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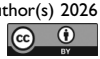
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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the safety perceptions of female sex workers in Rotterdam's unlawful sex industry and the strategies they employ for protection, based on the *Crime as Work* perspective. Through interviews and observations, it reveals that sex workers may be compelled into the unlawful sector due to existing policies. Although authorities often view the lawful industry as safe and the unlawful industry as unsafe, many unlawfully working sex workers challenge this binary. They are aware of safety risks in both domains and employ diverse safeguards, yet acknowledge that no measures are completely foolproof. The study calls for further research.

Keywords

sex work, crime as work, safety, violence

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Introduction

Sex Work in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is internationally renowned for its sex industry. Many different definitions of sex work exist.[1] One possible definition of sex work is "the exchange of sexual acts for pay", and the sex industry can be defined as "a broad range of sexual services including pornography, phone and internet sex" (Auguston & George, 2015, p.230). The brothel ban was officially lifted in the Netherlands in 2000 (Kazemier & Rensman, 2015). This also implied that the organisation and facilitation of sex work became officially legalised (Wijers, 2017). The lifting of the brothel ban had six aims: to control and regulate the organisation of voluntary sex work (including through the municipal licensing policy),[2] to enhance the combat against human trafficking, to protect minors from sexual abuse, to safeguard the position of sex workers, to disentangle sex work from criminal phenomena, and to reduce the number of sex workers without a valid residence permit for engaging in labour. With the lifting of the brothel ban, the responsibility of sex work policies formally shifted from the national government to local municipalities (Jans et al., 2013). This made municipalities in the Netherlands responsible for establishing their local licensing policies for sex work (Post et al., 2019).[3]

Legislation and Policies on Sex Work in the Netherlands

Importantly, legalisation does not mean that sex work is always allowed; municipal policies can still prohibit specific forms of sex work or circumstances in which sex work takes place (Bleeker & Van den Braak, 2021). Since policies are developed at the municipal level, what is permitted and what is not can vary significantly between municipalities. The Municipality of Rotterdam – where the fieldwork for this study was conducted - distinguishes three forms of sex work in its legislation: 'licensed,' 'unlicensed' and 'illegal sex work', as listed in its Policy Prostitution and Sex Industry (2015) and the Municipal By-law. Firstly, licensed sex work refers to sex work that requires a permit to be legal. In Rotterdam, this includes brothels, escort agencies, and businesses offering sexual services like peep shows and erotic imagery (Municipality of Rotterdam, n.d.). A license is required when the activity has a "business-like appearance," involving factors such as advertising, multiple workers at the same location, and the scope of services offered (Municipality of Rotterdam, n.d.). Secondly, unlicensed sex work refers to working from home. In Rotterdam, this is permitted if the individual is registered at the address, works independently, and the activity does not have a business-like appearance (Policy Prostitution & Sex Industry, 2015). In such cases, no license is required. Thirdly, sex work is illegal when a required license is missing. In Rotterdam, two forms are always illegal: window-based and street-based sex work (soliciting). Unlicensed sex work is thus not necessarily the same as illegal sex work (Timmermans et al., 2018).

In the Netherlands, a debate exists regarding the term 'illegal sex work'. One could argue that the term 'illegal' is legally incorrect since sex work has been legalised in the Netherlands. The term 'unlicensed' is not suitable for this study either, because what these sex workers do does not fall under the municipal definition of unlicensed. For these reasons, this study moves away from the legislative terms and puts forward a new term: *unlawful* sex work. In the context of this study, unlawful sex work refers to sex work that is not allowed by local policies.

Policies are a tool of authority to regulate the sex industry, and they have concrete, real-world consequences when it is operationalised and implemented (Wagenaar et al., 2017). In the Netherlands, additional regulations and measures as part of governmental policies have been recently implemented in the lawful sex industry to expand control and prevent human trafficking (Verhoeven, 2017). Although the government intends to offer help and protection for sex workers, Verhoeven argues that it can lead to work restrictions for them, including no longer being able to work lawfully because the requirements cannot be met. The focus on safety is much in line with a trend in politics and policies that has developed in the past decades, in which sex work is almost automatically linked to human trafficking (Snippe et al., 2018). Siegel's (2015) study on the closure of the window area in Utrecht, the Netherlands, illustrates why it is problematic when legislative and policy decisions are made while a clear overview of the local sex industry is lacking. They argue that in Utrecht, this has led to policy decisions that have exacerbated rather than alleviated existing problems, including the growth of its unlawful sex industry. Siegel (2015, p.143) therefore refers to a "human trafficking hype", an exaggerated and intensive promotion of negative images of sex work. Studies show that human trafficking and sex work are not the same phenomena, and a clear and careful distinction should be made (for example, Oude Breuil et al., 2011; Weitzer, 2011). Still, the 2020 annual report of the Municipality of Rotterdam refers to "human trafficking and prostitution policy" as a thematic approach to subversive crime (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2021, p.5).

Crime as Work

Specific forms of sex work may thus be prohibited by municipalities, but for many women, unlawful sex work is still their source of income (De Wildt, 2021). In his study *Crime as Work*, Letkemann (1973) takes an occupational perspective and emphasises the "work" of crime[4] and its similarities to "conventional" careers. By using occupational terms such as 'profession,' 'apprenticeship,' 'specialisation', and 'skill', Letkemann argues that criminals, like other professionals, need skills to be successful in their work. Criminals also need possibilities to acquire skills relating to technological developments, the financial rewards and the potential costs and dangers. The metaphor works best when applied to crimes that generate income, engage in market transactions, require time investment in repeated increments, and involve tasks that demand a certain level of skill learned through guidance or practice (Erickson et al., 2021). By conceptualising criminalised behaviour as a "job," a non-normative space

can be created in which actions, motivations and techniques can be analysed without stigma (Caputo & King, 2011). Lucas (2005), for instance, applied this perspective and examined sex workers' views of sex work as paid work. They argue that "simply deviance does not adequately explain variations in attitudes and experience" (p.540), and that sex work is in some ways very similar to other work, such as service sector work and self-employment. For instance, there is a problem of uneven demand, there are periods of financial insecurity and some forms of self-employment offer flexibility and autonomy. Caputo and King (2011) therefore argue that rather than distinguishing different forms of work based on illegal or deviant aspects of behaviour, it can be distinguished based on "nuances of the particular occupation – the setting, the informal and formal rules, the environment, the economic impact, technology, the risk negotiated, and so on" (p.174). As Erickson et al. (2021) argue, when comparing crime to work, the discipline and structure prevalent in many jobs and work lives such as individual diligence and dutifulness many jobs require, are not typically associated with criminal activities (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), though crime can still resemble a job in several ways, primarily because it often involves an investment of labour, resources, and risk with the expectation of a reward.

Letkemann (1973, p.49) further argues that there are three "classes of criminal skills" that criminals need to perform their criminal activities: mechanical, organisational and social. First of all, criminals need mechanical skills, which include tools and procedures. In his example of safecrackers, this refers to mechanical knowledge of a safe and the tools to 'crack' it. The second class of criminal skills are the organisation skills, which involve the planning and execution of the event. Thirdly, a criminal needs social skills. This can be in the form of perceptual or mental skills pertinent to their trade, which refers to interpreting the routine and everyday world: "The crime itself is perpetrated as it were, on square soil, in the legitimate world. The criminal must take on the role of the "other" to take advantage of the civilian." (p.138). Here, Letkemann (p.140) gives the example of a criminal who became friendly with the cleaning personnel to get information, without them being aware that they were aiding a criminal.

Another perceptual skill that a criminal needs, according to Letkemann, is the assessment of risk. Here, Letkemann (p.152) refers to avoiding the victim and the police (i.e., getting caught). In addition, the risk may relate to the criminal themselves, such as the possibility of experiencing violence when preparing or carrying out the criminal offence. A criminal might assess such risk when preparing for a criminal activity. Letkemann (p.156) also notes that although a criminal can be well informed about and experienced in adequate preparations for the crime, various factors can still prevent adequate preparation for criminal activity, of which the shortage of money and time are the major reasons.

One could argue that a governmental policy can form barriers for criminals, and thus, one more reason for not being able to adequately prepare for a criminal activity, including assessing the risk of violence. When applied to the unlawful sex industry of Rotterdam, a stricter municipal sex work policy may place higher demands on the qualities of unlawful working sex workers to avoid risks, including the risk of experiencing

violence. When translating the mechanical skills of sex workers, this could imply knowledge of technology such as using a phone to stay in contact with clients and websites to have advertisements for their services (Bernier et al., 2021). Secondly, for a sex worker to run a successful business, this would also imply specific mental skills, such as knowing how to behave around and interact with clients, for example, to understand how they can attract more clients or the type of client they are looking for. For example, sex workers in the high-class escort industry are expected to behave in a different manner than street-based sex workers.

Current Study

It appears that there has been one study on sex work in Rotterdam (Goderie & Boutellier, 2006), which also paid attention to the unlawful sector. It can be argued that, especially in light of recent technological developments, this study may now be outdated. Since Rotterdam is the second largest city in the Netherlands, it is remarkable that only so little attention has been paid to the role of municipal policies in the safety of sex workers in Rotterdam. The Municipality's association between sex work and human trafficking (as stated in the Municipal "human trafficking and prostitution policy") and its aim to support vulnerable sex workers (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2021, p.5) further raises the question of how unlawful working sex workers perceive their safety. One could argue that such knowledge is necessary, however, for a municipality to effectively develop a sex work policy that aligns with the local realities. Furthermore, research suggests that policies that prioritise support for sex workers — rather than reinforcing stigma — have a positive impact on their health, safety, and overall living and working conditions (Oliveira et al., 2023). Well-functioning policy is therefore crucial and fundamentally important for sex workers.

All this calls for the need to further clarify the understandings of unlawfully working sex workers with respect to safety and safeguarding their safety. As the most recent study indicates that the majority of sex workers in the Rotterdam sex industry, both lawful and unlawful, are female (RIEC, 2012),[5] the following research question was formulated: "How do female sex workers working unlawfully in Rotterdam perceive their safety under the Rotterdam sex work policy, and what strategies do they have to manage this (un)safety?" By using Letkemann's *Crime as Work* lens, this study aims to examine how female sex workers in the unlawful sex industry of Rotterdam deal with their safety and which measures they take to maintain this safety in the context of Rotterdam's sex work policy.

Methodology

Research Design Overview

This study is underpinned by a phenomenological approach, combining 37 qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews and 17 qualitative non-systematic observations.

The study was carried out within the theoretical framework of the *Crime as Work* approach. The data was gathered from November 2021 to April 2022. The research was combined with a research internship at the Municipality of Rotterdam, Team Policy and Interventions at the Department of Public Safety, throughout the whole research process. Guided by Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), the following section will elaborate on the interviews, observations, coding, analysis, ethical considerations and reflexivity.

Interviews

Respondents. Interviews were conducted from November 2021 to March 2022. In total, 39 respondents from four different domains have been interviewed in 37 interviews:[6] Authorities, aid agencies, sex workers, and a rest category of respondents apart from these domains. Each of the respondent groups has its specific responsibilities and perspectives on sex work, shaped by their respective backgrounds and professional roles. As it is the sex workers themselves who may or may not be subjected to violence and take measures to prevent it, the emphasis in this study lies explicitly on their perspective and experiences — in line with the 'nothing about us without us' ethos advocated by sex workers organisations (see, for example, ICRSE, 2015).

Regarding the authorities, thirteen respondents from different governmental organisations - on the national level as well as on the level of the city of Rotterdam - were interviewed. This includes respondents from the Municipality of Rotterdam, the Rotterdam Aliens Police, Identification and Human Traffickign Division (AVIM), Public Prosecution Services, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and the Ministry of Justice and Security. Additionally, employees of the Regional Information and Expertise Centre (RIEC), which focuses, among other things, on documenting information and statistics, and employees of Motus, a department of the Dutch police that focuses on the criminal use of property, are also interviewed.

Secondly, interviews were conducted with nine respondents working for different public and private aid agencies: the Municipal Health Service (GGD); Humanitas, which offers support to (ex-)sex workers and victims of human trafficking (Van den Dries, 2018); Door2Door, an information and service centre for and by sex workers who work or live in the region of Rotterdam (Door2Door, n.d.); Soa Aids Nederland that has a special 'team sex work' and researches sex work in the Netherlands; The Salvation Army and De Haven, both working from a Christian perspective. Finally, a member of The Association for Women and Law was interviewed. This association is a platform for lawyers with an interest in women and law in the Netherlands and has written articles and speeches about the (Dutch) sex industry from a legal perspective.

Thirdly, sixteen female sex workers were interviewed. Regarding the demographic characteristics of these sex workers (such as age, nationality, and residence status), no further distinction was made in the recruitment process. The inclusion of two sex workers needs further explanation. One former sex worker recently refrained from sex work

as she had experienced too much violence and abuse. However, she was able to provide much information about the Rotterdam unlawful industry. Another sex worker did not necessarily work in Rotterdam, but rather in the South of the Netherlands. Encountering her happened by chance, but as she had profound knowledge about the sex industry in general as well as in Rotterdam, she was still included in this study.

Brief Description of the Sex Workers. The nationalities of the interviewed sex workers varied broadly. In total, nine Dutch sex workers were interviewed; others had a Greek, a Thai, a Romanian or a Dutch-English background. Although many apprehended or registered female sex workers working unlawfully in Rotterdam originate from Eastern European or Latin American countries, there is also a significant number of Dutch sex workers. COVID-19 made it more difficult to approach sex workers because there was a large fine for working during the lockdown, which meant these sex workers had even more to lose, and thus their distrust was even larger. Moreover, both authorities and social workers indicated during the interviews and observations that many migrant sex workers returned to their homeland due to the insecurities of the pandemic. It became, therefore, even more difficult to approach and include sex workers from abroad. Still, indirect data about this foreign group could be gathered because the interviewed sex workers knew many other foreign sex workers. Aid agencies and authorities could provide information as well. For the foreign sex workers, the time they have been in the Netherlands varied from only a few months to decades. In terms of age, the interviewed sex workers were between 21 and 61 years of age. They vary in education (from none to university) and the experience they have in the sex industry; for instance, one sex worker started working only a few months ago, while another has been doing this work for over 30 years.

The sex workers also varied in the type of sexual services they offered. Distinguishing based on the type of sex work is rather difficult because most interviewed sex workers offer a variety of services, which is often rather fluid, based on what they want to offer at one point, the occasion and the wishes of the client. Neither their legal status is black nor white. Although all do reside with valid residence papers in the Netherlands, many respondents work partly lawfully and partly unlawfully or used to work lawfully and work now unlawfully or vice versa. Lawful forms of sex work by the sex workers in this study include strip clubs, licensed escorting, massage salons, private homes, and windows.[7] The unlawful forms of sex work present in this study are working from hotels, Airbnbs and holiday resorts, working frequently from home,[8] sex cinema's,[9] unlawful escort and sugaring.[10] Some sex workers also work at sex parties, as a dominatrix (BDSM) and/or provide services in the context of fetishes, such as Big Beautiful Women (BBW).[11] This can be either lawful or unlawful, depending on the municipality in which they work.

Procedure. All interviews were conducted by the first researcher, without the presence of third parties. Interviews with authorities and aid agencies were conducted either at the respondents' workplace or online via Microsoft Teams. Interviews with sex

workers took place in person in public locations, including a train station, a terrace, or at the researchers' office, depending on the respondent's preference. A topic list was employed, see Appendix. In terms of duration, the interviews were held for 45 to 165 min, with an average interview time of 67 min. Most interviews were conducted in Dutch, and interviews with sex workers from abroad were conducted in English. Explicit permission was requested to audio-record the conversation. The audio recorder was only activated after explicit verbal consent had been granted. All respondents from authorities and aid agencies explicitly agreed to audio-recording. Not all sex workers provided permission for audio-recording; therefore, their interviews were conducted by making detailed notes that they agreed on. During the interviews, notes were taken to facilitate the formulation of follow-up questions and field notes were taken for further analysis. No incentives or compensation have been offered to any respondent. It was found important that participation in this study would be entirely voluntary and with informed consent, and partial or full withdrawal would be possible without any further obligations or difficulties.

The respondents from authorities and aid organisations were contacted through email or telephone. The internship played a significant role here: rather than contacting a standard email address or telephone number, which often takes much time and does not always have a chance of succeeding, the contact details of persons with the specific relevant tasks or knowledge for this study could now be found easily. The snowball method has been used for respondents as well, as sometimes respondents knew other potential respondents. Recruitment of respondents from the authorities and aid agencies group posed no difficulties, as all approached individuals were willing to participate in the study.

Sex workers were, however, more challenging to approach. Not only because they work unlawfully and were practically harder to find, but due to COVID-19, there were indications that many sex workers stopped working or decided to work even more invisibly, for example, by only seeing regular clients. Furthermore, respondents indicated in interviews that foreign sex workers returned to their country of origin. The aid agencies were able to link the first researcher with a few sex workers, who were initially approached via phone. After these interviews went well, these sex workers provided new contacts to approach. The internship did cause questions when approaching sex workers to participate in this study, however. The internship did not provide contact persons in the sex work community; these respondents needed to be recruited through the snowball method. It was explained to them that this internship is rather an opportunity than a bottleneck because now the importance of the subject could be emphasised. It was also stressed that it would, by no means, use their data or information on the devices of the municipality, so complete anonymity would be ensured. These two arguments were found important by sex workers, and it seemed that the internship was not a problem per se. Thus, the internship played an important role in recruiting respondents from relevant authorities due to the practical reasons outlined above, while the recruitment of sex workers demanded additional attention.

It should be noted that sex workers who work unlawfully have very much to lose when disclosing their work. This includes their housing (since the municipality can shut this down in case unlawful sex work activities are discovered), a large administrative fine since it is unlawful, and the stigma experienced by their social environment when their work becomes publicly known. Together, these made it challenging to convince sex workers to participate in this research. However, ethical considerations, including anonymity and privacy, were carefully thought through, and an open, respectful attitude that takes the opinion of the sex workers very seriously was explicitly aimed at. Several sex workers decided not to participate in the research, and the most common reasons were fear of being caught by authorities. Furthermore, the lack of incentives or compensation led some sex workers to decline participation, as time equated to lost income since they would be unable to receive clients during that period. This decision was, of course, respected, and a larger number of sex workers were approached to achieve the final sample size.

Observations

Observations were conducted from 30 September 2021 to 21 April 2022. In total, 17 observations were conducted, ten of which were during a research internship with the municipality. These encompassed observations with various authorities such as the Tax and Customs Administration, the police, and ministries. Additionally, observations included information meetings, including webinars or conferences, as well as interactions with aid agencies and sex workers themselves. Furthermore, full-day fieldwork with Door2Door in Rotterdam involved visiting massage salons and a club and facilitating informal conversations with sex workers. Another afternoon was spent with AVIM, offering insights into local politics and decision-making processes, which some sex workers found intrusive during police checks. Lastly, a protest for sex workers' rights at the invitation of a previously interviewed sex worker was attended.

Data Analysis and Coding

All audio-recorded interviews were manually transcribed on a local standalone computer; no automatic transcription tools were used. Spoken language was transcribed verbatim, including any grammatically incorrect or awkwardly phrased sentences, without correction or adjustment. The notes from non-recorded interviews and the observations were processed digitally. All transcripts were then analysed by the first author using the software program *Atlas.ti*. A hybrid coding approach was adopted. The process began deductively, with an initial codebook derived from the topic list and theory. As coding progressed, additional codes were developed inductively. First, axial coding was used to organise the data into broad categories, such as 'safety' and 'unsafety'. This was followed by selective coding to identify sub-categories such as 'measures', 'perceptions' and 'experiences'. Finally, a thematic analysis was conducted to explore patterns within the data (Evers, 2025).

Ethical and Methodological Considerations

One important principle central to the ethical conduct of social research is the need for freely given informed consent (Easton & Matthews, 2016). When respondents, both authorities, aid agencies and sex workers, were approached, information was provided about the research questions and aims, how the interview or observation would be conducted, how the data would be used and how their confidentiality would be assured. This way, respondents were informed as precisely and fully as possible. Furthermore, the respondents were informed that participation was completely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw without any questions asked and without any adverse consequences. Contact details were provided in case a respondent would wish to have contact before or after an interview. Authorities and aid agencies were provided with the information via email, while sex workers were informed via phone and/or WhatsApp since they did not use email. Consent from respondents affiliated with authorities and aid agencies was obtained in advance via email and confirmed verbally at the start of the interview. Sex workers provided verbal (via phone) or written (via WhatsApp) consent before the interview, and this was repeated verbally at the start of the interview.

During the research, it was noticed that sex workers often distrust outsiders, especially students, researchers and journalists, because they were afraid that their stories would be misinterpreted. To overcome this concern, all sex workers were asked to provide feedback on their quotes. This allowed respondents to check whether they could find themselves in the description provided and whether their quotes had been translated well (Maesschalck, 2016). The feedback was treated with care, addressed promptly, and incorporated before being returned to the respective respondent. This aimed to demonstrate to them that their input was highly valued and, hopefully, to contribute positively to the development of trust. Not all sex workers provided feedback, but many stated that they appreciated the gesture.

Finally, it should be noted that there is a tension between transparency on the one hand, where respondents and their perceptions are described as precisely and clearly as possible, and anonymity on the other hand. Regarding authorities and aid agencies, the number of people working for these organisations in the region of Rotterdam is rather limited. Recognition by others is therefore very plausible. This also applies to sex workers. Therefore, all respondents of the interviews have been labelled with a code.

Research Team and Reflexivity

The first (female) author conducted the interviews and observations in the context of a master's thesis in criminology. The overall thesis focused on changes in the Rotterdam governmental approach to female sex workers and its consequences for the labour conditions, including safety, of unlawfully working female sex workers in Rotterdam. This was also communicated to all (potential) respondents.. The second (male) author acted as the academic supervisor for this research. The research project marked the first collaboration between the authors. Following the completion of the Master's programme,

contact was maintained, which ultimately led to the development of this jointly written publication with the fist author in lead.

Reflexivity was an integral part of the research process. The researchers approached the topic from a primarily neutral stance, viewing unlawful sex work through the lens of the *Crime as Work* approach. This theoretical perspective helped maintain analytical distance while recognising the structural and economic contexts of unlawful sex work. The researchers regularly reflected on their positions and potential biases.

Conventional research on sex work sometimes tends to pathologise female sex workers by studying them as victims who cannot make informed decisions about their lives and work (Van der Meulen, 2011). Therefore, it was found to be very important to approach and treat sex workers respectfully. It was emphasised at the beginning of each interview that nothing would be found weird and that it was important to listen to *their* experiences and opinions. It was difficult sometimes to find a balance between gathering enough data for this study and having a respectful attitude towards the sex workers in terms of asking too much or too private questions. However, it was noticed that sex workers often seemed to appreciate the questions that were sometimes just asked straightforwardly. It was repeatedly emphasised that they were not obligated to answer, and if they did not feel comfortable, the topic of conversation could be changed. However, this did not occur, and respondents seemed to be comfortable. Eventually, several respondents texted weeks or months after the interview took place with a link to a news article or just checking in on how the research was going, which indicates that the interaction with respondents was friendly and respectful.

Results

The following section presents the results according to the three types of skills defined by Letkemann: social, organizational, and mechanical skills.

Perceiving Safety and Recognising Potential Violence as Social Skills in the Lawful and Unlawful Domains of the Sex Industry

Depending on the perspective taken, the perceptions of safety and violence vary among the different actors. A discrepancy exists in how authorities perceive safety in both the lawful and unlawful sex industry of Rotterdam, and how aid agencies and sex workers themselves perceive this safety. Two major arguments will be described below: (1) sex workers perceive lawful and unlawful sex work as similarly safe or unsafe, and (2) sex workers think that strict policies can lead to more unsafe conditions.

Firstly, especially authorities, mostly the local aliens police and the Rotterdam Municipality, stress that violence and abuse regularly take place in the sex industry and that sex work can be dangerous. Safety would be better maintained in licensed businesses, such as clubs, because of facilities, for example, an alarm button, cameras and bouncers, and colleagues that can keep an eye on each other. For instance, several massage salons in Rotterdam also work with a doorbell, after which the door will be opened.

But as a social worker points out, although facilities such as an alarm button may be present, there can be social control in a club, which means that women are not allowed to use it; otherwise, they have to find another workplace. Still, several respondents from authorities and aid agencies think that working lawfully is safer than working unlawfully. The local aliens police, therefore, advises unlawful working sex workers to move to licensed businesses. However, several sex workers themselves indicate that working lawfully does not automatically mean it is safer: "*I've worked from home for 15 years, and I've been through all the shitty stuff in a club or private house. That doesn't mean anything. […] At home, things can go terribly wrong, but in licensed clubs, it can happen too. I've been raped in a club twice. And at home, nothing bad has happened."* (S6)

Another sex worker explains that in clubs, clients tend to use alcohol and/or drugs, which could make them unpredictable and potentially more violent. Furthermore, when something goes wrong in a licensed business, it is not always solved correctly, several sex workers explain. For instance, a sex worker explains that she heard the story of a girl who experienced stealthing.[12] The brothel operator did nothing because there was no proof, and the client was let in again. Two other sex workers talk about the time a girl was beaten in a club, and only flowers were sent to her afterwards: "*If you complain, you will have to leave."* (S8). Moreover, a sex worker who used to work for a licensed escort agency says: "*I always thought that they [the escort agency] wanted to have a copy of their [client's] passport. But it turned out, they don't do that at all. They call a hotel room to ask whether the client is there. Yeah, I can do that too."* (S15).

This sex worker also explains that the enforcement of licensed escort agencies is not always as good as it is assumed: "*The police don't check high escort agencies, like there couldn't be any abuses. But yeah, there are only white girls, and the operators are white, so they assume that everything is fine."* (S15).

In other words, most sex workers differ from authorities and aid agencies in how they perceive safety within both the lawful and unlawful sectors of the industry. This divergence may reflect differences in perceptual skills.

Regarding the second argument, several respondents point out that when laws and policies become stricter, the safety of sex workers decreases. A social worker describes: "*The law becomes more repressive, enforcing and enforcing, and controlling and controlling. I think sex workers are increasingly disappearing from us, into illegality. Vulnerability, more violence, I think too. I think the risk of violence is going to increase. That it can backfire, sure."* (A7).

Sex workers endorse that such a stricter approach limits the possibility of sex workers working lawfully. Firstly, sex workers believe that policies mostly focus on regulating the unlawful industry, and thereby overlook the practices and circumstances of the lawful industry. This relates to the lack of safety earlier described, and sex workers have a significantly lower income in the lawful industry because they need to pay a substantial part of their income to brothel owners and escort agencies, and they have to pay taxes. Several sex workers wonder whether the high commission charges are sometimes even legal. In other words, they feel that policies are too strict for the unlawful industry and too lenient for the lawful industry. They feel that, when there is a lack

of safety and the income is low, the lawful industry is not an option for them. Secondly, not all forms of sex work are allowed in Rotterdam. Street-based sex work and frequently working from home, for example, are prohibited. However, as both social workers, the police and sex workers themselves indicate, there are sex workers who have no other options because they do not have the means (for example, not being able to afford a telephone) or knowledge (for example not having a network for potential lawful workplaces or a language barrier) to work lawfully. Since the prohibited forms of sex work are the only forms of sex work they can do, they automatically depend on the unlawful sector. There are also sex workers who prefer and are determined to do a form of sex work that is prohibited, and thereby accept that working unlawfully is the only option for them. This is well illustrated by the desire of several sex workers to make working frequently from home lawful. These sex workers think that working from home can be safer, and their income is much higher than when working in lawful businesses. According to these sex workers, they have no intention to "break the law", but the strict policies leave them no other option than working unlawfully. Finally, another form of exclusion from the lawful industry is that sex workers from abroad are not always allowed to work in the Netherlands. Sex workers without a working permit, for example, from Africa or Asia, are therefore often automatically dependent on the unlawful sex industry. In other words, by limiting the lawful possibilities for sex workers either by allowing only certain forms of sex work or by requesting work permits, stricter policies can 'push' sex workers to the unlawful industry.

At the same time, a police officer points out that although stricter policies could be made with good intentions, they can also have negative implications for authorities:

> Nowadays, when one wants to make an advertisement on Kinky,[13] they have to show an ID. That is good, but it doesn't make our work easier. We used to have a look at Kinky, and with certain advertisements, we could find minors, that's what we're looking for. But now, because everything has become stricter, we suddenly lost them. We had to look, they were no longer on Kinky, where are they? […] Sometimes it's well-intentioned but not always helpful, that's what I mean. I can't say they [the websites] shouldn't. Sure, it's perfect what they do, but we lost them all and had to come up with something different. It's not that it disappears, it will always be there, but it becomes more hidden. (Po2).

In other words, although the municipality's stricter approach was aimed at increasing sex workers' safety, it can be counterproductive for both sex workers and authorities regarding enforcement.

The Experiences of Unlawful Working Sex Workers With Violence and Their Social Skills

Unlawfully working sex workers differ in their experiences regarding their safety. Several sex workers explicitly state that they have not experienced violence in their job:

> I've worked with dangerous men. […] And of course, mental patients, some of them are surely offenders, murderers. So, I know what I'm dealing with. And I know that perhaps the most dangerous people are also the ones who feel unerringly whether you are real. And I'm not getting there with a play. I once had someone, yes, in drug trafficking or whatever, who said: There is a gun on the windowsill, does that bother you? I said no. I never felt threatened, not for a second. (S8).

This sex worker does say she is aware that there is a possibility she encounters clients with bad intentions: "*Yeah, you should be aware because the human mind is complex, and people can be unpredictable. You don't know what can trigger someone."* (S8). Another sex worker explains that she never felt threatened; she thinks that this is also because she is a little older and has 'people skills'. These sex workers think that a sex worker's experience in the industry can help to assess the risks in a situation. Other sex workers have experienced safety incidents or know other sex workers who have, but think this happens in a minority of cases: "*Throughout the years, I've experienced several things. But in general, it's nothing compared to all the lovely, amazing, beautiful, exciting things, I have to say. I really want to emphasise that."* (S9).

Another sex worker agrees and thinks there is often an emphasis on the things that go wrong: "*Yeah, sometimes bad stuff happens. But that's not different from a jewellery store that is getting robbed. Or a supermarket where stuff is stolen, you know. Statistically speaking, I think, it isn't that bad, especially in the Netherlands. Of course, fucked-up things happen, absolutely, but there are way more good things than bad things."* (S14).

It should be noted, however, that violence and abuse do not have to be physically visible, as a social worker explains: "*When it comes to violence, people often think about a black eye, getting beaten. But [emotional and financial] violence is not visible, so [people think] it doesn't exist."* (A7). One sex worker mentions that she thinks that fakers, clients who do not show up for an appointment, are also a form of violence: "*If you go somewhere and no one is there, that's a terrible feeling. You've lost your money for your train ticket, your time and effort."* (S15). Other sex workers have experienced clients making fake appointments as well. Besides not showing up, clients can also keep asking questions without making an appointment ('time wasters'), and there are clients who only come to steal money ('thieves'). However, a client who does not show up is not automatically a faker, another sex worker wants to point out: "*Sometimes there is a reason one doesn't show up. Something happened, or their wife came home early, I don't know. I try to presuppose the positive."* (S14).

Another sex worker says she did not experience violence by clients or the police, but from her social environment. She tells about the time a distant relative found her advertisements online and threatened to inform her grandfather:

> She said: What would your grandfather think of this? […] I denied it and blocked her. I was very scared, and in the end, I called my grandfather to say that she was spreading lies about me. Of course, it's not a lie, but I was so afraid they were going to call my grandfather […]

> Everyone is always talking about violence, this also falls under violence, and this is the most violence I've experienced. Not with my clients, no, my surroundings. That's where most of the violence is coming from. (S16).

In other words, sex workers, whether they work lawfully or unlawfully, can encounter different forms of violence, including physical and mental violence from clients as well as law officers, but they can also experience this violence from people in their social surroundings. In this context, several sex workers contend that industry experience may improve one's capacity to evaluate situational risks, thereby fostering the development of social skills.

Planning and Execution in Relation to Risks of Violence as Organisational Skills

Regarding working unlawfully from home, opinions about safety vary. One social worker points out that working from home can be high risk because then clients know their private address. For this reason, sex workers indicate that they would rather rent a workplace, because they are aware of the risk that clients can be stalkers, can blackmail or have other bad intentions that may impact their safety. One sex worker talks about the moment she had a client who kept leaving candles, flowers and letters at her door for months. However, another sex worker who regularly works from home explains she lives in a building with cameras that record everything downstairs, and she has to open the door with a button in her home. This sex worker, thus, has set up her facilities comparable to those within the lawful industry. As another sex worker points out, an advantage of working from home is that one knows their way around the building: "*If you go to someone's place, you don't know whether they installed a camera, whether there are more people present. So yeah, I understand that people want to work from home."* (S16). This way, sex workers think that being familiar with the workplace can increase a sex worker's control.

Measures to Maintain Safety as Mechanical Skills

Most sex workers think that taking measures themselves can have a role in reducing the risk of violence. Unlawful working sex workers cannot rely on the facilities they would have had in the lawful industry. Therefore, they come up with diverse measures themselves to maintain their safety. They arrange these 'facilities' in different ways, and most sex workers use a combination of these measures. The following section will explore how sex workers may employ mechanical skills as a means of preventing or mitigating potential violence.

Selecting Clients. Although the internet offers sex workers more autonomy by arranging meetings with clients themselves, it does have a major disadvantage: they do not know

whether clients are honest about who they are and what they want, which can be dangerous. Many sex workers therefore work with the same clients, a so-called client base. Since they have met these clients before, it feels safer because trust has already been gained. Sex workers can also recommend clients they already know to each other, which makes them feel safer as well. Other sex workers indicate that they meet both regular and new clients. When a new client presents himself, sex workers sometimes screen clients beforehand, for example, by googling their name and phone number. Sex workers also screen new clients by having a look at how they react: "*If someone says: hey, I'm blah blah and I was looking for this and that, is that possible? That's fine. But when someone says: can you come tonight? That won't work."* (S8).

In this way, sex workers think they can estimate whether they are feeling comfortable with the client and consider whether they want to meet or not. When meeting a new client, a sex worker explains that she prefers to meet in an area she is already familiar with. She also indicates that she prefers to meet new clients in person first because she finds it emotionally hard to screen her clients: "*I don't know, I feel bad about it [screening clients]. I think I'm not doing it right. On one hand, I'm afraid of losing clients, and on the other hand, when they do give me information, I'm afraid that I'm too naive or too trusting."* (S15).

Another sex worker explains that she did not screen her clients because she simply needed money and found it boring to constantly meet the same people, but she points out that this led to more incidents, including violence and theft.

Sometimes, sex workers give the address they are working at to the client after he arrives in the street, so they can have a first impression and thus more control. At the same time, social workers point out that this is not watertight; there can always be someone different behind a profile. It seems that sex workers are aware of these risks; they indicate that they find it scary sometimes and have a weapon such as a baseball bat, a knife, a pepper sprayer or a spray with a kind of paint with them. But, as a police officer explains, this might create a false sense of security: "*Sometimes they have pepper spray or a baseball bat. Then I think: yes, that baseball bat is by the front door and you're in the bedroom. So, I say: the baseball bat is not going to help you when you need it. And that phone call to your boyfriend who's a few blocks away is not going to help you either when someone squeezes your throat."* (Po3).

Moreover, some sex workers avoid clients with specific ethnic backgrounds because they think it will cause problems. However, a former sex worker explains that this was not always possible: "*I had to deal with clients from countries that I didn't feel comfortable with. Morocco, for instance, I didn't like Surinamers either. There were certain types … types of clients I didn't want. But yeah, I did it for the money."* (S10).

This sex worker, in other words, felt that she had to accept the clients because of a lack of money. Another sex worker explains that she does not mind the ethnical background of clients, but knows that other sex workers sometimes do: "*Last week, someone asked me: is it discrimination to refuse Turkish and Moroccan boys? I said: no, that's not discrimination, you don't feel good about it so you shouldn't do it."* (S13).

Finally, some sex workers only work at certain times; this way, they avoid clients who are under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. A sex worker agrees: "*In the past years, clients wanted appointments later in the evening, around 1 AM. They drank, they smoked, and they used drugs. They are intoxicated and get more aggressive."* (S10). One sex worker does not accept intoxicated clients: "*When I'm on the phone with someone and I think he's drunk, I'll send him away, because I think he is not in his right mind, then."* (S6). Another sex worker does not mind if it is not too much, but does avoid working late during the week. Three sex workers explicitly state that they do not drink or use drugs, or only a tiny bit, so they keep an overview of the situation; they think that by using drugs or alcohol, one can become more vulnerable. In other words, avoiding certain clients, not working at certain times, and deciding whether one is willing to drink and/or do drugs can be measures a sex worker can take.

Using Black Lists. On Kinky, there used to be a 'blacklist', or a so-called 'fakers list', where sex workers could put personal details such as names and phone numbers of unreliable clients on to warn each other; clients who keep asking questions but never come to an appointment ('time wasters'), clients that do not show up to an appointment ('no-shows') and clients who abuse, assault, rape and steal from sex workers were listed here (SW Digitaal, n.d.). Sex workers do not necessarily have to know each other to inform each other; sex workers could retrieve these websites by themselves. By the end of 2020, this list was no longer online because it violated the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Pringels, 2020). After the list was removed, many sex workers felt unsafe and panicked about how they should handle their safety from then on. Several sex workers indicate: "*It's very unfortunate that Kinky's fakers list has disappeared. Not only were fakers listed there, but also people who were aggressive, or who stole money, or otherwise whom you do not want as a client."* (S15).

When the fakers list was removed, sex workers could no longer independently check their clients via the website. After a while, a sex worker started her own website to list fakers, time wasters and other unreliable clients. But, as one sex worker explains, the founder of this website asked for a fee: "*She [the founder] asked for money to realise the website, which was supposedly needed to build it. But now she started asking for fifty euros a year to use it. I find it so nasty to ask colleagues for money for their safety. I don't want to give her money. And I think the Data Protection Authority hasn't permitted it, so it can be deleted soon."* (S16).

Another sex worker indicates that she is using this website because she thinks it offers some security at least. However, another sex worker thinks faker's lists give a false sense of security because they work with the name that the client provides; next time, he can pick another name, telephone number and e-mail address and thus avoid the list. In April 2022, Soa Aids Nederland introduced a new, legally approved system called Ugly Mugs to prevent violence and improve the position of sex workers. This new list, after the Kinky's fakers list was removed, allows sex workers again to check their clients, which contributes to their autonomy in ensuring their safety.

However, as one sex worker points out, not all abuses are listed here: "*What I find a pity is that it concerns violent crimes, so yes, time wasters or haters or people who commit the small transgressions, they are not listed there. That's still difficult. But I do think that such a list is really important."* (S15).

Another way to keep each other updated and warn each other is by group apps, for example on WhatsApp and Telegram, by informing each other which clients are good and which ones are not. Banning the fakers list described above was thus only of little use because it still happened and happens via other media. Sex workers describe that these group chats might have 100 to 150 members. At one point, three different group chats for sex workers in Rotterdam were made: a Dutch, a Spanish and an English one. There are chat groups, in which sex workers warn each other for checks by the police and give each other advice, and there are fakers groups, in which they warn each other by sharing information about 'bad' clients. One sex worker explained that after a client tried to pull off a condom, she warned others by posting his name and telephone number in all the fakers chats with sex workers she was in. But this sex worker also indicates that other sex workers in these group apps prefer a website, so there is more of an overview. One disadvantage of group apps is that someone has to be a member, and thus needs to know other sex workers, while fakers lists on websites are accessible for everyone once a (free) account is made. Moreover, in case the police get access to these group apps, for example during a check, sex workers are afraid that the police will find their data. Still, since the new Ugly Mugs only lists violent clients and not other unreliable clients, and a new list created by a sex worker asked for a fee, which makes it financially not accessible for some sex workers, the existence of such free accessible group chats is an alternative for the original Kinky's fakers list.

Other Strategies Employed by Sex Workers in Dealing With Safety. Finally, sex workers take other measures to maintain their safety. This includes the usage of deposits, working together with other sex workers to keep an eye on each other, informing their surroundings, using safes to store the cash and having someone around that could intervene, or at least create that illusion.

Firstly, a sex worker explains she uses deposits. This way, she is assured that it is not a check by the police, and she has information about the client in case something happens. Moreover, she already has part of the money in case a client does not show up ('fakers') and thus ensures her income. But, as she explains, she has not always done this, and therefore she is glad that nothing bad happened.

Secondly, in clubs and private homes, colleagues can keep an eye on each other. When working unlawfully, sex workers sometimes also work with multiple sex workers at one address for the same reason. Some sex workers also prefer to work together because they think it is more fun. One ex-sex worker explains that it feels indeed more unsafe to work alone: *"You don't have any colleagues that help you fight a person. He can grab you, for example. […] It is hard to work alone, you are vulnerable, very vulnerable."* (S10).

But this ex-sex worker also explains that she still wanted to work alone, because she wanted to keep the friendship and work separated, and she is aware that this is not allowed in Rotterdam.

Thirdly, some sex workers inform their surroundings when they go to a client. One sex worker indicates she is no longer doing that: "*I used to leave notes with the addresses I went to. I thought: in case something happens, they will find those. But I'm no longer doing that. My clients now are all so sweet, I don't have to worry anymore."* (S9).

Another sex worker indicates that she often turns on her Google location finder and informs others. But this is not always watertight: "*I tell them [her surroundings]: I'm working here, from time to time, and if you don't hear from me, please call me. That's nice. But I have to learn to pick the right people because sometimes I ask someone and then I say that I'm home again, and that person doesn't answer. Yeah, that doesn't make me safe, of course."* (S15).

Fourthly, one sex worker points out that because she is not able to deposit the black money she earns, the cash is piling up in her home*: "It feels more unsafe. I have a stash of cash in my home, and every time someone visits or when I'm on holiday and someone takes care of my cats, I think: who do I let in?"* (S15). Another sex worker states that she had clients who tried to steal money: "*Some of them first pay you, so they see where you keep the money"* (S10). This sex worker, therefore, says that using a safe can avoid these problems. One sex worker explains she has a safe in which she keeps all the money she earns, and another sex worker uses an external safe, which she rents, to store the money because then it is no longer in her home.

Finally, one sex worker mentions that she had a dog: "*I always make sure the TV is on in the living room, and I used to have a dog. Sweetheart, but if someone came in, he'd bark. Then they [clients] are a bit frightened. And I pretend that I'm bringing the money to my partner."* (S6).

This sex worker refers to having another person around or at least creating that illusion. Sex workers can also ask someone else to be present while working, so this person can intervene in case of incidents; one sex worker asks her partner to be in the living room while she is working. Another sex worker explains that when she worked in a sex cinema, she knew the operator was in the store, so she could warn him, which made her feel safer. In other words, sex workers indicated that they can take actual measures, but just pretending to have one could already contribute to their safety.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine how female sex workers in the unlawful sex industry of Rotterdam deal with their safety and which measures they take to maintain this safety in the context of Rotterdam policies using Letkemann's (1973) concept of *Crime as Work*.

Sex workers who participated in this study indicated that violence can occur in both lawful and unlawful domains of the sex industry. It is often assumed by authorities that

working lawfully would be safer than working unlawfully because of the facilities such as cameras and alarm buttons. Sex workers, however, pointed out that this does not necessarily fits reality. Sex workers who work or used to work both lawful and unlawful, indicated that violence can occur in both domains, challenging this binary of the safe lawful sector and unsafe unlawful sector.

In *Crime as Work*, Letkemann (1973) argues that there are three "classes" of criminal skills people in conflict with the law need to be successful in their work: mechanical, organisational and social, the latter including perceptual skills. In terms of organisational skills, sex workers indicate that they take conscious steps in the planning and execution of their work. For example, sex workers can decide not to work at certain times to avoid intoxicated clients. When it comes to working from home, sex workers think differently about safety. On one hand, sex workers think it is safer because one is already familiar with the environment, but on the other hand, sex workers are afraid that clients with bad intentions have too much personal information about them. Deciding in the workplace, thus, can be an important organisational skill.

Regarding social skills, unlawful working sex workers need perceptual skills to recognise potential violence, evaluate the associated risks, and respond accordingly. The female unlawful working sex workers in this study differed in how aware they are of their risks and safety. Several sex workers indicated that they have experienced violence when they were working unlawfully, while others explicitly stated that nothing has ever happened to them. Both groups, however, pointed out that one can have their 'own share' in this: although most of them are aware that taking these measures can never and will never be completely watertight, sex workers think that this can play a major role in how many and which safety incidents they encounter in their work. This refers to social skills, including perceptual or mental skills. Here, sex workers sometimes assess the risk of violence when working unlawfully, in other words, whether or not they are at risk. This assessment seemed to be related to their age and their level of experience in the industry, or what a sex worker called "people knowledge", the ability to estimate whether a client can be trusted. Here, sex workers are aware that a client can use a different name and phone number, and can be a faker. In addition to violence by clients, sex workers indicated that their social surroundings can interact violently as well, mostly due to the stigma of sex work. Here, perceptual skills are needed to assess whether or not their social environment can be trusted, and thus whether or not they can disclose on their job.

Finally, regarding mechanical skills, which refer to tools and procedures, sex workers illustrated that they can take a variety of measures and adopt procedures to maintain their safety. Since unlawful working sex workers cannot use the facilities that are being used in the lawful industry, such as an alarm button, they have to think of and take their own safety measures. They can do this individually, such as working with deposits, using a safe to avoid robbery of their cash, or having cameras installed in their workplace. They can also use their phone as a tool to maintain a client base with clients they trust. Sex workers can also work together. For example, they can use and warn each other via group chats, use fakers' websites to warn each other and check their new

clients, and they can work in the same building to keep an eye on each other. Most sex workers are aware that these measures are not watertight, but point out that security is not ensured in the lawful industry either.

Letkemann (1973) also points out that a lack of time and money are the two most important factors that prevent adequate preparation for a criminal event. A lack of time is not very applicable, since most sex workers rent their own workplace and thus have enough time to offer their services. Sex workers do indicate, however, that a lack of money sometimes indeed means that one does not take measures, or not enough measures or not in an adequate way, which can lead to more dangerous situations, and thus increases their chances of experiencing violence by clients. Sex workers indicated that when in need of money, a sex worker can accept clients that they do not feel completely comfortable with, but nevertheless accepts them. This, thus, can make them vulnerable to more violence.

In the end, stricter policies limit sex workers' ability to work lawfully, excluding them from the lawful sector and pushing them towards the unlawful sector. Sex workers indicated that policies primarily target regulating the unlawful industry, neglecting the conditions of the lawful one. Safety concerns and low incomes make lawfulwork unfeasible for many sex workers. Furthermore, certain forms of sex work are prohibited, leaving some with no option but to work unlawfully. Foreign sex workers without permits are also excluded from lawful work. Overall, sex workers indicated that due to the municipality's strict policies, there is sometimes no alternative but to operate within the unlawful industry.

Discussion

As noted earlier, there is relatively little recent (Dutch) research available that examines the implications of working outside the lawful sector for the safety of sex workers. Moreover, in the available studies, the voices of sex workers themselves are largely absent. The present study addresses this gap and offers insights that, in part, diverge from the existing body of knowledge.

When it comes to safety perceptions, the findings of the current study complement existing research but also contradict certain previous studies. In the previously mentioned study on sex work in Rotterdam, Goderie and Boutellier (2006, p.79) argue that in the unlawful industry, there is a clear presence of "[i]nsecurity, particularly in terms of human trafficking. In illegal prostitution, exploitation, violence, and poor working conditions thrive." In another, more recent study (Nijkamp et al., 2014), attention was given to safety within the legal sector. Fieldwork conducted in other Dutch cities — namely Amsterdam, Eindhoven, and Groningen — showed that, at that time, sex workers in the lawful sector reported virtually no incidents of violence. The findings of these studies correspond with the perspectives of most authorities in the study, yet the unlawful working sex workers in this study argued that working unlawfully does not automatically mean working unsafely. While complete protection can never be guaranteed, these sex workers reported that implementing certain

measures enhances their sense of safety. Importantly, they also pointed out that the lawful industry is not automatically safer; several sex workers state that they have experienced more violence when working lawfully than they have while working unlawfully. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that the aforementioned studies did not engage directly with unlawful working sex workers. One could argue that this underscores the importance of including unlawfully working sex workers in sex work research.

Furthermore, as the results indicate, because sex workers working in the unlawful sector cannot rely on the support systems available in the lawful industry, they may adopt various safety measures such as maintaining fakers lists, using group chats to warn each other, working together, and requiring deposits. Although Dutch journalistic articles have previously addressed this issue (see for example Pringels, 2020, about the removal of the blacklist), scientific literature in the Netherlands on sex workers' safeguards appears to be limited. Weitzer (2012, pp. 26–27) noted that call girls and escorts may use blacklists and inform each other about aggressive clients. Internationally, more research is available, and the current study is able to offer additional depth. A Canadian study (Lewis et al., 2005) shows that sex workers operating outside lawful businesses cannot rely on the safety measures provided by such establishments — such as bouncers — but that they can implement similar measures on their terms. This study also shows that sex workers are able to determine their own services and working hours, and that they can collaborate with others to assist in ensuring their protection. The findings of the current study provide a more detailed understanding of how sex workers can put these safety strategies into practice. Another study conducted in Victoria, Australia (Begum et al., 2013, p.94) points out that sex workers may rely on a unique "set of skills" that sex workers develop on the job, such as developing "a sixth sense". However, it does not elaborate on what exactly this set of skills looks like. Since sex work has been legalised in Victoria, it also raises the question of how these dynamics manifest for unlawful working sex workers. The findings of the current study add to this by providing insight, through the lens of the *Crime as Work* approach, into how this skill set can be interpreted for sex workers operating in the unlawful industry.

Moreover, the exclusion of sex workers from the lawful sector, effectively pushing them toward the unlawful branch of the industry, was also highlighted in a Dutch study on improving the social position of sex workers by Dutch municipalities (Swart, 2022). This study found that a segment of sex workers remains largely invisible due to their exclusion from the lawful industry — for example, those engaged in home-based sex work. These authors argue that sex workers who are unable to obtain a license due to the minimum age requirement of 21 can also be considered part of this group. The findings of this study align with these conclusions. However, the aforementioned study argues that the exclusion of these sex workers from formal policy frameworks appears to worsen, rather than improve, their social position. Without access to the lawful industry, safe working conditions cannot be guaranteed, and support services struggle to reach those working in private settings. As a result, sex workers who remain out of

sight are less likely to seek help — especially when operating under illegal or informal conditions. As the aforementioned study argues, this increases sex workers' vulnerability, although it did not include sex workers themselves. The current study indeed shows that, due to existing policies, some sex workers are 'forced' to work in the unlawful industry. However, this study offers a more nuanced perspective as sex workers included in this study reported that the lawful industry does not automatically equate to safety, nor does the unlawful industry necessarily imply danger. Rather, they describe taking proactive steps and establishing informal safeguards to protect themselves from violence to the extent possible. Moreover, sex workers working unlawfully often turn to one another for support, a dynamic that may remain largely invisible to formal support services. Further research may shed light on how unlawful working sex workers construct and interpret their social position in their interactions with support services.

As evidenced by the foregoing, it is of paramount importance to incorporate the voices of those directly concerned—in this case, unlawful working sex workers—into research on the subject. In other words, the principle of "*nothing about us without us"* (ICRSE, 2015) should be reflected in scientific inquiry. We would argue that this is particularly crucial in research contexts in which stigma or prejudice is present, as such inclusion can yield findings that might otherwise have remained invisible.

Despite the large number of interviewed respondents, including unlawful working sex workers, several critical notes can be drawn. First of all, research has shown that in the Netherlands, sex workers come from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This study involved relatively more Dutch sex workers, though efforts were made to include those from other backgrounds. However, many sex workers from abroad returned to their home countries due to pandemic lockdowns. Reasons provided by respondents included seeking refuge with family or concerns about health. Although this was not formally part of the research, it sheds light on their experiences during challenging times. Focusing on Dutch sex workers does not necessarily limit the study's scope, as research often centres on foreign sex workers. Additionally, this study only examined female unlawful sex workers, yet respondents noted the presence of male and transgender sex workers in Rotterdam. Future research could encompass sex workers of various backgrounds and genders to encompass these aspects. Furthermore, one should note that the respondents from the three different domains (authorities, aid agencies and sex workers) all have different perceptions and experiences. These differences can already be considered a research result, as this research has found that a strong discrepancy exists in the perceptions of these three groups when it comes to safety in the lawful and unlawful sex industry. Future research can examine these differences further and determine where these differences come from. More importantly, future research can examine how meaningful policy can be developed, taking all these differences into account.

Finally, it should be noted that this study does not intend to trivialise or dismiss violence and other abuses in either the lawful or unlawful sectors. Given the previously mentioned limitations, such a conclusion cannot be drawn based on this study alone.

However, the study does present a more nuanced view of the current discourse. Further research is therefore essential to inform and advance the debate on safety and insecurity within both sectors of the Dutch sex industry.

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Notes

1. This article prefers the term 'sex work' over 'prostitution' since it conceptualises it as a form of labour, or at least as an income-generating activity (Adriaenssens et al., 2016).
2. In Dutch policy and legal documents, the term 'voluntary sex work' was frequently used to contrast human trafficking. One could argue that there is no such thing as 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' sex work however, as the latter would be classified as human trafficking.
3. Although municipalities are authorised to develop their policies, the national legislator did set 'boundaries': for instance, the minimum age to perform sex work in the Netherlands is eighteen years, and migration law still applies, such as having a permit which allows labour (Government of the Netherlands, 2015).
4. Since sex work is not criminalised in the Netherlands but may be considered unlawful, the term 'crime' as used by Letkemann (1973) is thus not convenient in this study. However, Letkemann focuses on activities that are prohibited, and thus the theory can still be well applied to unlawful sex work.

5. Despite this study being published over a decade ago, the interviews conducted for this study suggest that there has not been a significant shift regarding this matter in the Rotterdam sex industry.
6. Sometimes, multiple respondents were interviewed at the same time, and sometimes one respondent was interviewed multiple times. Hence, the number of respondents and interviews does not match.
7. As explained previously, windows are prohibited in Rotterdam. Sex workers who work or used to work behind windows do so in other cities such as The Hague and Amsterdam.
8. As explained previously, this is considered a brothel and thus needs a license. None of the included sex workers had this, which makes it automatically unlawful.
9. Although sex cinemas are licensed in Rotterdam (and thus lawful), they are only allowed to display erotic imagery. Offering physical sexual services is unlawful, or a license is needed to do so.
10. Sugaring is a beneficial relationship between a 'sugar baby' and a 'sugar daddy', where a sugar baby offers dating and companionship in exchange for financial support (Upadhyay, 2021).
11. BBW focuses on women who have a significant corpulent figure (Jones, 2019).
12. With stealthing, a client takes off the condom without the permission of the sex worker.
13. Kinky and Sexjobs are the most prominent sex work websites in the Netherlands.

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Appendix Topic List for Interviews

Introduction

1. Explanation of research and researchers
2. Informed consent, written or verbal
3. Check for questions

Themes

4. Income
5. Job security (staying in the industry)

6. Social protection (e.g., health care, financial help)
7. Content of work:
   a. Autonomy
   b. Agency
   c. Safety (physically and mentally), safety strategies and safeguards
   d. Workplace (e.g., privacy, hygiene, facilities)
   e. Social relations (e.g., other sex workers, aid agencies, authorities)
   f. Activism and unions
8. Current sex work policy of the Municipality of Rotterdam
   a. Lawful and unlawful sex work
   b. Changes in legislation: business plan, Bibob check, minimum age, registration)

Closing Remarks

9. Thanking
10. Check for questions
11. Provide contact details for future concerns or questions.