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RESEARCH

Sexual Assistance for People with Disabilities: A Case Study in the Portuguese Context

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Abstract

Introduction Sexuality is a fundamental dimension of life, yet people with disabilities often face systemic oppressions that hinder their sexual agency. This study addresses the lack of formal sexual assistance in Portugal by exploring the insights of a disability rights collective regarding the implementation, challenges, and empowerment potential of such services.

Methods A qualitative case study was conducted with "The DEFiants" (As DEsaFiantes), an anti-ableist Portuguese feminist collective. Data collection occurred between October 2023 and July 2024, involving three stages of exploratory and semi-structured interviews with two representative members to capture the collective's public stance. The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Results The findings identified six key themes: the need for broad and flexible definitions of sexual assistance, the transition from theory to practice, the potentialities of sexual assistance for self-knowledge and empowerment, ethical challenges (particularly regarding intellectual disabilities), the strategic distinction between personal and sexual assistance, and the necessary alliance with the sex work movement.

Conclusions The study concludes that sexual assistance should be framed as a human right that prioritizes pleasure, autonomy, and self-determination. The participants advocate for a model that moves away from medicalized perspectives and instead embraces a "body revolution" that empowers non-normative bodies.

Policy Implications To operationalize sexual assistance in Portugal, policies must focus on the decriminalization of sex work to provide a legal framework for the service. Additionally, the study suggests utilizing existing mechanisms, such as the Social Benefit for Inclusion, to fund these services, thereby ensuring equitable access while protecting the privacy of people with disabilities.

Keywords Sexual assistance · Sex work · Disability · Sexuality · Portuguese context

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Introduction

Sexuality is widely recognized as a dimension of people's lives that influences the quality of life and life satisfaction (WHO, 2015). Nevertheless, it continues to be treated as taboo in several societies (Chrastina & Večeřová, 2020; Esteve-Ríos et al., 2021; Gammino et al., 2016).

The multiple oppressions and challenges faced by people with disabilities affect the development of their sexual agency (Liddiard, 2017). Therefore, activists defend that sexuality should be an explicit demand of the independent living movement (Bahner, 2020; García-Santesmases et al., 2024). The independent living movement emerged around the 1970s from the disability rights movement to fight for a life far from institutions, dependency on caregivers, and controlled by a medical perspective. This philosophy is a form of resistance that creates a counter-narrative to the existing social construction of disability, which continues to oppress people with disabilities. By reinforcing people with disabilities as rights-holders, the need for policies and social changes is highlighted (Tarrant, 2022). Crucially, this movement also challenges the tendency to treat people with disabilities as a homogeneous group. Such homogenization overlooks the intersectional nature of disability, where experiences of sexuality are profoundly shaped by various intersecting factors (e.g., gender, socio-economic context) (Lambelet, 2017). Furthermore, mainstream feminist theory has historically prioritized the experiences of able-bodied women, often neglecting the specific forms of systemic oppression faced by women with disabilities (Liddiard, 2017). This lack of inclusion has resulted in a double invisibility, where women with disabilities find themselves on the margins of both the feminist movement, which has often ignored bodily diversity, and the disability rights movement, which has frequently been gender unaware (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Based in the slogan 'Nothing about us, without us!', which gained international prominence in the 1990s through the work of James Charlton and disability activists, a fundamental shift in rights and advocacy occurred: the phrase rejects the paternalistic medical model - where professionals make decisions for people with disabilities - and establishes a social and human rights model that centers people with disabilities as the primary experts of their own experiences and policy needs (Charlton, 1998). In this context, sexual assistance was originally demanded by people with physical disabilities (García-Santesmases, 2019; Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022).

Although sexual assistance is not formally recognized as a human right by international declarations and constitutions, several authors argue that it should be framed as one (Pinho et al., 2020a; Crehan, 2023; De Asís Roig, 2019; Gammino et al., 2016; Girard et al., 2018; Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022; Limoncin & Jannini, 2018; Sánchez & Rodríguez, 2020; Saorín et al., 2022; Tichovová et al., 2021).

From a broad perspective, sexual assistance can be defined as support in the sexuality domain for adults with disabilities (European Platform Sexual Assistance [EPSEAS], 2024). However, different definitions coexist in the literature, depending on the sexual activities involved in the provided service (De Asís Roig, 2019). These definitions and the perspectives that underpin them are shaped by the underlying model of sexual assistance adopted. Within the European literature, four primary models are referred: the charitable model (Di Nucci, 2011; Girard et al., 2018), the therapeutic model (Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022), the autoerotic model (Martínez, 2016) and the erotic model (Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022; Saorín et al., 2022).

Within the charitable model, volunteers affiliated with non-profit organizations voluntarily and altruistically provide sexual services to individuals with severe disabilities (Di Nucci, 2011; Girard et al., 2018). The therapeutic model, also referred to as sexual surrogacy, is grounded in the premise that individuals—whether or not they have disabilities—may require professional guidance to address sexual dysfunctions. In this framework, a surrogate partner implements, in practice, the interventions discussed in therapy with a qualified health professional (e.g., psychologist, psychiatrist, or sexual therapist) (Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022). Both models are criticized and rejected by social disability movements. The charitable model as it puts the access to pleasure in the willingness of volunteers who might have some paraphilia (Gammino et al., 2016) and the therapeutic model, as it assumes sexuality as an individual problem of people with disabilities, thereby promoting intervention aimed at normalizing them rather than addressing broader social and structural barriers (Freckelton, 2013). Therefore, recently the discussion tends to focus on the autoerotic model (Martínez, 2016) and the erotic model (Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022; Saorín et al., 2022).

The auto-erotic model frames sexual assistance as a service that promotes the access of a person to their own bodies (De Asís Roig, 2019; García-Santesmases, 2019). The support can be provided before (e.g. helping the person undress), during (e.g. placing contraception, positioning the person), and after (e.g. assisting with hygiene, helping the person get dressed) sexual interactions with others, or to assist in masturbation if they are unable to do it themselves (Real, 2021). In other words, this model is instrumental support for the person in the sexual activity (Martínez, 2016) to access their body and thus does not include sexual relations between the person with disabilities and the sexual assistant (Centeno, 2020; García-Santesmases, 2019; Sánchez & Rodríguez, 2020; Saorín et al., 2022). The erotic model frames sexual assistance as a mutual experience, involving

emotional and/or sexual engagement that benefits both parties involved in the interaction (García-Santesmases & Branco de Castro, 2016; Geymonat, 2019). This assistance may involve penetration, oral sex, massage, physical contact, touch, masturbation, conversations about sexual topics, and the use of sex toys (Limoncin et al., 2014).

No European country has yet adopted specific legislation for sexual assistance (Real, 2021). In countries with legal sexual services (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland) sexual assistance is a legitimate activity with different levels of regulation and funding; in countries without a specific legal framework concerning sexual services (e.g. Denmark, Belgium, Austria, Spain and Italy) sexual assistance can be tolerated, but the lack of clear regulations creates ambiguities and challenges for the organizations that promote it; and in countries with abolitionist systems (e.g. France and Sweden) sexual services are criminalized, which makes it difficult to implement and access sexual assistance (Pinho et al., 2020a). Abolitionism, by criminalizing the purchase of sexual services, often results in faster and riskier negotiations that tend to exclude people with disabilities, denying them the agency to seek sexual fulfillment (Bahner, 2020; Geymonat, 2019).

Sexual assistants are usually linked to specific characteristics, such as empathy, sensitivity, the will to help others and the understanding of the needs of people with disabilities (Esteve-Ríos et al., 2021; Gammino et al., 2016; Limoncin et al., 2014). Regarding sexual assistance, training, funding and legal framework are frequently mentioned since they also tend to differ from country to country (Chrastina & Večeřová, 2020; Gammino et al., 2016).

Training can help in dealing with diversity (Pinho et al., 2020b) and the specific needs of each service user by addressing knowledge about disability, sexuality, ethics, communication, and massage techniques (Geymonat & Macioti, 2016; Limoncin & Jannini, 2018). Selection and training are associated with practices with less physical involvement, such as oral sex and penetration (Esteve-Ríos et al., 2021; Limoncin et al., 2014), as well as fewer risks of possible abuses (Gammino et al., 2016; Limoncin & Jannini, 2018) and atypical sexual interest in people with disabilities, which can include sadism, attraction for the idea of impotence and obedience or the desire to satisfy sexual assistants' fantasies (Limoncin et al., 2014). Thus, training is recommended by several authors (Pinho et al., 2020b; Geymonat & Macioti, 2016; Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022; Morales et al., 2020; Rakić, 2020), but it is not a synonym of competence (Geymonat & Macioti, 2016).

Funding to pay for the service is another concern. Some organizations subsist with memberships and training fees, refusing public funding to avoid attempts of the State to control the ways in which the service can be provided and to protect sexual assistants' identity by preventing access to information that can be used by external members to stigmatize people (Geymonat & Macioti, 2016). Nevertheless, as highlighted in other studies, funding the service would ensure the opportunity for people with disabilities to resort to sexual assistance without depending on their economic possibilities to do so, and it would improve conditions for professionals to provide a safe and quality service by ensuring a fair payment (Pinho et al., 2020b; Saorín et al., 2022).

Moreover, the legal framework on sexual assistance could contribute to access to the service and decent conditions for professionals. However, professionalization could also risk over-regulation and association with sex work (Tichovová et al., 2021). The confusion between sexual assistance and sex work points to perpetuating stigma and discrimination (Saorín et al., 2022). A critical conceptual distinction must be made between sex work and sexual assistance. While both involve commercial sexual services, sexual assistance is rooted in the Independent Living movement and a service provided to people with disabilities (Centeno Ortiz, 2016). Also, some people defend that it requires specialized knowledge regarding disability-specific physiology, transfers, and communication (Liddiard, 2014). Sex work is a service that can be provided to people with or without disabilities but may be inaccessible for people with disabilities due to the lack of accessible spaces or professional stigma (Pinho et al., 2020b; Centeno Ortiz, 2016). Therefore, sexual assistance is designed to bridge the gap between necessary supports for a pleasurable moment and the right to sexual expression.

However, restrictive policies on sex work prejudice the implementation of sexual assistance. Thus, decriminalization and integrative policies for sex work are pointed out as a possible solution in the literature (Geymonat, 2019).

The lack of consensus and programs on sexual assistance reflects the failure of policies to support the sexual citizenship of people with disabilities, representing a systemic failure to recognize their sexual agency. There are still no clear paths for people with disabilities to access these services (Crehan, 2023; Saorín et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to debate and adapt sexual assistance to each country, culture, and people with disabilities (Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022), focusing on pleasure, desire, and attraction (Morales et al., 2016, 2020).

In Portugal only in 2017, through Decree-Law no.129/2017 of 9 October, an Independent Living program was implemented (DR, 2017). This decree is a prime example of policy failure; while it promotes autonomy by allowing some people with disabilities to have their daily activities supported by personal assistants, no guidelines concerning the sexual sphere were considered. This suggests that sexual needs are considered secondary or non-existent

for those requiring personal assistance. In a larger study about sexuality and disability, some people with physical disabilities have mentioned an interest in using sexual assistance (Pereira et al., 2018). However, there is no formal service of sexual assistance in Portugal, creating a legal vaccum where sex work – as a general service without specific knowledge concerning disabilities – is the only option for people with disabilities to access commercial sex services (Pinho et al., 2020a). As a result, individuals are often forced into potentially discriminatory and unsafe practices to exercise what is, in essence, a fundamental human right. Here, service users with disabilities who resort to sex work tend to be men, as also observed in the international literature (Bahner, 2015; Jones, 2012; Liddiard, 2014; Sanders, 2007; Wotton, 2016), and professionals provide both penetrative and non-penetrative sexual practices. In the study conducted by Pinho et al. (2020b), sex workers who were interviewed reported embarrassment when dealing with non-normative bodies and practices adapted to such bodies. The lack of training and knowledge was pointed out as an obstacle, therefore, sex workers argued that training could help improve the quality of services (Author et al., 2020b; Wotton, 2016). The creation of a legal framework for sex services and financial support for the service was demanded by these professionals as well (Pinho et al., 2020b).

Due to the lack of studies concerning the perspectives of people with disabilities about a sexual assistance service in the Portuguese context, the research team tackled literature and social movements to address this gap, and the need for a case study emerged, focusing on a Portuguese Feminist Collective (*The DEFiants*). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the perspectives and stances of *The DEFiants* regarding sexual assistance and intended to answer the following research questions: What do *The DEFiants* think about sexual assistance? How do *The DEFiants* conceive a possible service implementation in Portugal?

Methods

The DEFiants Collective

The Portuguese support system for people with disabilities remains characterized by a tension between traditional institutional control and the emerging independent living movement. This imbalance is visible in the management of Independent Living Support Centers (CAVIs): while 35 centers are run by traditional disability organizations, only four are managed by people with disabilities (Fontes & Sena Martins, 2021). This landscape suggests a persistent marginalization of the agency and self-determination of people with disabilities in the design of policies that affect them.

Given this context and the scarcity of organizations in Portugal that strictly adhere to the independent living philosophy, the anti-ableist feminist collective As DEsaFiantes, which can be translated as *The DEFiant* and will be used from now on, was invited to participate as a primary unit of analysis for this case study. As an anti-ableist social movement, it represents a unique critical and feminist voice in the Portuguese context, being the reason of the selection of this specific collective. The group emerged precisely to address a perceived gap in the traditional Independent Living movement, which they view as often being gender unaware. For *The DEFiants*, the struggle for autonomy in an independent living model cannot be separated from the struggle for bodily rights, as seen through a feminist lens. They explicitly discussed how women with disabilities face a double invisibility - being excluded from the feminist agenda and being desexualized within the disability movement. This stance aligns with crip feminism, which challenges the historical exclusion of non-normative bodies from feminist discourses of liberation and bodily autonomy (McRuer, 2011). Their perspective is particularly vital in addressing how feminism has often overlooked women with intellectual disabilities, who are frequently subjected to paternalistic protectionism and denied the right to experience their own sexuality under the guise of vulnerability (Garland-Thomson, 2002, 2011). The feminist perspective of *The DEFiants* is what transforms the demand for sexual assistance from a mere service into a political 'body revolution' aimed at reclaiming pleasure as a right. To capture the collective's official political posture, the study utilized key informants as spokespersons. These informants were not selected to provide personal narratives but to articulate the movement's politicized consensus on sexual assistance. This approach is consistent with qualitative research on social movements, where the focus is the public voice and the organization's strategic stance. *The DEFiants* were founded in 2020 and aim to address issues at the intersection of gender and disability. The collective also aims to build alliances with other social movements; an example is the Portuguese Sex Workers Movement.

The DEFiants have a nationwide expression, with a significant focus on Lisbon and comprise a group of women and men with disabilities aged between 29 and 40 years old. All of them are Portuguese and single, and one is in a civil partnership. *The DEFiants* members are mainly heterosexual, except for one person who is questioning their sexual orientation. Concerning professional activity, the members are psychologists - one specializes in Couple Therapy and Clinical Sexuality - and others are from design and computer engineering.

Ethical Considerations

The research received approval from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto (Reference number: 2023/06-11c).

Centering the voices of people with disabilities and recognizing their thoughts, experiences and needs is essential in working together to build a more inclusive and sex-positive future for all (Crehan, 2023). Thus, *The DEFiants* were chosen for their willingness to take a public position on this matter, emphasizing the importance of visibility and debate in the present historical and sociocultural moment. A declaration with this information was signed by a representative person of *The DEFiants* with the authority to do so (see Appendix 1). Because of the mentioned decision, the data collected through the interviews of the participants represents their public position concerning sexual assistance; thus, the identities of the participants who were interviewed were protected, and all data was anonymized. No sociodemographic data concerning the individual participation of *The DEFiants* members will be disclosed to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Collection

Data collection started with the recruitment process. The research team searched for social movements linked to disability rights using digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and websites. The existence of organizations working in the field of disability rights in Portugal is scarce, and *The DEFiants* are the only reference with a critical and feminist perspective. Due to the need for more research outside of heteronormative male contexts and to include representations of women with disabilities (Benoit et al., 2022; García-Santesmases, 2019) the feminist perspective was an important characteristic identified by the research team to think about a service that does not exist in the national context. Therefore, the research team emailed *The DEFiants* and scheduled a meeting to present the research. Then, *The DEFiants* were invited to participate in the research through a case study.

The DEFiants members were informed of the aim of the case study and promoted an internal debate about the theme of sexual assistance. Two members of *The DEFiants* were designated by the collective to act as key informants. These representatives participated in three stages of interviews. It is important to emphasize that these participants served as authorized voices of the organization; therefore, the data represent a collective political position rather than individual subjective experiences. After verbal informed consent was obtained, two members of the research team proceeded with data collection at three different moments: in the first, exploratory interviews were conducted; in the second, semi-structured interviews were conducted; and in the third, a session for respondents validation was held, where the preliminary analysis was presented to and discussed with the collective's representatives to ensure the findings accurately reflected their official position. All these moments were recorded in an audio format, transcribed *verbatim*, and anonymized. The interviews focused on the following themes: terminologies and models related to disability, sexualities and corporalities, and conceptualizations and operationalizations of sexual assistance. The data collection occurred between October 2023 and July 2024; each moment presented an average duration of two hours.

Data Analysis

The research team used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022) since it is an analytic methodology with the potential to identify implicit and explicit meanings presented in the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). No software was used to manage and organize data. In the analysis, while the initial coding was predominantly inductive, capturing the specificities of the participants' discourse, the generation of themes was theoretically informed by the Independent Living model. The process followed the six recommended phases: (1) Familiarization with the data, where one of the researchers transcribed the interviews from audio to Word format and read the content multiple times. Here, the researcher took reflexive notes on initial impressions regarding terminology and power dynamics; (2) Coding of the narratives was conducted, with a first systematic and detailed coding of the entire dataset, capturing both semantic and latent meanings; (3) Grouping the codes into possible themes, which means that codes were organized into broader categories based on shared core concepts; (4) Reviewing the themes, which comprise patterns of shared meanings linked to a central idea. In this phase, a thematic map was developed (see Fig. 1) to help in the process of checking the themes against the original transcripts and ensure they accurately represented the collective's political posture. The depth of the analysis was ensured through three different moments, culminating in the devolution and validation of the results by the participants. Here, was the stage where the researchers and the collective discussed the codes and themes, ensuring a shared understanding of the movement's strategic demands and political consensus; (5) Defining and naming themes, which consisted of refining the themes' names; and (6) Producing the report that tells the story of the data and illustrating the findings (which were translated by the research team from Portuguese to English), while connecting them back to the research questions and existing literature.

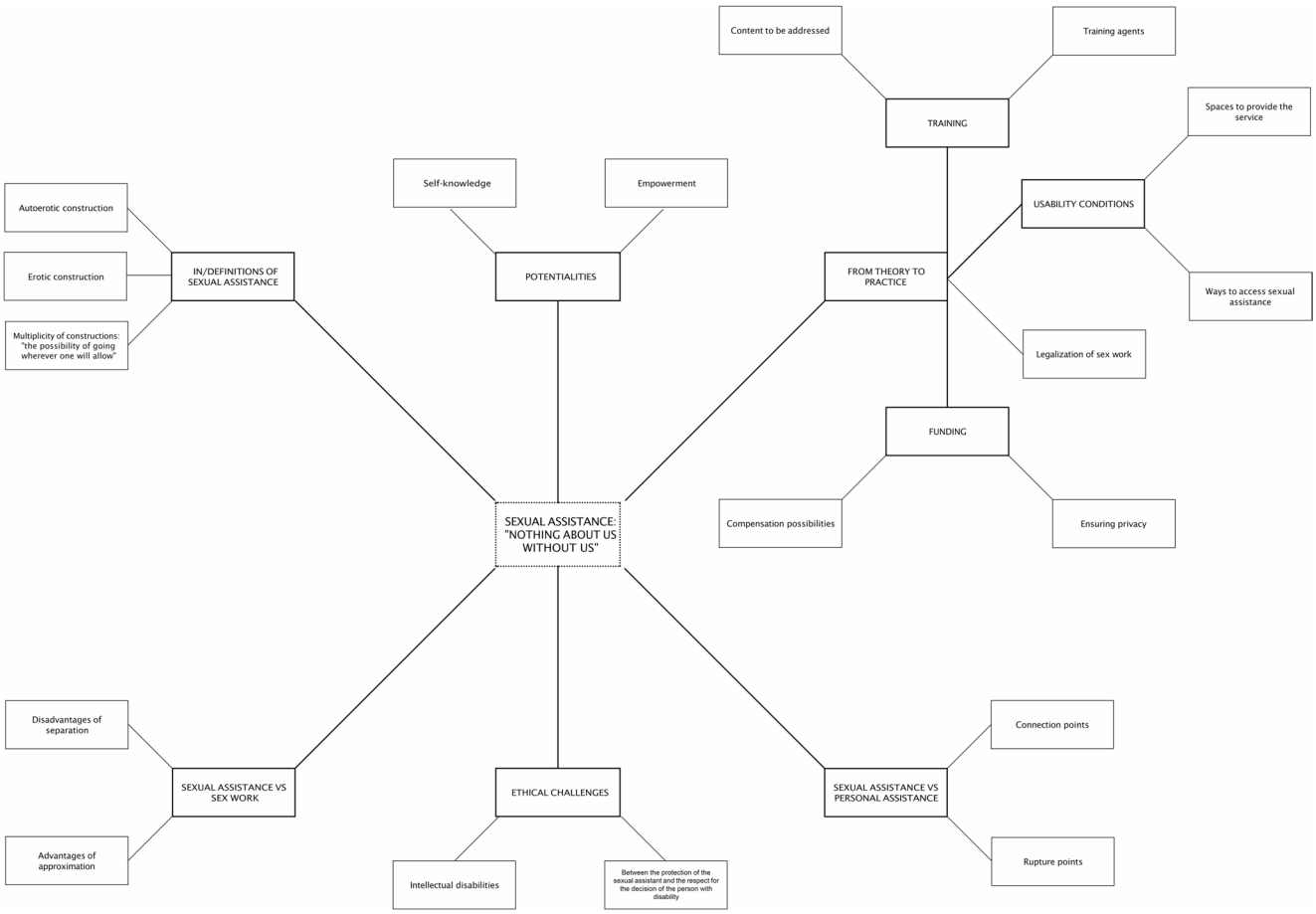


Fig. 1 Thematic map

Methodological Limitations

This study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, as a single case study focusing on one specific activist collective – *The DEFiants* – the findings cannot be generalized to all people with disabilities or disability organizations in Portugal. While the inclusion of additional perspectives from different collectives would be valuable, this limitation reflects the current embryonic state of the Portuguese activist landscape regarding sexual assistance. Also, the recruitment of only two key informants as spokespersons, within the collective, might be perceived as a small number; however, it is important to note that this reflects again the scarcity of social movements in Portugal that adopt a critical, anti-ableist, and feminist approach to sexuality, with a reflexive position concerning sexual assistance. Furthermore, the decision to use two key informants was strategic to capture the movement's unified public stance, which was refined through internal group deliberations prior to the interviews and the final validation of researchers' preliminar analysis during the devolution and validation of the results. Thus, this ensures that the results represent the collective's official narrative.

Second, while the study provides a deep mapping of a specific public position regarding sexual assistance, it does not capture the diversity of individual subjective experiences of sexuality among the broader population with disabilities. Nevertheless, the depth of the analysis was ensured through a three different moments, which allowed for a detailed exploration of the movement's ideas and strategic demands. Future research could expand on this by involving a wider range of stakeholders, including personal assistants and sex workers, to provide a multi-perspective view of the implementation of sexual assistance.

Results

The DEFiants are composed of activists for disability rights and aligned with the independent living model. They argue that policies concerning people with disabilities should include them in the discussion. That foundation is evident in all the narratives concerning sexual assistance,

prompting the commitment to thinking and expressing the desires and needs of people with disabilities regarding the service. The following results present the central themes identified in the collective's discourse. While the quotations originate from two key informants (hereafter referred to as P1 and P2 to distinguish their voices), the content reflects the unified public position reached by the movement through internal deliberation. Thus, the central idea of the analysis is Sexual assistance: 'Nothing about us with us without us', which the participants repeatedly emphasized as the ethical and political foundation for any discussion of sexual assistance in Portugal. As observed in Fig. 1, the findings include six themes: In/definitions of sexual assistance; From theory to practice; Potentialities; Ethical challenges; Sexual assistance vs. Personal assistance; and Sexual assistance vs. Sex work.

In/definitions of Sexual Assistance

The DEFiants express knowledge about different possibilities of defining sexual assistance depending on the physical limitations, motivation, and interest of the person who seeks the service.

On the one hand, participants refer to the existence of an autoerotic construction of sexual assistance, which perceives the service as a support to access one's own body, providing self-pleasure through masturbation, or creating conditions of autonomy for people with disabilities to experience sexual relationships with another partner. On the other hand, participants mention the existence of an erotic construction of sexual assistance, in which the people who seek the service and the people who provide the service may have sexual relationships between them.

From *The DEFiants* perspective, sexual assistance should be seen as a multiplicity of constructions: 'the possibility of going wherever one will allow' because, apart from a medical approach, multiple definitions of sexual assistance can broaden the perspective of the service and respond to the specificities of people with disabilities. Thus, *The DEFiants* see advantages in non-defining the service or in the coexistence of different definitions since one single way of defining sexual assistance can limit the desires and needs of people:

> *In our approach… in our vision… we think that sexual assistance can encompass all these areas, all these experiences of sex. Effectively, if there is consent, the person should be able to enjoy sexual assistance in what they need and not in one or other of these single constructions.* (P2)

From Theory to Practice

From theory to practice translates the views of *The DEFiants* concerning the possible operationalization of sexual assistance in Portugal. Several issues were addressed in this theme, such as the legalization of sex work, usability conditions, training, and funding.

One of the limitations perceived by *The DEFiants* for the implementation of sexual assistance services in Portugal is the lack of laws addressing commercial sex services, especially sex work. *The DEFiants* mentioned that they had already thought about applying to a fund to organize sexual assistance services, but there is no proper legislation to frame sex work and acts considered to facilitate or profit from prostitution can be legally criminalized. Therefore, they identify the need to overcome this situation by legalizing commercial sex services: '*I think it also involves legalizing prostitution. I think that would be a good starting point for us to have legality here, structured laws, wouldn't it?*' (P2).

In addition, to think about the operationalization of a service of sexual assistance in Portugal, *The DEFiants* express the need to create some usability conditions because people cannot be further disadvantaged due to the existence of a disability. One of the conditions is adequate space to provide the service. *The DEFiants* disagree with a profile of a sexual assistant, i.e., a person with specific characteristics to provide support in the domain of sexuality of people with disabilities, because they believe everyone is different and value different characteristics since their needs and interests are also different. For example, for some people, it might be important to have a sexual assistant who is physically robust to provide the service, but for other people, that might not be needed. Moreover, characteristics such as a patient or sensitive person are not assessed objectively because people can also understand what they mean differently. Alternatively, *The DEFiants* point out the importance of thinking about the characteristics of the spaces to provide the service. Here, accessibilities, support products, and access to bathrooms were mentioned:

> *Perhaps what could be important is that the spaces have the characteristics indicated (…) they should guarantee accessibility, guarantee support products such as a crane, for example, which could be a facilitator. That would be much more interesting than looking for the characteristics of the sexual assistants, but rather the characteristics of the space. The bathroom has doors that allow you to get in, which often does not happen, does it? The person cannot do their hygiene afterward because they cannot get in.* (P1)

Another condition to be considered is the management of the service. *The DEFiants* claim this management should be ensured by people with disabilities and suggest possible ways to access sexual assistance. One of the possibilities explored was related to the use of independent living centers as mediators of the process between people with disabilities and sexual assistants, presenting several people who could be available to provide the service. The other possibility was the use of a website as a platform to announce sexual assistance services to ensure anonymity of the process.

Training was also a debated issue when considering implementing sexual assistance in Portugal. *The DEFiants* believe it should be a resource that is mandatory to exist but not mandatory to use. In other words, people should have training programs available, but it should not be seen as an obligatory requisite to practice sexual assistance as a specialized service. Some people might prefer people without training due to the proximity to the usual relationships, where there is no specific information concerning disabilities. Nevertheless, for those looking for a service with concerns about specific issues of disability, it may be essential to have professionals with this training. Also, on the side of the professionals, training can help people to feel more secure and comfortable when providing the service. *The DEFiants* consider that training should be based on the foundations of independent living, and the content to be addressed should include physiology specificities linked to disabilities, ableism and other social prejudices, ethical challenges, notions of care, and attitudinal questions, such as the importance of respect for the time, body, and decisions of others:

> *(...) Perhaps you can also give a more physiological perspective here. Because*, *for example*, *there are some people who*, *when they have pleasure*, *do not have sphincter control (...) also*, *breaking down prejudices and stereotypes (...) this already embraces ableism (...) the question of dressing*, *undressing*, *giving time*, *not speeding up*, *isn't it? The respect for the other person's body and time.* (P2)

Additionally, *The DEFiants* refer that training agents - people responsible for the training - should be people with disabilities who might invite some experts without disabilities, reinforcing the importance of an active role of people with disabilities in all the different spheres of sexual assistance implementation.

Finally, funding was another central debated issue because *The DEFiants* defend that it is essential to ensure access for all people with disabilities who choose to use the service. The access of products and services is frequently hindered by economic barriers for people with disabilities and *The DEFiants* argue that sexual assistance cannot be an example of that. The need for specific items, such as adapted sex toys, cannot be translated into a higher price for a specialized service. Therefore, funding could address this domain and provide access for people regardless of their economic possibilities. The reflection included compensation possibilities with options for expense submission. Here, *The DEFiants* suggest the application of the already-existent social benefit for inclusion so people who would use the service could present the expenses and be compensated by it. They believe this is a way to minimize extra costs that may be incurred for the use of this service and, simultaneously, not expose the person, ensuring the provision of the compensation without getting into significant intimate issues. In other words, the social benefit for inclusion would allow a more general description of the expense and ensure privacy, which is a concern of *The DEFiants* because some parents control the social benefits of people with disabilities:

> *I think it would be great here* [framing the expense in the social benefit for inclusion] *because it would allow it to be not specific. In other words*, *it could be specific to the issue of sexuality but diluted*, *for reasons of privacy*, *in something that already existed so that it would not be an indicator of anything*, *right? And the person could continue to ensure their privacy and the privacy of the practices they want in their life.* (P2)

Potentialities

The DEFiants identified two potentialities of sexual assistance. One of them is the contribution to the self-knowledge of people who resort to sexual services. Some people cannot access their own bodies, and sexual assistance is a way of self-exploration through masturbation, playing an essential role in this domain. Furthermore, it can impact not only the self-knowledge of what is pleasurable but also prevent situations of abuse:

> *How am I going to have informed consent if I do not know if I like it*, *if I do not know how I am going to react*, *right? Even in terms of protection from abuse*, *it is extremely important that I recognize what is a touch that gives me sexual pleasure and what is a touch that I reject. Or what is a touch on my genitals for care purposes and what is a touch on my genitals for pleasure purposes*, *because I do not know any of this if I cannot access it by my own means. So*, *even for these safety issues*, *right? Not just pleasure but also safety.* (P2)

Another potentiality of sexual services is the empowerment of the non-normative bodies: *'(...) It is essential for us*, *even*

for women's empowerment to feel more… more self-confident and to extend it to other relationships'. (P1)

Ethical challenges

Some ethical challenges were pointed out when considering sexual assistance by *The DEFiants.* Intellectual disabilities are one of the concerns because some adults with intellectual disabilities are under guardianship. This means that a person has the legal responsibility for the decision-making of that person, and consent issues might arise in cases where, for example, a cousin, a sibling, or a group of friends take the person to sexual services:

> *(...) the issue of consent for people with intellectual disabilities*, *the issue of the person under guardianship*, *and so… this involves issues that legally have to be framed (...). In these cases of the person who is not totally responsible for themselves*, *who has to have mediation to support decision-making*, *we believe that yes*, *it has implications (...)*. (P2)

The other concern falls between the protection of the sexual assistant and the respect for the decision of the person with a disability. This refers to the dilemmas of those who provide sexual services that may leave bodily marks and those who request sexual services, who may ask for sexual practices that result in bodily marks. On the one hand, there is a need for the protection of sexual assistants who may face recrimination for the result of the practices. On the other hand, the decision to choose a specific practice may be respected if the professional also consents. Hence, thinking about some contract that sets the limits and protects both parties involved in this service is needed:

> *(...) the question of being hurt… Suddenly*, *the disabled person might want to*, *right? But then they might get marked*, *they might get hurt*, *and then there is someone else who is going to handle their body*, *who is going to realize that that body has marks*, *right? So*, *we have to somehow*, *without it being something that breaks the pleasure again*, *but we have to find a way for there to be somewhere before the moment or when the service is being contracted that also exempts the sex worker*, *right? (...) perhaps there has to be some caution and safeguard here for the sex worker who*, *yes… has to and should fulfill the client's wishes but has to be safeguarded (...)*. (P2)

Sexual Assistance vs. Personal Assistance

In sexual assistance vs. personal assistance, *The DEFiants* highlight some points of connection between the figures. This means that they see the advantages of thinking of sexual assistance as a continuum of personal assistance to give support in the sexual sphere of people with disabilities. Thus, they mention that both figures can be provided by the same person in specific cases where they agree to do it within the established relation. Moreover, they refer that, in the future, it can be thought the integration of the services when sexuality starts to be treated as an equally important domain in people's lives. However, for now, *The DEFiants* point out the importance of having points of rupture. They mention the importance of distinguishing sexual assistance and personal assistance, even at a strategic level, because for many people, sexuality is still seen as a secondary priority in the lives of people with disabilities:

> *Sexuality needs its own area*, *doesn't it? (...) I mean*, *we already have a few hours*, *and if we have to fight over whether they are going to wash the dishes or help me put on a vibrator*, *damn it*, *right? It is not possible. You cannot compete with things that are so different from each other. And so*, *I think that for the time being*, *it seems to be the most appropriate because sexuality really needs its own space. It is not that it is not part of the other areas of life; of course*, *it is*, *but it needs to be treated in a way that is appropriate to the need that exists*, *which is practically everything*. (P2)

In addition, people tend to prefer a different person to support the sexuality sphere to protect their intimacy.

Sexual Assistance vs. Sex Work

In thinking about sexual assistance and sex work, *The DEFiants* point out the disadvantages of separation, i.e., the negative points of having a separation between the two figures due to the decreasing possible choices for people with disability who want to resort to the service, by considering a specialized service just for individuals with disabilities seeking assistance. Also, they believe separating the services does not effectively work for inclusion and contributes to the issue of discrimination because it creates labels. *The DEFiants* think that legalizing only sexual assistance is based on the vision of the service as a need for well-being and health, which can easily fall into the medical perspective, instead of perceiving the service as a source of pleasure and a right for people with disabilities. For these reasons, *The DEFiants* defend an approach aligned with free access to pleasure and a positive perspective of sexuality.

The DEFiants reinforce the advantage of approximation between sexual assistance and sex work. Therefore, they claim a scenario where professionals and spaces are prepared to receive any client. Thus, *The DEFiants* present a position of ally to the movement of sex workers by saying:

> *We are not free until everyone is free. The fact that legalizing only sexual assistance also creates inequality between different workers. This is us gaining rights at the expense of other people's rights, and this does not make sense to us as a social movement.* (P1)

Discussion

The DEFiants show a knowledge concerning different possibilities to define sexual assistance, as presented in the literature (Pinho et al., 2020a; De Asís Roig, 2019; García-Santesmases, 2019; García-Santesmases et al., 2024; Limoncin et al., 2014; Mannino et al., 2017; Morales et al., 2020; Saorín et al., 2022), focusing in the two main models discussed – one that sees sexual assistance as an autoerotic construction and the other as an erotic construction (Centeno, 2020; García-Santesmases, 2019; Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022; Martínez, 2016; Sánchez & Rodríguez 2020; Saorín et al., 2022). However, *The DEFiants* find advantages in the diversity of defining sexual assistance and support the idea of a multiplicity of constructions to ensure 'the possibility of going wherever one will allow.' This aligns with the definition of sexuality of Simone de Beauvoir (2015) when she mentioned that the body is lived by the subject. By invoking a feminist lens, the collective reclaims the body as a site of political resistance against the 'othering' of corporalities with disabilities. This move is a direct response to the historical failure of feminist theory to account for the specific barriers to sexual agency faced by those with cognitive or physical diversity (Garland-Thomson, 2011), demanding a feminism that is truly inclusive of all bodily experiences. The results also emphasize the idea that the sexual agency of each person, regardless of their physical or psychological conditions, is subjective, and thus, sexuality translates to the person's experience with their body.

Contrary to the literature that links sexual assistance to specific characteristics (Esteve-Ríos et al., 2021; Gammino et al., 2016; Limoncin et al., 2014) *The DEFiants* argue that people with disabilities are different (Lambelet, 2017) and might prioritize different aspects in the person who provides the service; therefore, they think a profile of sexual assistant is not as useful as thinking about the characteristics of the space where the service can be provided. *The DEFiants* expose the importance of having an accessible space with support products and accessible bathrooms. Other conditions, such as the creation of a website to announce sexual assistance services, are pointed out.

Regarding training, *The DEFiants* think it would be an important resource for people who want to use it but not as a mandatory condition to provide sexual assistance. The same view is shared by Geymonat and Macioti (2016), who state that training does not necessarily correspond to a competent person. Nevertheless, *The DEFiants* recognize the importance of training to people who seek a service that considers some specificities of disability and to some professionals who can feel more secure and comfortable with having more knowledge. The inclusion of physiology specificities linked to impairments, ethical challenges, notions of care, and attitudinal questions is recommended (Geymonat & Macioti, 2016; Gutiérrez-Bermejo & Jenaro, 2022; Limoncin & Jannini, 2018), similar to the results found in the study conducted by Morales and colleagues (2020) where knowledge about transfers, positioning and care, considering different types of disabilities are seen as beneficial for users to include in the training of sexual assistants. *The DEFiants* argue that the independent living model should be the basis for the training and management of sexual assistance services. The incorporation of the independent living model in policies is essential to the emancipation of people with disabilities, reinforcing people's self-determination (Tarrant, 2022). It is crucial to consider people's unique perspectives and experiences, such as sensory preferences or motor challenges, when developing programs and services, as well as to center their voices in research and advocacy, ensuring that their lives are acknowledged and respected (Crehan, 2023).

Moreover, the importance of funding sexual assistance to ensure access for all people with disabilities is reinforced (Pinho et al., 2020b; Bahner, 2012; Davies, 2000; Gammino et al., 2016; McRuer, 2011; Saorín et al., 2022). In thinking of sexual assistance as a right, it is essential to consider the role of the State, which should be responsible for providing the conditions for the service (De Asís Roig, 2019). Also, the results suggest framing the expenses in the social benefit for inclusion that already exists in Portugal, in a general way that does not violate the privacy of people with disabilities.

Sexual assistance contributes to the self-knowledge of people who resort to sexual services and to the empowerment of non-normative bodies (Saorín et al., 2022), but challenges are also identified. One of the concerns that needs more reflection and debate is the application of sexual assistance to adults with intellectual disabilities under guardianship (Gammino et al., 2016). People with intellectual disabilities face multiple problems concerning their sexuality, namely, access to information; appropriate

support to decision-making and expression of consent; and several challenges to develop their sexuality in a regulated social and private life, which tends to lead to overprotection and denial of their sexuality (Chrastina & Večeřová, 2020; Gammino et al., 2016). The other concern is the importance of taking measures to ensure the protection of sexual assistance while respecting the decision of the person with a disability. From the perspective of *The DEFiants*, the persons providing the service, who have rights and obligations (De Asís Roig, 2019), should have a contract to define conditions and protect both parties involved.

One barrier to the operationalization of sexual assistance is the lack of legislation addressing commercial sex services, which contributes to the reluctance to use the services (Morales et al., 2016). Also, the consequences of the law, which in many places criminalizes facilitation or profiting from prostitution, have discouraged sex workers' alliances for a long. Sex workers face stigma and do not have a legal framework; therefore, conditions have become hard to achieve for sex workers' movements. However, self-organizing groups have been emerging and gaining visibility across Europe (Crowhurst et al., 2012), and people call for the recognition of sex work and sexual assistance as valuable services (Geymonat & Macioti, 2016). Thus, *The DEFiants* defend that sexual assistance should be a part of integrative policies for sex work (Geymonat, 2019). De Asís Roig (2019) mentions that sexual assistance depends legally on the existence of a legal norm and, in terms of human rights, on a standard that ensures a dignified human life, which should be the obligation of the State to provide. In other words, an ethical model of sexual care that prioritizes pleasure, autonomy, and self-determination is advocated, and decriminalizing and integrative policies are essential to support this approach and guarantee the rights of all people involved in commercial sex services (Geymonat, 2019). Nevertheless, it is important to work to create conditions since there are reports of rejection in the access of sex work due to the lack of accessibility in the workplace and the lack of preparation of professionals to attend to service users with non-normative bodies and who require different practices (Pinho et al., 2020b, Gammino et al., 2016). Therefore, *The DEFiants'* stance as an ally to the sex work movement is a direct theoretical challenge to the abolitionist paradigm. While prohibitionist approaches argue that buying sex is not a right, this research suggests that for some people with disabilities, the ability to access commercial sex services is the only gateway to bodily autonomy. Therefore, the paradigm of prohibition is not merely a legal hurdle but a form of structural ableism that prioritizes the moral policing of the body over the practical implementation of the Independent Living philosophy. By advocating for decriminalization, the collective seeks to move from a medical-protective model to a social-rights model where sexual assistance is a recognized tool for self-determination.

Finally, *The DEFiants* claim a distinction between sexual assistance and personal assistance in the Portuguese context since sexuality needs to be addressed as a priority and not as a secondary domain of the lives of people with disabilities. This demand also intends to protect the intimacy of people with disabilities, having support in the sexual sphere by a different person from the one who ensures their daily and care activities (Mona, 2003; Morales et al., 2020), especially because otherwise many people may prefer to repress their desires and needs to avoid the feeling of embarrassment (Gammino et al., 2016).

Policy Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for the development of social policies in Portugal, particularly regarding the sexual citizenship of people with disabilities. Currently, Portuguese legislation—specifically Decree-Law no. 129/2017 of 9 October, which established the Independent Living support model—is silent on the sexual dimension of personal assistance. Based on the specific perspective of this collective, it is recommended that policymakers consider the following suggestions:

First, there is an urgent need for legislative reform regarding commercial sex services. The current legal ambiguity in Portugal, where sex work is not a regulated profession and facilitation can be criminalized, creates a barrier to the formalization of sexual assistance. Policymakers should advocate for the decriminalization and integrative regulation of sex work to provide a safe, legal framework that protects both sexual assistants and users, ensuring that sexual assistance is not relegated to a clandestine and potentially unsafe practice.

Second, this study proposes a concrete financial strategy to ensure equitable access. Rather than creating a new, stigmatizing bureaucratic process, the government should allow the costs associated with sexual assistance to be framed within the existing Social Benefit for Inclusion (Prestação Social para a Inclusão). By allowing this benefit to cover sexual assistance as a non-specific expense, the State can guarantee the right to sexual health and pleasure while protecting the user's privacy and preventing institutional or familial control over their intimate choices.

Third, sexual assistance should be implemented under the Independent Living model, with Independent Living Support Centers (Centros de Apoio à Vida Independente - CAVIs), serving as the primary managing entities. This choice facilitates management by using a pre-established structure, while fostering a culture of mutual support and shared knowledge among service users. It is essential to

favor centers managed by members of the disability community who grasp its specific requirements, ensuring the service is not limited by traditional medical or therapeutic perspectives.

Finally, policy guidelines must shift focus from the personal characteristics of the assistant to the accessibility of the environment. Future regulations should establish standards for "accessible sexual spaces," ensuring that venues are equipped with support products (e.g., ceiling hoists/cranes) and bathrooms that meet the requirements of Decree-Law no. 163/2006 (the Portuguese accessibility law). By focusing on environmental facilitators, the State can promote autonomy and reduce the physical barriers that currently prevent people with disabilities from exercising their sexual rights.

Conclusions

In conclusion, thinking about sexual assistance is challenging, and the risks of falling into essentialist perspectives are real. There is a tendency to homogenize groups and not consider differences, which is reinforced by media by the construction of these social representations influencing public policies and care practices (Lambelet, 2017). An autoerotic construction of sexual assistance is privileged in the literature (Sánchez & Rodríguez, 2020). However, it is important to adopt a critical view to avoid reproducing heteronormativity, ableism systems and the same solution for different bodies (García-Santesmases, 2019). That is why a broader definition of sexual assistance is supported by *The DEFiants*. Sexual assistance is seen as a possibility for a body revolution by promoting the self-knowledge and empowerment of the person. Therefore, it should be framed as a right for people with disabilities. This gives strength to the social movements' revindications concerning the rights of people with disabilities and implicates the State in the process of providing conditions for the existence of the service since it is a matter of a dignified human life (De Asís Roig, 2019).

There is a need for concrete action to create future where sexual assistance is a real possibility for people with disabilities (Crehan, 2023). An ethical model of sexual assistance that prioritizes pleasure, autonomy and self-determination is presented in this study. For the Portuguese context, the main results reinforce that decriminalizing and integrative policies of sex work are essential to support this approach and guarantee the rights of all people (Gammino et al., 2016; Geymonat, 2019); that training should be available; that several conditions such as the space need to be considered for a proper use of the service; and that funding is central to allow equal access of sexual assistance services (Gammino et al., 2016).

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Data Availability The datasets presented in this article are not available for ethical reasons of anonymity and confidentiality of the people interviewed.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto (Reference number: 2023/06-11c).

Consent to Participate Verbal informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study prior to the interviews.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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