

I will meet (or have a skype call) with you to conduct an interview of approximately 60 minutes. I will make an audio recording of the interview, from which I will then produce a written transcript. I will send this transcript to you for approval. I may use excerpts from the interview in academic and non-academic publications related to the research project. For this purpose, the excerpts may also be translated into another language (e.g. German).

Participation in the research project

Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You may choose at any time to not answer a question, to not express your point of view, or to not disclose information. At your request, some or all of your statements will be erased from the recording and/or deleted from the transcription. Should you disclose information that might compromise the integrity of another person, these statements will be erased from the recording and not entered into or erased from the transcription. You are free to withdraw or to refuse to participate in any part of the study at any time without any negative consequence, and without being required to justify your decision. If you decide to withdraw from the project, all you have to do is let me know by writing an email. If you withdraw from the project after having participated in an interview, the recording and transcription of your interview will be destroyed at your request.

Confidentiality

Everything you say before, during and after the interview will remain confidential. I will be aware of your identity, but will not disclose this information to any third party not directly involved in the research project. Excerpts from your interview may be quoted in academic and non-academic publications related to the research project. However, your name will be replaced with a pseudonym to grant you your confidentiality.

Use of interviews

The interview you participate in will be audio recorded and transcribed. I will use the interview transcription to develop an analysis of sex work activism and prostitution politics in Germany. The interview will be part of my data set and will be compared with other interviews during the analytical process.

Publication and dissemination of results

The results of the interview analysis will be disseminated in academic and non-academic publications related to the research project. Among them there will be publications in academic journals and books, research reports presented at national and international academic conferences or non-academic magazines and online blogs. I am committed to

render these publications available to as many people as possible and attempt to publish the results of the interview analysis in open access publications. When this will not be possible, I will render available the publications drafts. If you are interested in the publications, don't hesitate to contact me via email.

Interview storage and analysis

The whole set of printed documents, including the signed consent forms containing personal information of the interviewee will be preserved in a secure location, to which only I will have access. I will record the interview on a digital audio recording device that is in my possession only. The audio files of the interviews, the related transcriptions and the interview analysis files will be stored in a password-protected portable hard disk accessible only to me.

Compensation

To acknowledge the time and effort you put into the interview I offer a small financial compensation of 20€. This compensation will be paid after and is entirely independent from what you state during the interview. It will also be paid if you abort the interview or retract it at a later stage.

Consent Form

I, _____ ,

acknowledge to have read the information on the research project included above and I accept the way in which the interview will be employed in the framework of the research project. I state that I freely decided to participate in the interview and I give my consent to produce and audio record the interview.

Participant signature, place and date:

Interviewer signature, place and date:

A signed copy of this document will be given to the participant.

Version: German, short

Scuola Normale Superiore

Institut für Sozial- und Politikwissenschaften

Piazza degli Strozzi 1

50124 Florenz, Italien

Arbeitstitel: *Aktuelle politische Selbstorganisation von Sexarbeitenden in Europa*

Interviewer: Joana Hofstetter

Kontakt: joana.hofstetter@sns.it; Tel. 0176/840 79 321

Einverständniserklärung

Das in dieser Studie gesammelte Material wird **vertraulich behandelt** und **sicher gespeichert**. Daten werden **anonymisiert oder pseudonymisiert**. Das heißt, dass Informationen gestrichen oder ersetzt werden, die eine Identifikation von Personen ermöglichen.

- Ich bestätige, dass mir die Möglichkeit gegeben wurde, **Fragen zur Studie** zu stellen, und dass diese Fragen ausreichend beantwortet wurden.
- Mir ist bewusst, dass ich zu jedem Zeitpunkt meine **Teilnahme an der Studie beenden kann**, ohne dafür Gründe zu nennen.
- Ich stimme zu, dass das Interview **aufgezeichnet** und für Zwecke der Forschung **verwendet** wird.
- Ich stimme auch zu, dass das Interview – in anonymisierter oder pseudonymisierter Form – **archiviert** und anderen Forscher*innen zugänglich gemacht werden kann.

Unterschrift und Datum:

Die Interviewerin steht jederzeit für Nachfragen zur Verfügung.

Herzlichen Dank für die Teilnahme!

Data Sheet

Version: English

Scuola Normale Superiore
Faculty of Political and Social Sciences
Piazza degli Strozzi 1
50124 Florence, Italy

Sex Work Activism and Prostitution Politics in Germany

Data Sheet

Confidentiality

All personalised data given on this sheet will be treated confidentially. As an interviewer, I will be aware of your identity, but will not disclose this information to any third party not directly involved in the research project. Data from this sheet may be used in academic and non-academic publications related to the research project. However, your name will be replaced with a pseudonym to grant you anonymity. Together with the other documents (information and consent form, interview transcript), the data sheet will be preserved in a secure location to which only I will have access. The files will also be stored in a password-protected portable hard disk accessible only to me.

Interviewer

Joana Lilli Hofstetter
PhD candidate, Scuola Normale Superiore,
Faculty of Political and Social Sciences
joana.hofstetter@sns.it
+49 176 840 79 321

Place and Date of Interview

Type and Duration of Interview

Interviewee

Name/Pseudonym	Gender
Age	Nationality
Profession/Area of Work	
Politically active in...	
Additional information I find important...	

Version: German

Scuola Normale Superiore
Fakultät für Politik- und Sozialwissenschaften
Piazza degli Strozzi 1
50124 Florenz, Italien

Sexarbeitsaktivismus und Prostitutionspolitik in Deutschland

Datenblatt zum Interview

Vertraulichkeit

Alle Angaben, die Sie auf diesem Datenblatt treffen, werden streng vertraulich behandelt. Ihre Identität ist nur mir als Interviewerin bekannt und wird von mir nicht an Dritte weitergegeben. Angaben aus dem Datenblatt werden gegebenenfalls in wissenschaftlichen und nicht- wissenschaftlichen Veröffentlichungen verwendet. Hierfür wird Ihr Name mit einem Pseudonym ersetzt, um Ihre Anonymität zu garantieren. Das Datenblatt wird zusammen mit den anderen Dokumenten (Interviewabschrift, Einverständniserklärung) an einem sicheren Ort aufbewahrt, zu dem nur ich Zugang habe. Außerdem wird es auf einer passwortgeschützten externen Festplatte gespeichert, zu welcher nur ich Zugriff habe.

Interviewerin

Joana Lilli Hofstetter
Doktorandin, Scuola Normale Superiore,
Fakultät für Politik- und Sozialwissenschaften
joana.hofstetter@sns.it
0176 840 79 321

Ort und Datum des Interviews

Art und Dauer des Interviews

Interviewpartner*in

Name/Pseudonym	Geschlecht
Alter	Nationalität
Beruf/Arbeitsbereich	
Politisch aktiv in...	
Was ich außerdem noch wichtig finde zu mir:	

List of Selected Participant Observations

Date	Type	Location	Notes
07.03.2019	Objects of Desire	Berlin, Schwules Museum	Vernissage, sex worker art exhibition
26.04.2019	Liad Hussein Kantorowicz: Unidentified	Berlin, Schwules Museum	Art performance
02.06.2019	International Whores' Day	Berlin, Schöneberg	Demonstration, march
18.06.2019	„Sexarbeit - eine ganz normale Arbeit? Zum Verhältnis von Prostitution, Staat und Gesellschaft“	Berlin, Lichtenberg	Discussion forum with <i>die Linke</i>
22. – 27.07.2019	Strich/Code/Move	Berlin, Washingtonplatz	Collaborative art project
23.07.2019	Gedenken an Beate Fischer anlässlich des 25. Todestags	Berlin, Reinickendorf	Commemoration with <i>Antifa-Nordost</i>
15. – 16.08.2019	Whore Congress, BesD	Berlin, Jannowitzplatz	Interactive research space
17.08.2019	World of Whorecraft, BesD	Berlin, Jannowitzplatz	Sex work fair
21.09.2019	“Marsch für das Leben?! – What the fuck!”	Berlin, Rosenthaler Platz	Counterdemonstration against anti-abortion march with <i>WTF</i>
23. – 28.09.2019	Strich/Code/Move	Hannover, Am Steintor	Collaborative art project
25.10.2019	“Becky’s Journey”, Hydra	Berlin, Hydra Café Neukölln	Film screening and discussion

26.10.2019	“Navigating the Gentrified World of Porn”	Berlin, Kottbusser Tor	Panel discussion, Porn Film Festival Berlin
14.02.2020	“Rache am Patriarchat”	Berlin, Hermannplatz	Demonstration against sexualized violence
03.03.2020	International Sex Worker Rights Day, BesD	Berlin, Pariser Platz	Demonstration
08.03.2020	International Women’s Day/Feminist Strike	Berlin, Leopoldplatz to Alexanderplatz	<i>Frauenkampftag</i> demonstration
14.05.2020	Online Varieté Show, Berlin Strippers Collective	Berlin and others	Online show
02.06.2020	“Huren hören – an evening of sex workers stories”, Hydra	Berlin and others	Online storytelling event
03.07.2020	Demonstration in front of Bundesrat	Berlin, Leipziger Straße	Protest for opening of sex work venues
09.07.2020	“United We Strip”, Berlin Strippers Collective	Berlin and others	Online cabaret show
02.09.2020	“Can Whores Unite?”, SWAG	Berlin, Ostkreuz	Sex Work Film Festival and Unionisation Panel
03.09.2020	Sex Worker Night @ B-Lage, trans*sexworks	Berlin, Neukölln	KüFa (‘Küche für alle’), fundraising dinner
06.09.2020	Sex Worker Action Week Demonstration, SWAG	Berlin, Schöneberg	Demonstration, march

19.09.2020	“Marsch für das Leben?!“ – What the fuck!	Berlin, Washingtonplatz	Counterrallies against anti-abortion march with <i>WTF</i>
08.03.2021	International Women’s Day/Feminist Strike	Berlin, Leopoldplatz to Alexanderplatz	<i>Frauenkampftag</i> demonstration
01.05.2021	„Yallah Klassenkampf – auf zum revolutionären 1. Mai“, trans*sexworks	Berlin, Hermannplatz	Internationalist 1st of May demonstration