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Manufacturing vulnerability: sex work, migration, and trafficking on the southern borders of Europe

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This thesis contributes to the growing body of literature that critiques dominant representations of sex work, trafficking, and migration through a governmentality lens. It adds empirical depth to theorizations of vulnerability, highlighting both its use in discourse and the practical consequences that this has on individuals on the ground. The main objective of the research, as stated in the introduction, was of responding to two interlocking needs namely that of critically investigating how vulnerability is constructed in relation to migration, sex work and trafficking by a range of actors including notably, policy-makers and NGOs in Europe; and retheorise vulnerability through lived experiences (Weitzer, 2012; Benoit et al., 2019) by exploring how migrants who engage in sex work in Malta understand, experience, and resist vulnerability. As has been argued in various sections of this thesis, the Maltese context is relevant not merely because it remains underexplored, but also due to its uniqueness: subject to rapidly changing and complex migration patterns, it represents a case study on the criminalisation of sex work in Southern Europe.

The first part of the thesis provides evidence of how governmentality and biopolitics, as theorised by Foucault and later applied by other scholars, manifest in the governance of sex work, migration, and trafficking through a diffuse yet coordinated network of actors. These include EU institutions, national governments, NGOs (see Agustin, 2010; O'Brien, 2019), law enforcement agencies, and private sector entities (see Bernstein, 2018), all of which contribute, often in overlapping ways, to the reproduction of dominant constructions of victimhood, which are intimately tied to and dependent on representations of vulnerability (O'Brien, 2019). The research re-confirms some of the findings of the literature, namely that these constructions are frequently rooted in gendered, racialised, and paternalistic stereotypes that frame certain populations – particularly women and gender non-conforming migrants involved in sex work – as inherently passive, victimised, and in need of rescue (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016; Kempadoo, 2007). Rather than listening and responding to the diverse needs of individuals on the ground, this research shows that these narratives are superimposed and perpetuated through policy documents, in addition to, as innovatively demonstrated by this thesis, funding priorities, digital imagery, and project proposals that align with broader EU security and migration agendas. Importantly, this system of governance does not operate through top-down imposition alone, but is sustained by the active participation of actors who,

while diverse in their role and positioning, collectively reinforce a regime of control under the guise of protection. This entanglement illustrates how vulnerability becomes instrumentalised as a tool for categorisation, surveillance, and intervention, rather than as a starting point for rights-based protection or structural reform.

The argument made across the first three articles is that representations of vulnerability operate as a connective thread across multitude dimensions, which among others include EU policy documents, funding calls, and the projects designed by NGOs, private actors and governments in response to them. Within EU policy law and policy frameworks, especially those addressing trafficking, migration, and gender-based violence, vulnerability is frequently invoked as a core concept and rationale, yet it is often framed in reductive and individualistic terms, as an attribute attached to specific individuals or groups (Lowenkron, 2015).

In line with the argument made by O'Brien (2019) in relation to the need for both victims and culprits to exist in discourse in order to justify "rescue", narratives of vulnerability are bolstered and legitimised through constructions of culpability. Vulnerability is frequently portrayed as an almost inherent characteristic, generally assigned to women and children, rather than as the product of structural and political conditions, including circumstances exacerbated or even produced by specific policy choices. Women engaging in sex work are frequently invoked as prime examples of vulnerability, and this is particularly evident in EU Parliament documents. On the other hand, representations of culpability, essential to counter-balance and bolster the portrayal of vulnerability, are constructed through vaguely articulated notions of "demand" that target specific actors (e.g., clients, employers, smugglers), whilst remaining silent about the roles of states in generating precariousness (De Genova, 2017). As a result of these constructions, EU policies not only over-simplify complex phenomena such as trafficking and smuggling, but also crucially, deflect attention from the deeper social, economic, and political factors that shape exploitation and mobility (O'Brien, 2019). These discursive strategies distort reality, whilst also shaping it – they reinforce exclusionary frameworks that obscure the lived experiences of migrant sex workers, whose vulnerability is first produced and then pathologised by the very systems claiming to protect them.

These processes extend well beyond EU policies, embracing EU funding programmes, which determine the nature and scope of funding for a range of actors in the European landscape, including NGOs, private companies, institutions, academic actors and more. Reflecting EU policies, the AMIF, ISFP, REC, and JUST programs have contributed to shaping narrow representations of vulnerability in the anti-trafficking field. Very little attention has been paid to "following the money flow" of anti-trafficking (Sharapov et al., 2024). The second article of this thesis not only contributes to bridging

this gap with a focus on the European context, but also crucially, examines the role of dominant discourses in influencing funding priorities. Funding priorities have displayed an insistence on trafficking for sexual exploitation, repeatedly framing women and girls as the primary victims. These policy-driven priorities are mirrored in project proposals, reinforcing a limited and often carceral understanding (McGlynn, 2022) of vulnerability that sidelines other forms of exploitation and the broader structural drivers of trafficking.

Crucially, EU funding structures incentivize alignment with dominant policy framings, rewarding organisations that reproduce these narratives, particularly those emphasising demand reduction and collaboration with law enforcement. This leads to repeat funding of a small number of actors, often well-established NGOs or consortiums, creating disparities in access. Arguably, this, in conjunction with administrative burdens, creates barriers for smaller, grassroots or rights-based organisations, especially those adopting more nuanced pro-sex worker stances. The rise in funding for tech-based anti-trafficking solutions, particularly under Horizon programmes, sparks novel concerns, echoing those raised by Bernstein (2018) and others (see: Chuang & Shih, 2021; Fudge, 2025). These projects are often vaguely articulated and afforded millions of euros in pursuit of nebulous security objectives. The growing influence of private actors in these initiatives signals a shift toward securitisation with unclear benefits for victims or marginalised communities. EU funding not only channels essential resources but also plays a powerful role in constructing who is seen as vulnerable, how that vulnerability is understood, and which interventions are legitimised.

If the article on funding bridges considerations over EU policies and NGO activities, the Italian case study of digital imagery offers further insight into the role of a vast range of actors – NGOs, media and institutions – in producing and reproducing constructions of vulnerability linked to trafficking. The focus on the role of digital imagery in perpetuating stereotypical representations and the exploratory reflection on how online representations may impact policy-making, particularly in the Southern European context, is one of this thesis' contributions to the literature. While illustrating how some of those representations reflect the contradictions inherent to EU policies, and emphasising the specific role of visuals in perpetuating stereotypical depictions, the article also argues that these representations should be understood as situated within the Southern European landscape and reflecting the specific dynamics of the Italian context. In fact, they speak to how national anxieties around migration, race, and gender are channelled into constructions of the "trafficked victim". This imagery resonates with broader Mediterranean narratives that frame the region as both the first port of call for the migrant "invasion" and a site of humanitarian crisis (Vañó-Agulló, 2025). The prominence of religious organizations in Italian civil society further moulds visual depictions, with victimhood being feminized, infantilized and linked to moral salvation. The conflation of traffick-

ing, migration, and smuggling in both language and imagery – evident in media titles and mismatched visuals – reflects entrenched ambiguities and ambivalences that are exacerbated by Italy’s geo-political position as a key point of entry into Europe.

If the first part of this thesis highlights the endurance of narrow understandings of vulnerability influenced by (neo-)abolitionist tendencies at the EU level and by preoccupations over migration management in Southern Europe, the second part of the research, epitomised by the two articles drawing on interviews with migrants living in Malta with experiences of sex work – both voluntary and exploitative – show the mismatch between superimposed understandings of vulnerability and lived experiences. Moreover, it highlights the role that restrictive sex work and migration policies, supposedly designed to protect ‘vulnerable’ individuals, play in reproducing vulnerability and precarity.

The first of the two empirical articles delves into how vulnerability is experienced and conceptualised by migrant sex workers themselves. Despite participants’ diverse backgrounds and life circumstances, the notion of vulnerability emerged a constant across all narratives, underscoring its systemic, societal, and situational character. The article introduces the concept of vulneramentality – a mode of governance rooted in the management of populations through the language of vulnerability – which both amplifies existing inequalities and creates new forms of marginalisation. Concurrently, it recognises that social positioning at the intersection of gender, race, class, and migration status crucially shapes how vulneramentality is experienced. While the research identifies occasional instances of peer support and collective care among sex workers, these remain limited due to the isolating effects of criminalisation and the pervasive stigma surrounding both migration and sex work. Echoing, Andrijasevic’s (2010) Mai’s (2018) reflections over resistance and agency, the article sheds light both on the ways in which migrants with experiences of sex work make sense of vulnerability – making room for their experiences and constructions – and how they react and respond to it.

The second empirical article builds on this foundation by showing how criminalisation operates not only through formal legal norms but also via everyday policing, discretionary enforcement and regulatory ambiguity. Drawing on case studies, it demonstrates how migrant sex workers in Malta navigate complex liminal spaces characterised by legal grey zones, heightened surveillance, and selective enforcement. Although sex work itself is not technically illegal, the policing of surrounding activities results in informal criminalisation, particularly targeting street-based and independent indoor workers. The findings reveal that spatial avoidance, strategic compliance, and adaptation are common resistance and coping strategies; however, these are often insufficient in the face of unpredictable law

enforcement and widespread criminalisation. Migrant women and gender-diverse individuals, especially those racialised or undocumented, bear the brunt of this discretionary policing and live under the constant threat of detention and deportation.

Together, these two articles reinforce the thesis' overarching argument: representations of vulnerability, when institutionalised through law and policy, often fail to protect and instead produce the very harms they claim to mitigate. Rather than recognising the situated, dynamic, and intersectional nature of vulnerability, current governance frameworks in Malta – mirroring broader EU tendencies – conflate vulnerability with criminality, control and exclusion. The findings point to the need to reimagine vulnerability not as a fixed identity or policy category, but as a site of political contestation and potential solidarity, rooted in the lived realities of those most affected.

As previously mentioned, this thesis corroborates existing literature on the dominance of trafficking discourses and their instrumentalisation by a range of actors, from state authorities to NGOs and other actors. However, it also contributes novel insights by concentrating its analytical lens on Southern Europe and exploring under-researched areas, such as that pertaining to the role of digital imagery in shaping trafficking narratives – and potentially, influencing in turn policy-making – and the impact of discourses around trafficking, migration and sex work on EU funding. It uniquely gives prominence to the knowledge and testimonies of migrants with experiences sex work, co-constructing narratives of vulnerability through an engaged, reflexive research process. In doing so, it unpacks and reframes vulnerability, not merely as a vaguely articulated policy category, but as a central discursive and affective tool underpinning constructions of victimhood (O'Brien, 2019), that should reflect people's lived experiences. While this thesis identifies, in line with previous scholarship, multiple instances of agency and micro-resistance among migrant sex workers (see: Mai, 2018), it also critically examines how such resistance is often circumscribed within what is theorised here as *vulneramentality*. Pushing conceptual boundaries, the thesis proposes a grounded theorisation of what a governance modality rooted in vulnerability might entail, starting not from institutional logics, but from the embodied, situated realities of those governed.

6.1 TOWARDS A VULNERABILITY REDUCTION FRAMEWORK

If it is true that current understandings of vulnerability fail individuals in situations of marginalisation, then what should be done to address this gap? In line with Brown and Sanders (2017), who highlight the importance of drawing from lived experience in theorizing vulnerability, this study emphasises the pressing need to engage in conversations with people who are commonly labelled as “vulnerable” so as to truly grasp their experi-

ences of vulnerability. This should be the very first step towards building an understanding of what vulnerability consists of, as this thesis has attempted to do, within the limited scope of the interviews conducted and the geographical setting of Malta.

The second step should involve building a “vulnerability reduction” framework via informed policies on sex work and migration, as well, as relatedly, trafficking and labour. While the decriminalisation of sex work is a necessary development, essential to enhance access to rights for sex workers and enable harm reduction (Brooks-Gordon et al., 2021), it cannot be detached from other policy reforms. As Gilda Merlot (2019), an undocumented sex worker from Honduras has compellingly argued, “we must move past the “human trafficking” and “slavery” narratives when it comes to *both* [emphasis added] immigration and sex work”. That is to say, the decriminalisation of sex work must go hand in hand with the creation of regular channels for migration, as well more humane and dignified policies around labour, housing and more (PICUM, 2018; Schapendonk et al., 2023). Armstrong’s (2017) analysis of the impact of the decriminalisation of sex work on migrant sex workers living New Zealand reveals that without this holistic approach, people with a migration background risk being left behind and continuing to face risks of exploitation.

This holistic and grounded approach reflects the call for a shift in perspective from traditional prevention-based approaches to “vulnerability reduction” (p.53), advocated by Marshall et al. (2012) in their chapter in “Trafficking and prostitution reconsidered – new perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights”. Thus far, prevention has permitted to displace responsibility from destination countries to host countries, placing the burden on them to avoid exploitation from happening “at the source” (p.53). When applied to the European context, one can easily see the practical implications of this logic in a host of recent agreements with transit countries implemented by Italy, Spain and EU member States to manage migration flows, as well as allegedly curb issues such as smuggling and trafficking (Echeverría et al., 2024).

Prevention has allowed governments to ignore the issues that should be addressed at destination – while busy striking deals with third countries or drafting elaborate anti-trafficking plans, they have dismissed the impacts of their highly restrictive migration policies (Marshall et al., 2012), which should in fact be the focus of vulnerability reduction. Of course, as the authors rightly acknowledge, irregularised migration is not the sole cause of trafficking, as the latter occurs even in the context of regular migration: labour policies which impact access to work, discrimination and difficulties in accessing support for those who are exploited, all play their part and ought to be re-examined in the pursuit of vulnerability reduction.

Reducing vulnerability should be the main focus of policies looking to improve the lives of migrants – including those engaging in sex work – which should of course, entail addressing risks of exploitation. Nevertheless, this preoccupation with averting exploitation should not be unique to the sex work industry; rather it should extend to all sectors which employ high rates of migrants. Although this has been already argued by others before (see for instance: Anderson, 2010; Mac & Smith, 2018; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017), sex work continues to be sensationalised and considered as distinct from other forms of employment, despite being equally shaped by global disparities and inequalities. The outcome of this stark division between sex work and any other kind of employment is the all-too-frequent reliance on moralistic understandings, which continue to undermine the agency of people involved in the sector (Mac & Smith, 2018). This results in arbitrarily reducing the experiences of all individuals engaging in sex work to ones of victimhood.

As Wijers (2024) has argued, and has emerged so patently in the empirical fieldwork carried out via this PhD, there is a fine line between victimhood and deviance, which becomes blatantly obvious in the case of migrant sex workers: they are both infantilised and in need of being rescued, and concurrently, criminalised for breaching labour and migration regulations. Not only is this discourse harmful, in that it translates into narrow and stereotyped understandings of exploitation, which only a small minority of individuals can aspire to align with; but, more worryingly, it further vulnerabilises migrants who engage in sex work. It exposes them to enhanced risks of violence and exploitation by clients, generates fears and anxieties linked to the potential of being reported, removed and losing their main source of income, as well as creates barriers to accessing key services (Rossoni & Camilleri, forthcoming). Because vulnerability is constructed from above rather than informed by the needs and views of those it purports to protect, the solutions offered even to those who supposedly meet the standards of vulnerability, are often inadequate (Agustin, 2010; Surtees, 2013; Center on Violence against Women & Children).

Unlike most scholarship, which either assumes or critiques vulnerability as a policy category, this study emphasizes the need to listen to the voices of those labelled vulnerable to explore how they define, experience and resist vulnerability. Many participants reframed vulnerability as a structural condition – produced by legal precarity, institutional neglect, and societal stigma – rather than as an intrinsic personal trait. This framework represents a first step to better understanding vulnerability as lived experience, to be further expanded upon via future research. Rather than framing sex work as inherently exploitative or trafficking as a singular evil, the framework allows to focus on material conditions – legal precarity, housing, labour rights – and the reduction of vulnerability. Although it was developed with

reference to individuals with experiences of sex work, it is designed to be applied to other migrant workers.

The aspiration of this thesis is that this framework can concretely inspire policy-makers and other key stakeholders, including NGO workers. As has been argued in other parts of this dissertation, the invitation to policy-makers is to step away from simplistic definitions of vulnerability and engage with the populations who are the target of their policies. This ought to include consulting them directly, through formalised arrangements, on the effects of specific policy solutions. These consultations should not be merely symbolic, but part and parcel of a participatory process of policy development as well as, later on down the line, of policy evaluation. Concurrently, rather than working in silos, a vulnerability-reduction approach requires joint efforts to address overlapping issues concerning migration, labour, sex work and exploitation, including trafficking. Policies should be able to “speak to each other”, rather than stand in contradiction. This alignment should also have reverberations over funding allocations, that should reflect these shifts towards a more grounded understanding of vulnerability. Further transparency over EU funding allocation via publicly accessible and comprehensive project results should also be prioritised.

A fully-fledged vulnerability reduction framework should also take stock of the impact of discretionary policing and work to address gaps in legislation, policy and practice not merely through legislative and policy change, but also through training and monitoring of the work of police forces. For NGO workers and practitioners, the implications of this research are to rethink their extant vulnerability frameworks – as well as their public communication around vulnerability – once again starting from how the people and groups they serve understand and experience vulnerability. These considerations should lie at the heart of any application for funding developed within the sector.

More broadly, vulnerability reduction, in line with the vulnerability framework presented in this thesis, should go hand in hand with stigma reduction. This should enable more migrants who engage in sex work to share their experiences and build formalised networks of support even in small countries such as Malta, where shame and stigma currently prevent it. Greater education around themes of sex and sexuality can also contribute to reduce stigma. Finally, vulnerability-reduction should include pathways to regularization, healthcare access, and the right to work, irrespective of immigration status.

6.2 FINAL REFLECTIONS

The politics of sex, work, and power are deeply interwoven with the politics of representation. As this thesis has shown, representations of migrant sex workers – whether in digital images, legal texts, or NGO reports – are not mere reflections of reality but instruments to exercise government and control. Yet, even within constraining structures, migrant sex workers assert agency, resist domination and imagine alternative futures.

This research project has sought to explore the complex meanings, constructions, and material consequences of vulnerability across five interconnected axes: policy discourse, funding governance, visual representation, lived experience, and legal regulation. Each of the five articles that emerged from this project contributed to a multi-layered analysis of vulnerability, not only as a condition but also as a tool of governance. Vulnerability is not simply something that “happens” to individuals: it is actively produced, distributed, and regulated through a myriad of mechanisms and systems that, in turn, determine who gets to be visible and grievable and who is invisibilised, remains excluded, or is outright criminalized.

A clear pattern emerges across the various articles included in this doctoral project: vulnerability is not a descriptive condition, but rather, a deeply political one. It is shaped by the structural forces of migration regimes, law enforcement practices, funding priorities and symbolic economies. Among the key questions that arise from this research and that should continue to inspire future research are: Who gets to be recognized as vulnerable? Who defines vulnerability, and for what purposes? Who stands to benefit from vulnerability?

What became apparent through the research was that dominant framings of vulnerability often serve to silence the voices of those who are most affected by it. To address these issues, epistemic authority must be redistributed: migrant sex workers should not merely be viewed as research participants or passive recipients of policy, but as knowledge producers and political actors in their own right.

Ultimately, policy change must begin from the ground up. While the decriminalisation of sex work is a crucial step, it is not enough on its own. More comprehensive reforms are required to dismantle the systems that enable informal criminalisation, racial profiling and selective enforcement. Funding mechanisms must be reoriented to support rights-based, intersectional and community-led approaches. Peer-led networks, legal empowerment initiatives, and harm-reduction strategies are essential components of a more just and effective response. These interventions must be based in the lived realities of those affected and be shaped by the individuals and communities who experience vulnerability firsthand.

Finally, this research calls for a reimagining of vulnerability. It should no longer be seen as a technocratic label or an instrument of control; rather, it must be understood as a site of solidarity, resistance, and collective action. Vulnerability, as a fundamental condition of human interdependence, must be detached from paternalistic governance structures and re-politicized as a call for collective justice. Achieving justice for migrant sex workers requires not only legal reform but also justice, economic redistribution, and the dismantling of structural inequalities.

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