For a right to have rights! Street-based female sex workers' claims in Portugal

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Abstract:

Sex workers (SWs) based in Portugal are not (yet) organized in a trade union or as a social movement. However, they are not voiceless. This study aims to identify the needs of nineteen street-based female SWs, considering the rights they advocated. Data were gathered during participatory action research and were collected through informal interviews, in-depth semi-structured interviews and group discussions. We identified three major categories of rights: the right to work, to be protected by the law and to be free from violence. We also identified barriers they encountered in the process of being heard, including stigma. These findings suggest that they have opinions and the will to make a difference, but they claim from an individual standpoint. Some recommendations to social work practice, such as right-based and relationship-based approaches, and research with SWs are suggested to promote human rights and SWs' participation in the public sphere.

Keywords:

sex workers' rights; female prostitution; street-based prostitution; sex work; social work; rights-based approach; relationship-based social work

Introduction

Different political parties and social institutions have been showing interest in the review of policies of prostitution. The debate is polarized into two opposite viewpoints: one that considers prostitution as violence against women, and

other that argues for its recognition as work. Some European countries have been adopting measures that tend to abolish this activity. The current proliferation of abolitionist discourse tends to reproduce narratives of victimization, denying sex workers (SWs) agency and their ability to make decisions.

In Portugal, different legal models have framed prostitution: regulation (1853–1962), prohibition (1963–82) and abolition (1983–present). Currently, only activities related to prostitution are considered as a crime, namely pimping and benefitting for the exploration of others. Prostitutes and their clients are not criminalized, but there is a lack of policies regarding the protection of SWs' working and living conditions.

The SWs' rights movement is incredibly significant at the international level. All around the world, SWs have been fighting for human, sexual and labour rights (Kempadoo 1998; Lopez-Embury and Sanders 2011). The Portuguese Sex Work Network, composed of non-governmental organizations (NGO) that provide services to SWs, researchers and allies, has been promoting SWs' rights through various initiatives, such as requesting changes to the legal framework and attending events to fight for SWs' rights (e.g. May Day). These initiatives are occasional, and, despite some attempts of collective action (see Lopes and Oliveira 2006; Oliveira 2019), participation in the public sphere is still developing. Meanwhile, political parties have been hearing professionals who provide services for SWs; the majority are SWs' supporters and other individuals who stand mostly for the abolitionist model. In this process, SWs are still silenced and excluded from a hypothetical policy revision. Despite the lack of an organized social movement or a Portuguese trade union, SWs have been showing will to give their opinion and make a change, to improve their lives and to fight for human rights and against discrimination, stigma and prejudice. Recently, for instance, various informal groups are requesting government measures to face the crisis provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, they are advocating for a right to have rights. In Hannah Arendt's (1973) conceptualization, a right to have rights means a right of each person to be part of an organized community, to belong to humanity, and each individual is protected by the community to which one belongs. For SWs, who are usually discriminated against and see their liberties and civil rights called into question, the sense of belonging to a larger community sharing the same concern and giving them security is of great importance. Plus, the sense of belonging to a group helps to confer identity and to fight against stigma.

Since the beginning of social work practice, social workers often come in contact with SWs in various professional settings, such as hospitals, social welfare departments, child protective services, HIV/AIDS programmes and so on (Weiner 1996; Sloan and Wahab 2000). Social work practices had been shaped by the social representation of the prostitute and prostitution and influenced by several ideologies and theories (Sloan and Wahab 2000; Wahab 2002). Much of early practice was influenced by religious and charity approaches, with social workers intervening to rescue the women they believe were victims of male aggression or to control their behaviour, considering them deviants, incapable of making choices and that they should be re-educated (Sloan and Wahab 2000; Wahab 2002). With the beginning of social work professionalization, social workers tried to distance themselves from charity and church-based work, and the emergence of the medical discourse brought new models of practice. Medical studies focused on the causes and pathology of the prostitute started to regard prostitutes as sick persons. Later, in the second half of the twentieth century, different feminist positions on sex

work became a great influence on social workers' practice. These discourses still tend to shape social work practices nowadays. Briefly, two main opposite feminist views are at the core of the discussion: one considers that prostitution should be eradicated since it is violence against all women, and prostitutes are regarded as victims and fragile individuals (Barry 1995; Farley 2005). The other recognizes prostitution as work, rationally chosen and it might be a successful job (McLeod 1982; Pheterson 1989; Chapkis 1997). These conceptions are grounded on the understanding of both parties regarding woman's sexuality and body. In the first perspective, the woman's body is perceived as a sexual object, satisfying the sexual needs of men within the legitimate heterosexuality of patriarchal oppression. In the latter, the woman's body is regarded as a sexual subject, seeking and obtaining pleasure, freedom and power (Weitzer 2009; Sanders et al. 2011). Both perspectives have been considered reductionists, since they deny complexity and diversity of experiences and meanings for people involved in sex work (Weitzer 2009). Human rights' guarantee is also another issue that divides and concerns both perspectives. Anti-prostitution feminists describe prostitution as an inherent human rights violation, while the SWs' rights movements framed SWs' rights as human rights. By linking SWs' rights to human rights, SWs are ensuring that the international community will not ignore abuses perpetrated against them (Mgbako 2020).

As a former social worker and a researcher working in harm reduction with street-based SWs, I became sensitive to the lack of participation of SWs in the design, implementation and evaluation of projects that concern them. Usually, these are run by NGOs and focus mainly on harm reduction and HIV prevention. Additionally, academic research tends to exclude them from the research process (van der Meulen 2015), and they are also excluded from the social and political debate around policies (Mathieu 2003).

Therefore, from September 2012 to June 2015, I facilitated participatory action research (PAR) with street-based female SWs and an outreach team in a Portuguese city. This study aimed to encourage all stakeholders (SWs, outreach staff and facilitator) to participate in the construction of a socio- educational model of intervention.

Drawing on this PAR, this article focuses on the rights that SWs advocated during our study. The findings discussed here represent one piece only of a larger investigation. The PAR process and results are discussed elsewhere.

After framing SWs' rights as human rights and the contextualization of the right to work, to be protected by the law and to be free from violence, I briefly present a sum up of the PAR I was engaged in. Then, I focus on the rights claimed by the SWs. These rights are divided into the three above- mentioned major categories, namely the right to work, to be protected by the law and to be free from violence. All these categories include cross-cutting rights, such as the right to be treated with respect, to be heard and seen as full people, to motherhood and to be free from discrimination and stigma. Finally, some recommendations to social work practice and research with SWs are both suggested to promote human rights and SWs' participation in the public sphere.

I recognize prostitution as a form of sex work, being defined as an exchange of sexual services, performances or products by adults and with mutual consent (Weitzer 2010) and 'as an understandable (and reasonable) response to a socio-economic need within the context of a consumer culture, and within a social framework that privileges male sexuality' (O'Neill 2001: 15–16). Sex work is considered to be voluntary in a context of limited choice

due to several structural and social constraints, including economic, that lead women, men and transgender entry into sex work (Silva 2010). Despite the economic constraint is a regular factor among SWs, it is not an exclusive factor or decisive by itself. It plays with psychological, social, cultural and gender aspects, going beyond determinism and free will, with people having the ability to make choices and giving meaning to their experiences (Oliveira 2011). I am against all forms of exploitation of persons for sexual or other purposes, child abuse, violence and every kind of cruelty.

SWs' rights are human rights

The International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights, during the First World Whores' Congress held in 1985, drafted the World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights, where SWs' rights were for the first time framed as human rights (Mgbako 2020). This Charter, among others revindications, argued for the guarantee of all human rights and civil liberties, including the freedom of speech, travel, immigration, work, marriage and motherhood and the right to unemployment insurance, health insurance and housing (Pheterson 1989). More recently, in 2012, the Sex Workers Freedom Festival played a key role in the definition of the rights to associate, to be protected by the law, to be free from violence, to be free from discrimination, to health, to move and to migrate, and to work and choose occupation (Mgbako 2020). In this section, the rights mentioned by the participants are highlighted.

A right to work, to be protected by the law and to be free from violence

The right to choose an occupation and to work will tackle the lack of labour protection, improving working conditions. In Portugal, sex work is neither legal nor illegal, and the existing framework lacks SWs' protection regarding their working and living conditions. Governmental measures tend to exclude SWs from social benefits – for instance, in the case of unemployment, disease, retirement or death. Currently, the confinement due to COVID-19 pandemic may call our governments' attention to how precarious and vulnerable SWs' situation can be as many do not have another source of income or social- economic support.

The right to be protected by the law guarantees legal protection and access to justice when they are victims of crime. Working conditions and other oppressive elements that combine gender, social and racial inequalities may facilitate violent situations. Several studies demonstrate a high prevalence of violence and victimization in sex work settings, especially among female street-based prostitution (Pyett and Warr 1997; Church et al. 2001; Raphael and Shapiro 2004). Violence against prostitutes tends to increase when it is associated with myths, such as prostitutes cannot be raped or the assumption that they were asking for or deserve it (Miller and Schwartz 1995). Often, women chose not to file a complaint precisely because they are prostitutes and do not feel confident to seek police help (Pyett and Warr 1997). This fact favours aggressors who are not punished for their acts and take the advantage to continue committing this crime (Oliveira 2011). Consequently, violence against SWs is usually invisible. Professionals such as police, outreach workers, journalists and the battered women themselves seem to face aggressions with indifference and accept it as normal (Oliveira 2011).

There are many forms of violence, which can be perpetrated by clients, passers-by, professionals of health and social services and so on. It may also occur among SWs, who sometimes fight against each other because of territorial and personal reasons, and in private 'off-duty'(non-working) places; in the latter there is no identified aggressor (Ribeiro and Sacramento 2005).

Violence is not an intrinsic aspect of sex work, but it arises from many situations and sources, assuming different and multiple forms, and it should be analysed within a context of sex work stigma (Ribeiro and Sacramento 2005; Oliveira 2011). Stigma and discrimination promote an environment that sustains the culture of violence (Ross et al. 2012).

The relationship between sex work and stigma has been widely documented. According to Goffman (1963: 3), stigma refers to 'an attribute that is significantly discrediting'. Stigma is the result of an interactive social process that involves the relationship between an attribute and a stereotype. Link and Phelan (2001), in turn, re-conceptualized stigma as the co-occurrence of five components: labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss and discrimination. Working in conjunction with social, economic and political power, these components generate stigma. Unlike Goffman, Link and Phelan (2001) argue that stigma is dynamic, meaning that stigmatized persons could be empowered. Usually, to cope with stigma, SWs activate some defence mechanisms (e.g. rationalization); however, these forms of resistance operate at an individual level, having little or no impact on the wider society (Weitzer 2017).

Resistance is seen as a way of producing social change, so people living with stigma should not be seen as passive, helpless or submissive victims (Link and Phelan 2001). However, stigma is difficult to eradicate because of the discrimination it engenders. Symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1989) and hegemonic discourses explain the internalized oppression and domination. Symbolic power legitimizes power inequalities; therefore, stigmatized individuals or groups can find it difficult to resist. Link and Phelan (2001) argue that a range of aspects and mechanisms need to be considered if stigma is to be changed. Thus, they propose a multifaceted multi-level approach, designed to (1) produce fundamental changes in attitudes and beliefs or (2) change the power relations that enable dominant groups to act according to their attitudes and beliefs that lead to stigmatization. Weitzer (2017) considers that the authors have made a great contribution to the understanding of stigma; however, the changes that must be made by this multifaced approach are not clear. Weitzer (2017) agrees that a widespread attitudinal change is a necessary condition for reduction stigma, and he commends the following: (1) the use of neutral language instead of derogatory terms because of the asymmetrical power relationship it reproduces; (2) media should portray a range of settings and workers' experiences instead of focusing on a negativity bias – they can be also a vehicle for public education; (3) decriminalization; (4) industry mobilization; (5) SW activism; (6) academic community and the deconstruction of anti-prostitution discourse as 'mainstream social institutions and many powerful, well-organized interest groups are committed not only to blocking any normalization of commercial sex, but also to perpetuating and intensifying stigmatization' (Weitzer 2017: 9).

The right to be free from violence ensures that SWs are protected from the abuse they experience at the hands of other individuals, as well as institutional violence perpetrated by health and social care professionals. Several studies performed in Portugal (Ribeiro et al. 2007; Silva 2007; Oliveira 2011)

identified discriminatory attitudes towards prostitutes perpetrated by service providers. Oliveira (2011) considered those attitudes a less evident form of violence that SWs encountered in contact with welfare, health and justice services. This form of violence stems from the political need for social control of bodies and the sexuality of men and women engaged in prostitution, who are regarded as deviants and as an affront to the normalized sexuality (Pheterson 1993; Oliveira 2011).

In this regard, social work – as a human rights profession, moving from politics of 'rescue' and 'rehabilitation', to politics of empowerment through recognition of SWs' agency and their ability to make choices – might be a significant step towards social inclusion.

Background

The focus of PAR is on improving practice, raising consciousness and encouraging emancipation. The general idea is inspired by a desire to conduct research with SWs rather than on or about them. As such, I chose PAR because it allows the production of pragmatic knowledge and generates praxis or action (Freire 1972; Denzin and Lincoln 2006), and it seems the most appropriate to comply with participants' interests. Plus, PAR is not only a method but a philosophy of life and an approach that implies a commitment to others, ethics and respectful relationships (Fals-Borda 1991). SWs are treated as persons and not as objects of research (van der Meulen 2015), which is very important for who is highly stigmatized and is not accustomed to participating in studies as an equal partner (Martin 2015; van der Meulen 2015).

This PAR involved 28 participants (nineteen street-based female SWs, eight outreach workers of an NGO that provide services for SWs and one PAR facilitator) and was developed through three cycles of planning-action-reflection. To sum up, we achieved an agreement based on shared concerns and a mutual understanding regarding priorities to all stakeholders – occupational health and safety. Despite the consensus, we find less cohesion among SWs, which affected collective activities. PAR's consciousness-raising initiatives provided a sense of control, but collective action is still required to strengthen their shared concerns. This article presents the rights that 19 SWs claimed, and is only one piece of a larger investigation.

Method

The topic discussed in this article focused only on contributions of nineteen street-based female SWs. They were located through a service for SWs designed to promote health and to prevent HIV/AIDS. I was integrated into the outreach team, and my presence, including the purpose and goals of the investigation, were explained to SWs and accepted by them.

Data were collected from September 2012 to June 2015 through informal interviews and in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in private and group discussions. As Glassman and Erdem (2014) emphasized, the starting point of PAR is not an abstract research question but arises from the experience and observation of human interaction. Therefore, questions were predetermined, written based on preliminary data collected during fieldwork through informal interviews. Questions guiding the larger study were grouped into five broad categories: evaluation and redesign of outreach services for SWs; perceptions of stigma concerning social, health and justice services; opinion on sex work (reasons for entry and stay involved, positive and negative

aspects, Portuguese framework); managing personal and professional lives; and dreams and hopes.

The women were interviewed in time and at a place of their choice (an NGO's headquarters, cafe/restaurant and on the street), and group discussions took place in an NGO's headquarters. Interviews and group discussions were recorded with their permission and transcribed. Before coding, SWs were encouraged to read, comment and modify their interview transcripts. All procedures and findings were discussed with participants in several phases, including the categories of rights presented in this article. Participants were informed that any information provided would be strictly confidential, that access to data would be limited to me and my supervisor. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants.

Study participants (N = 19)	
Demographic characteristic	Sex workers
Age (in years)	
20–29	7
30–39	3
40–49	5
50–59	4
Education	
Primary or lower	7
Secondary	6
Completed secondary	6
Nationality	
Portuguese	12
Brazilian	3
Romanian	4
Sex work experience (in years)	
<1	1
1–10	12
11-20	6

Content analysis was applied to analyse the data, following the principles and procedures described in the specialist literature on this technique (Strauss and Corbin 2007). All consent procedures were evaluated and approved by the research centre where this study was integrated.

Findings and discussion

In this section, I present SWs' voices, trying to be accurate with what they stand for. In Maggie O'Neill words, 'in the process of the research, I do not aim or claim to speak for female "prostitutes" but rather to speak with them, from multiple standpoints, and to open up intellectual and practical spaces for them to speak for themselves' (2001: 51).

A right to work

Despite few exceptions, the majority of SWs consider prostitution as work, which should be recognized and treated like a regular job, which implies the payment of taxes and the access to social and legal rights.

They argued that rules concerning regulation of the activity should be established by SWs, that is, they requested control over work conditions (not over their bodies), in the following terms: (1) SWs must be free of choice to work in indoor or outdoor settings, and not be confined to 'red light districts', and to choose the type of services they want to sell. The selection of both clients and sexual practices are fundamental rights within the trade (Pheterson 1993). (2) SWs should work as an independent worker, free from exploitation of third parties. Finally (3) they emphasized the need for the control of sexually transmitted infections, as long as they are treated with respect and in a non-judgemental way.

Despite their opinion on these legal matters, some barriers prevent them from taking action towards change. Among some aspects such as the tendency to consider sex work as a temporary or occasional activity, which leads to a lack of professional identity or group cohesion (Mathieu 2003; Oliveira 2011), stigma appears to be the major barrier. SWs are aware of the general opinion of society – regarded as 'traditional models of female dishonor' (Pheterson 1993: 46), since they contravene norms of acceptable female sexuality (Pheterson 1993) – as such they devalue the activity in respect to other professions, believing it is dishonest and deviant behaviour. In Goffman's point of view, stigmatized persons hold the same beliefs as society regarding themselves; therefore, they manage the information to preserve their spoiled identity. In Sandra's words, 'I can't say that it is an honest job […] it is a way of survival, to make money to pay bills' (aged 35, five years in sex work).

SWs tend to justify themselves arguing for survival prostitution. This rationalization is a defence mechanism that converts prostitution in legitimate and acceptable work, enabling to deal with negatives issues of sex work. In the same way, other SWs emphasized that they go beyond commercial sex exchange, as Raquel mentioned: 'I believe it is a profession like any other and sometimes we are more psychologists than prostitutes. You know, most of the time men only want to talk' (aged 42, twenty years in sex work).

This statement brings sex work closer to a conventional and socially accepted job to manage their spoiled identity. It is also a rationalization that transforms sex work into useful and functional activity, providing, as in this example, emotional support (Sanders 2006a). On the other hand, it shows the diversity of SWs' clients. Besides the sexual experience, some SWs' clients are looking for emotional comfort, connection or the girlfriend experience (Sanders 2007).

Not all SWs support the legalization, and some of them argue against it because they believe it can attract more girls into the trade, who could be misled by myths and fantasies. Moreover, they identified any advantages with the legalization. However, they did not recognize themselves as victims; on the contrary, they showed clearness in their choice, agency and self-determination. Prostitution certainly is not a dreamed job, but it appeared as a response, in a time and within a context of several constraints, namely economic, which led to the decision of entry into sex work. It is worthy of mention that none of the SWs advocated a prohibitionist policy model.

A right to be protected by the law

SWs are familiar with clients' aggression; some of them have already been assaulted or they know a colleague who was. For example, Diana's ears were ripped by one client who took off her earrings. Monica, Carina and Raquel were kidnapped, stripped, beaten, physically, emotionally and sexually abused, and abandoned naked in the wilderness. Susana was raped under the threat of a knife in her throat. Many others were robbed. In some cases, SWs filed a complaint against their aggressor, and their testimonies played a key role to arrest the perpetrators. However, other SWs feel that the police do nothing to prevent and arrest these individuals. Despite some exceptions of people helping and being nice to them, society tends to use another form of violence, mostly verbal offenses, as Carina noted: 'Some people pass by and mocks us. They call us "whore", "fucking bitch". They also had thrown me stones and empty bottles' (aged 43, four years in sex work).

Verbal offenses can be found in a main road area where an SW offers her services. On the wall is written 'whore AIDS', suggesting a relationship between prostitution and disease, and demonstrating double discrimination – one due to prostitution, and other related to AIDS. The relationship between prostitution and epidemiology has been widely documented, revealing a kind of 'whorephobia' that has been serving to justify the need for control of sexually transmitted infections, mostly based on moral and hygienic practices and discourses.

Oliveira (2011) distinguishes two forms of violence: covert and open. The aforementioned examples mainly portray a form of open violence, that is, directed violence with physical and/or psychological consequences, including verbal or written insults, scorn, kidnapping and assault. The covert form of violence – a gesture or behavioural expression of reprobation, avoidance, contempt and/or disrespect – is rarely mentioned by an SW. However, it is well known that stigma and stigmatization are a constant in their lives, and it is being considered a form of violence (Ribeiro and Sacramento 2005; Oliveira 2011), perhaps the most damaging of them all due to its unquestionable and natural acceptance rooted in the social construction of the prostitute and by taking a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1999).

Sex work is not inherently violent, but its context makes it dangerous, debilitating and unsatisfactory (Overall 1992), as Carolina (aged 36, ten years in sex work) remarked '[Prostitution] is exhausting. I feel bad when people pass by and I do not know what they are thinking. They think we're crap'. Or as like Sara said: 'Nobody is nice to us. We are not like the other ladies' (aged 35, two years in sex work).

A right to be free from violence

Participants have a close relationship with welfare services. Many of them beneficiate from the Social Insertion Benefit (the Portuguese government's measure for social inclusion of people who are in a disadvantaged economic situation), and others are followed up by child protective services. Not all of them disclose their occupation to social workers for fear of stigma, of losing welfare benefits and their children. Consequently, not all social workers know women's status; therefore, their ability to meet the SWs' specific needs is limited (Sloan and Wahab 2000).

From SWs' point of view, welfare services are unresponsive to their needs and fail to guarantee their rights. First, they consider that their right to be

heard and seen as full people has been compromised. Traditional social workers tend to understand social issues linearly and partially and seek for solutions less collaboratively (Sousa et al. 2007). Some social work practices reinforce stigma by pathologizing and labelling SWs. Charity organizations frequently define what people need, believing they know what is best for their clients, relying on fake discourses of solidarity, empowerment, self-esteem and social inclusion (Agustín 2007). This might occur due to the influence of the anti-prostitution discourse on social workers' practices. According to Wahab (2002), the anti-prostitution arguments proved to be more consistent with social work background, shaping the social representation of prostitutes as victims in distress needing to be rescued or as deviants. These representations continue to inform much of contemporary social work practice with female SWs, reinforcing notions of social workers as agents of social and moral control (Wahab 2002).

Second, SWs believe economic support is unfairly distributed, with people who use drugs and other individuals having more support than SWs. This reveals, on the contrary of what could be expected, that there is no empathy or solidarity among these stigmatized categories. According to Goffman (1963), stigmatized individuals may find support from those with whom they share the stigma (defined as equal partners) or from the informed ones (individuals who accept stigma in a non-discriminatory way), which seems that is not applied in this case. The discriminatory discourse of SW in relation to other individuals appears to be a defence mechanism to deal with their stigma, by distancing themselves from the marginalized/deviant social category and approaching themselves with a normative expectation.

Finally, welfare services refuse to provide support when requested, pushing people to a situation of greater vulnerability. SWs claim that that do not get help to have a better life and working conditions or to exit prostitution. Regardless of their choice, their rights are always compromised. It is well known that street-based female prostitution is the most visible type of sex work. Frequently, it is associated with higher economic disadvantage (O'Neill 2008; Porter and Bonilla 2010; Ribeiro et al. 2007). Both visibility and economic vulnerability may lead to oppression and give social and health services legitimacy to control and violate SWs' privacy.

Most participants stated having children as a reason for entry into and/or for stay involved in sex work; however, many do not disclose their activity to social workers, because they feel their ability to be 'good mothers' is called into question. Some of them had already lost custody of their children, and others live in fear of losing them. Thus, welfare services tend to not acknowledge SWs' ability to be mothers (Ribeiro et al. 2007; Silva 2007; Oliveira 2011). Social workers' reports indicate that SWs are unable to take care of their children and reinforce the female sexual behaviour dichotomy – the 'bad' and the 'good' girl, based on hegemonic values and moral standpoints (Silva 2007; Oliveira 2011). In a study conducted by Peled and Levin-Rotberg (2013), two narratives were found among child protection officers, and both help to silence mothering in prostitution. This discrimination against SWs represents a form of structural violence (Oliveira 2011) – a form of violence perpetrated by institutions and systems (Wahab and Panichelli 2013). The symbolic violence is exerted by the services that reinforce stigma and do not recognize SWs' self-determination and ability (Oliveira 2011).

Recommendations for social work practice

SWs identified discriminatory attitudes towards them perpetrated by service providers, especially social workers. The whore stigma has been operated as a mechanism of repression and control of behaviour (Pheterson 1993; Silva 2007), and the neo-liberal capitalist society gives the right to suspend the rights to privacy, respect and individual choice. As Weiner noted,

> Being a prostitute makes a woman vulnerable to the loss of social services, removal of her children and termination of parental rights, expulsion from social support systems such as family or church, rape or other violence, and arrest.
> (1996: 100)

However, it does not mean that all social services and social workers are unfair or disrespectful to female SWs. It also does not intend to deny reports of child abuse or neglect. These situations should be analysed to protect the best interests of children, and this analysis should be evidence-based rather than be influenced by stereotypes, moralistic standpoints or prejudice.

As Sousa et al. (2007) noted, support institutions are ambiguous because professionals have a genuine intention to help, but, at the same time, they have a coercive function (to make people behave as they should). In order words, social work is polarized in a double function: to control and to care (Barker and Thomson 2014), caught in a 'double bind' (Benoit 1997).

Regardless of the different perspectives on sex work – as a form of violence or as legitimate work – social work aims towards social justice, and social workers should take an ethical stance to ensure that SWs' needs are met, and not be coercive or punitive (Wahab and Panichelli 2013). Furthermore, social work practice is not only about the assessment and meeting of SWs' needs, but it is also about the defining, understanding and guaranteeing of human rights (Ife 2008). As guidelines to social workers' practice, Sloan and Wahab (2000) suggested the following: promote the prosecution of third parties who explore or force women into prostitution; promote social and economic justice, equal work and education; destigmatize and depathologize SWs; and support women who want to leave sex work behind, or allow SWs to continue to work through the provision of services without requiring them to leave prostitution.

Society and elite categories, such as social workers, may indeed use the power and techniques to maintain and control stigmatized individuals. Due to the issues of lack of equality, it might be difficult to decrease existing stigmatization and power social dynamics. Therefore, relationship-based practice for social work with SWs is recommended. Briefly, relationship-based practice builds on psycho-social approaches and casework (Trevithick 2003), regarding the professional relationship as the medium through which a social worker could achieve a holistic understanding in order to better intervene (Ruch 2005). As noted by Howe

> Social workers might design their interventions in such a way as to increase clients' exposure to relationships that are secure, responsive, psychologically available, emotionally corrective and positively regarding.
> (1998: 52)

The social worker–client relationship is central to social welfare (Biestek 1957; Perlman 1979), and it has been regarded as the soul of social work (Biestek 1957) or as the heart (Collins and Collins 1981) as well as a facilitator in education settings (Rogers 1975; Freire 1996). All social practice is, by definition, relationship-based, insofar as social work interventions imply an inter-personal dimension (Ruch 2005).

Social service users value some aspects of a successful helping relationship, showing preferences in areas of working relationships, work style and worker characteristics (Ribner and Knei-Paz 2002). The key aspects to a successful helping relationship include factors that provide a sense of equality in the relationship and a non-judgmental stance, flexibility, accessibility and empathy. Social workers are people who listen and see their clients as full people and who have time to go the extra distance (Ribner and Knei-Paz 2002; Leigh and Miller 2004; Barker and Thomson 2014). Human connection is a fundamental element to the promotion of positive experiences with the services. The experiences of being listened to by service providers, with a genuine concern beyond professional responsibilities, being treated as an equal and as an individual, generate trust in the worker and the institution that he/she represents. But if previous relationships with professionals have been experienced as non-supportive or even humiliating, users may be discouraged from re-seeking services (Barker and Thomson 2014). That is why social workers need also to be sensitive to the difficulty that SWs have in trusting social workers (Weiner 1996).

By adopting a relationship-based approach, we are challenging the tendency to emphasize a reductionist understanding of human behaviour and also the bureaucratic responses to complex social problems (Ruch 2005). Social workers must be able to deal with the uniqueness of each actor and combine various sources of knowledge to understand complexity and unpredictability. Collaborative, non-judgemental and empathetic intervention models are essential to disseminate, promote services' effectiveness and deconstruct negative representations regarding both social workers and SWs.

The relationship-based approach can be applied in face-to-face encounters by using the relationship as a source of information to best meet SWs' needs and guarantee their rights, regarding it as 'the means by which any help or intervention is offered' (Ruch 2005: 113). Social work needs to renew its discourses and practices by promoting collaborative ways of work, anti-oppressive practice and empowerment, acknowledging the expertise of SWs and counteracting the tendency to pathologize problems and people.

Social workers might also be allies in the fight for SWs' rights, advocating for social justice and towards policies that could protect and guarantee human rights. Promoting consciousness-raising initiates at an individual level might be a step for SWs' collective political action.

Final notes: a look into the future
SWs are not voiceless. They have been silenced by some social categories and are encountering some barriers preventing their full participation in the public sphere. These findings suggest that they have opinions and the will to make a difference in their and other people's lives, but they claim from an individual standpoint.

Researchers, outreach workers, health and social services professionals, police, politicians and other authorities may ally in the fight for

the recognition of SWs' rights as human rights. Some small steps could be taken, such as treating every human being with respect, making an effort to hear want they have to say, taking a careful and non-judgmental stance, assuming a lead role against all forms of violence, discrimination against and exploitation, acknowledging that violence against SWs is violence against us all. However, caution must be taken because of the ambiguous role of the allies. According to Mathieu (2003), their support is important because SWs lack resources and might find help for a collective action, but depending on allies may lead to a fragile situation, and, as Lopes and Oliveira noted, 'we must stress the importance of SWs ownership of any future activism, organization or movement. Without this, any development is doomed to fail' (2006: 13).

I recommend research with SWs, rather than on or about them, rights-based and relationship-based practice for social workers and other professionals who provide services for SWs. Inequal power relationships should be replaced with equal partnerships, aiming to promote consciousness-raising activities with and for SWs as well as to take action on matters that concern SWs. It is also important to build bridges with other members of the community to demystify stereotypical representations and to raise awareness of SW stigma and its consequences on its actors.

Finally, any discussion regarding sex work policy should promote the inclusion and consultation of SWs. A policy change must be informed by the lived experiences and with the full participation of SWs to ensure that it is in full compliance with SWs' human rights and recognizes their agency and self-determination. Through networking involving all the stakeholders, it is possible to overcome limitations and barriers and promote citizenship towards a more equitable world.

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