

Stories of Resistance: An Exploratory Study of Intersectionality in Sex Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

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A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Criminology and Criminal Justice

2025

School of Social Sciences and Humanities

Yes, the gods are on the park bench, the gods are on the bus,
the gods are all here, the gods are in us.

The Gods are timeless, fearless, fighting to be bold,
conviction is a heavy hand to hold,
grip it, winged sandals tearing up the pavement -
you, me, everyone: Brand New Ancients.

(Tempest, 2013, p. 43)

Dedication

To all people who sex work



Figure 1: A badge I wear with pride, gifted to me by the NZPC.

Acknowledgements

Ka tika me tuku mihi ki te iwi, me ngā hapū, nei matau e tū irunga i ngā whenua o Tāmaki Makaurau; Tēnā koutou.

It is right for me to acknowledge the iwi and hapu, in the lands that we stand on in Auckland; Thank you.

To my mum, Jane, my brother, Seph, and my family, thank you for the unconditional love and support you give me.

Mo lo'u toalua, Velova'a, alofa le uma, ma le aiga o Anae, fa'afetai lava. Alofa tele atu.

To my partner, Velova'a, endless love, and the Anae family, thank you. Much love.

To my incredible supervisor, Dr Grace Gordon, words cannot thank you enough for your unwavering calm and support on this journey; Ngā mihi.

To the AUT Criminology department, your knowledge and wisdom has blessed me, carving out a new path; Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou.

To the Aotearoa Sex Workers' Collective (NZPC), this research would not have been possible without your full support, guidance, and coproduction; Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou.

This research and Masters qualification would not have been possible without the funding awarded by the Leverhulme Trust (<https://www.theleverhulmetrust.ac.uk>). My eternal thanks for granting a dream and opportunity that has changed my life forever.

Abstract

Sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand is a significant issue for social justice and public policy because, despite the country's longstanding globally unique decriminalisation model, sex workers, particularly those who are migrant and gender-expansive, continue to face intersecting forms of stigma, discrimination, and structural exclusion. These challenges are compounded by societal attitudes, political inaction, and institutional barriers that undermine the safety and rights of sex workers. This thesis focuses on the extent to which “risk” and “safety” are intersectional in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand, and how migrant and gender-expansive sex workers actively resist discrimination. The thesis draws on findings from a peer/ally-designed, qualitative and arts-based study of sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, which used reflective thematic analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and a group “craft session”. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how individual, community, and structural factors shape the lived experience of people who sell sex and their strategies for existence and resistance. The analysis shows that sex workers actively manage risk and safety, and assert agency through personal strategies, collective support networks, and spatial practices, while simultaneously confronting systemic barriers rooted in misogyny, racism, and xenophobia. These experiences are captured through six themes, organised from micro to macro levels, under the overarching narrative of the *Right to Exist*. The thesis argues that while decriminalisation provides a legal framework for safety, it remains insufficient without broader cultural and institutional change, particularly given that the current legal framework in Aotearoa New Zealand excludes non-resident migrants from its protections. This thesis concludes by suggesting that the decriminalisation law be extended to include all sex workers, removing the Section 19 amendment, and that recognising and supporting the diverse strategies of resistance employed by sex workers, especially those at the margins, is essential for advancing equity, dignity, and justice in sex work policy and praxis.

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Glossary of Terms

TERM	DEFINITION
AROHA	'Love' in Te Reo Māori
BAREBACK	Unprotected sex/sex without a condom – It is a legal requirement to use condoms under Section 9 of the PRA; contravening this is a criminal offence incurring a fine not exceeding \$2,000.
BOOKING	Appointment made by a client/s.
BROTHEL	Establishment to pay for sexual services, usually walk-in or phone appointments.
CALL GIRL	Considered an outdated and exclusive term for sex workers.
CHEMSEX	Sexual activity engaged in while under the influence of stimulant drugs, sometimes involving multiple participants.
CIS	Someone whose gender is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.
CLIENT	People who purchase sexual services.
CLUB	A venue for stripping/dancing.
COKE	Cocaine – A white powder stimulant that is normally snorted or rubbed into the gums.
'COMING OUT'/'OUT AND PROUD'	'Coming out' is typically associated with when a person first tells someone/others about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; however, in this context, it is when a person is open about sex working.
CRACK	Crack cocaine – Usually smoked.
DANCING/STRIPPING	Erotic dances usually done at a paid establishment, like a bar or club venue;

	do not touch the dancers; extras may be sold – Consent is essential.
DOMINANT/DOMME/DOM	Having power and influence over others; also known as a female dominatrix; associated with kink play, BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) – Consent is essential.
FEMME	A term generally used to describe feminine LGBTQ+ people.
FETISH	A form of sexual desire in which gratification is strongly linked to a particular object, activity, or a body part other than sexual organs. Racial fetishisation is linked to the objectification of a person based on an aspect of their identity.
FULL SERVICE	Includes sexual intercourse and physical acts; penetrative sex, touching, hands, oral, kissing, and multi shots (multiple ejaculations) may not be included but sold as extras – Consent is essential.
GENDER-EXPANSIVE	Inclusive term for people whose gender differs from the sex assigned to them at birth.
‘GET HARD’	Erection.
GIRLS	Considered an outdated and exclusive term for sex workers.
HAPPY ENDING	Massage that ends with an orgasm, usually hand relief (a handjob).
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus.
HOOK-UP	Usually a one-time meet-up for sex.
HUI	(Te Reo Māori) To gather, meet, congregate (verb), or a meeting, a seminar, a conference (noun).
KAUPAPA MĀORI	Māori approach, Māori topic, Māori customary practice, Māori institution,

	Māori agenda, Māori principles, Māori ideology - a philosophical doctrine, incorporating the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of Māori society (Te Aka, n.d.).
KETAMINE	A dissociative drug, grainy white or light brown powder, medically used as an anaesthetic.
MASC	A term generally used to describe masculine LGBTQ+ people.
MASSAGE/SENSUAL MESSAGE	Typically, naked massage for both client and masseuse. Hand relief is often included; extras include kissing, touching the masseuse, oral, receiving oral, prostate massage, but usually not full service – Consent is essential.
MD	Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) – A recreational/club drug taken as ecstasy pills or as MDMA powder.
METH	Part of the amphetamine family of stimulant drugs.
OUTCALLS	Working away from an office or home, usually at a client’s home or a rented room.
PĀKEHĀ	Of European descent, Te Reo Māori
POST-OP TRANS	Post-operative – A transgender person who has undergone gender-affirming surgery.
PRE-OP TRANS	Pre-operative – A transgender person who has not undergone gender-affirming surgery.
PREP	Preventatory medication for those at risk of exposure to HIV.
PRIVATE	Work privately/independently (usually from owned or rented property).
PROSTITUTION	A legal term for the criminal offence of commercialised sexual services,

	considered outdated, inappropriate in some legal settings, exclusive, and stigmatising.
SELL EXTRAS	Additional acts, usually sexual: touching, kissing, oral, hands, penetrative sex. Not all clubs sell extras in Aotearoa New Zealand – Consent is essential.
SEX WORK	Commercialised sexual services, considered inclusive and destigmatised.
SEX WORKER	A person who sells sexual services.
STATUS	HIV status (positive or negative).
SUBMISSIVE/SUB	Ready to conform to the authority or will of others, obedient; associated with kink play, BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) – Consent is essential.
TANGATA TIRITI	People of the Treaty (Te Tiriti o Waitangi).
THE INDUSTRY	The sex work industry.
TO CLOCK/CLOCKED	To notice a person’s gender expression; negative association, can be extremely dangerous and/or life-threatening for the gender-expansive person.
TRANS	Transgender.
WĀHINE	‘Women’ in Te Reo Māori
WANK	Masturbation.
WEED	Cannabis – A plant-based drug. It can be smoked, eaten, or vaped.
WORKING GIRL	Considered an outdated and exclusive term for sex workers.

Introduction

Four Stories: England, Scotland, Ireland, and England Again

England

On the 8th of April 2025, Nottinghamshire Police in England raided three massage parlours on suspicion they were operating as brothels and exploiting women forcing them to operate as sex workers (Torr, 2025). Two people were arrested, a 58-year-old man on suspicion of managing or assisting to manage a brothel and possession of criminal property, and a 59-year-old woman on suspicion of possession of criminal property and causing or inciting prostitution for gain. According to the report, officers seized “cash, documents and high-value items” (2025, para 5), as well as a baton recovered from one of the addresses. At the bottom of the short report, Sergeant Karl Browne said “As a force we take a victim-first approach with this issue, which is why we also work closely with charities and support groups to ensure women identified as being involved in prostitution can access the network of support available to them” (para 10). Sex work in England is partially criminalised (Mac & Smith, 2018). Provided it is done privately between two consenting adults, sex work is legal; however, everything else around it, is not, making the law a bit of a tangled mess. The key offences reported in this story are the managing or assisting to manage a brothel and causing or inciting prostitution for gain, both offences under the Sexual Offences Act 1956, 2003. At first glance, what interested me in this story was being reminded that brothels are illegal in England. I had spent over a year in Aotearoa New Zealand, a country that uniquely decriminalised sex work in 2003, and where brothels are now permitted, and I had become so accustomed to this and was shocked back to reality with the news story from my home country.

What drew my attention most to this story, however, was how little information was shared. I visited several different news websites to try and gain more information; however, no story gave more detail. It is not specified whether the cash, documents, and high-value items belonged to the workers themselves nor whether they will ever see those items again. According to Gallant and Lam (2024), this is typical procedure in police raids where the workers themselves suffer the most with earnings being taken as police evidence. The seized documents could be visas, birth certificates, and passports, potentially leading to arrest and deportation. The sergeant’s choice of words is interesting, “identified as being involved in prostitution” (para. 10), not trafficking and not

sex work, but the criminal terminology for selling sex, prostitution, which criminalises the workers themselves, despite the story suggesting that the workers were being exploited. Moreover, the language used around the workers being forced to ‘sex work’ does not make sense either as this language conflates sex work with trafficking and sexual exploitation. I know this because I wrote guidance on this very issue when I worked as Police Staff in the Early Intervention and Prevention Unit at Staffordshire Police in England. While the term ‘survival sex work’ is understood to mean people sex working to survive and, in these circumstances, choice can be tenuous, it is still understood to be sex work and not trafficking. Forcing people to sell sexual services is not sex work, it is sexual exploitation, but these two areas are often conflated and it’s unhelpful. This story ends with the words of Sergeant Browne reassuring us all that the workers identified in the police raid “can access the network of support available to them”, which include “charities and support groups” (para. 10). As usual in this area, it is community organising that can be a lifeline to workers and victims; although, charitable frameworks are not ideologically neutral; they are often deeply embedded in, and influenced by, prevailing socio-political belief systems. Let us hope that whoever these people were, they were in receipt of some care and support.

Scotland

A BBC article published on the 20th of May 2025 reported the words of a sex worker named “Alice” who felt ‘terrified’ at the prospect of a new bill proposing to ‘end demand’ in the sex industry by criminalising the clients only, a legal model commonly known as the ‘Nordic Model’, or the ‘Swedish Model’, following its inception in Sweden in 1999 (Mac & Smith, 2018; Wallace Lockhart, 2025). According to the report, Alice shared the new bill would make her less safe because it would remove the ‘good clients’ and leave only the ‘bad clients’ who may not necessarily fear illegal activity. Alice shared, "my body would become a crime scene, wouldn't it? So why would I go to the police? I wouldn't even go to the police now" (2025, para 23). Currently, Scotland operates under the same tangled legal model as England, ‘partial criminalisation’. The Nordic bill was introduced by Ash Regan, a Member of the Scottish National Party (SNP). Regan reportedly said, "buying sexual access to a human being is a form of male violence" and criminalising the clients (the vast majority who are male) will end "a system of exploitation and violence" (para 8) that impacts the most vulnerable women in society whilst simultaneously protecting women through decriminalising those who sell sex. Sounds convincing, who wouldn’t want to end male violence in a patriarchal society? But Alice’s words are haunting, “my body would become a crime scene, wouldn't it? So why would I go to the police?”. An invasive metaphor that also highlights a deterrent effect on workers seeking

help from authorities. By criminalising clients, the law would create a climate of surveillance and fear that ultimately harms those it claims to protect. While the sale of sex is technically legal, the criminalisation of buyers would turn workplaces, and bodies, into sites of criminal investigation. This would continue to erode trust - “I wouldn't even go to the police now”- rather than establish something new. Alice implies that such a system would deter her from reporting violence or seeking help, ultimately undermining her safety and autonomy in practice.

Ireland

In October 2024, National Ugly Mugs, a peer-led organisation supporting sex workers, released an alert on their website warning workers that an “anonymous unknown group calling itself “Escort Ireland Watch” [were] carrying out surveillance on people they believe are sex workers across the country” (Ugly Mugs, 2024, para 1). Information stated the group were intentionally trying to gain information about people, such as where they lived, taking photographs and videos of people and their properties, and subsequently creating dossiers to send country-wide to politicians and the police. Both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland brought in the Sex Buyer’s Law, or the ‘Nordic Model’ in 2015 and 2017 respectively. This law has also been called the ‘Equality Law’ and ‘partial decriminalisation’ (Equality Not Exploited, 2024; Evans, 2023) due to removing criminality from those who sell sex whilst criminalising those who buy sex in hopes that this will end demand. However, a report by Queens University Belfast (2019) found that this law did not increase safety for sex workers nor decrease demand, but in fact put sex workers in more dangerous positions, increased stigmatisation, and demand did not decrease. Reflecting on Ash Regan’s words in the aforementioned story, ending violence towards women and increasing safety for sex workers seemingly has not been achieved under the sex-buyer law in Ireland, and the Ugly Mugs alert provides a fitting metaphor. The alert did not include clients being under surveillance, followed, and videoed with dossiers sent to the offices of politicians and the police; rather, the group who continue to be harassed are the people who sell sex.

England

At the University of Manchester, in autumn 2017, I was twenty years old and had just started my third and final year of BA Criminology. I was sat in a seminar discussing the week’s topic for a course I was doing called ‘Law, Gender, and Sexuality’. The topic of discussion was what legal model was the most appropriate for governing sex work. Was prohibitionism the best? What about the Nordic Model? Did England’s partial-

criminalisation make the most sense? What about regulation, or decriminalisation? At the time, with the limited knowledge I had about sex work, a term I learned on that course, I remember taking quite a radical feminist position. I hadn't learned enough about sex work in school or at university (it hadn't been covered on any of my other courses until this one), so much of it came from literature and film. Indeed, my mind instantly pictures the character of Nancy from *Oliver Twist* or Fantine from *Les Misérables*. The film *Taken* had terrified me from ever travelling abroad without my mum. Thanks to my brother I had been introduced to the film *My Own Private Idaho* that featured male sex workers, so the narrative was not completely monolithic, but for the most part, the narrative I had been presented with for those involved in sex work or 'prostitution' never ended well. Moreover, I had been particularly drawn to radical feminist theory in sociology at school, but the topic of sex work had never been covered, and I think that perhaps because of my connection with the theories on other topics, I trusted radical feminists to know what they were talking about. Thus, I sat there in the seminar and very honestly shared that I thought sex work was inherently misogynistic and a symptom of a patriarchal society, so what good could possibly come from regulating it or decriminalising it? How naive I was.

'Law, Gender and Sexuality' turned out to be one of my top courses at undergraduate level. I didn't achieve a high mark in it, but it changed my life through what it taught me; it made clear to me absolutely that these three components, 'law', 'gender', and 'sexuality', were intricately connected and disproportionately impacted the lives of people from certain communities. That course has always stayed with me and through ongoing learning and brilliant discourse I have with my brother/best friend, I found myself in 2021 reading *Revolting Prostitutes* by Juno Mac and Molly Smith (2018), to help me in my role in the police, as I had been tasked with producing guidance on policing sex work in Staffordshire. Mac and Smith's book gave me the "ahh, I get it" moment I needed as to why no other legal model than full decriminalisation is necessary for supporting and protecting people who sell sex. Reflecting now, I feel that university, discourse, and literature lit a fire within me, gently flickering but building over the years leading me to co-producing national guidance for the Police Chiefs Council with a group of us made up of police, support workers, academics, organisers, all urging 'safeguarding' over 'criminalising'; that 'sexual exploitation' was not 'sex work', and that 'trafficking' and 'sex work' need to be separated and policed differently. I ultimately became stifled in this work because of the law in England and working for the police, and I wanted to further my study at postgraduate level continuing to advocate for the rights of sex workers but in a country where it was decriminalised. There was only one country that had uniquely done this and had been decriminalised for most of my life, Aotearoa New Zealand. As I think about that flickering fire that started in 2017, or even before then, I feel now that it has

become a burning passion and an enraging flame, to aid in the fight for sex workers' rights, protection, and safe working conditions world-wide. Moreover, that these rights, protections, and safe working conditions be non-negotiable, unconditional, and crucially, intersectional.

Four Stories: Bubbles, Jack, JoJo, and Laura

In 2003, Aotearoa New Zealand decriminalised sex work under the Prostitution Reform Act with the aim to increase protection for people who sell sex (Mac & Smith, 2018). While decriminalisation has improved legal conditions for many sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, not all have benefitted equally. Marginalised sex workers continue to encounter social and structural barriers that affect their safety, autonomy, and access to justice. I had the honour of listening to the many stories shared by four participants who agreed to take part in this research project, Bubbles, Jack, JoJo, and Laura. Through the generosity of their time, they helped paint a picture of intersectional experiences of risk and safety in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

JoJo is Middle Eastern and came to Aotearoa New Zealand originally as a refugee. JoJo is a woman of colour who shared many stories with me about what it is like to be a woman of colour, a refugee, a sex worker, and trans. Although she referred to herself as a transwoman in many of her stories, she does not identify with the term 'trans' due to the implied meaning of a person 'transitioning' gender. For JoJo, she has always been a woman and the healthcare she accessed affirmed her gender. Therefore, the references to JoJo being trans are only experiences that she shared to highlight transwomen in sex work.

Laura is an Asian woman of colour who shared her experiences of working as a dancer. Laura had a way of speaking in fantastic monologues that highlighted the intersectionality of experiences in sex work and the injustice that many sex workers face and resist.

Bubbles is the only participant who is 'out' publicly as a sex worker and chose to use her working name in this study. Bubbles is a migrant from the United Kingdom but has lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for over fifty years and so very much feels 'Kiwi'. Bubbles shared her experiences of being older and working as well as being large. Bubbles very much gave the impression of a wise woman who knew a lot about working safely and who had 'seen it all'.

Jack was the only male participant in the study and gave a diverse experience of being a male sex worker, a man of colour from Asia, and being gay. Jack added a particular uniqueness to the study because of his experiences as a man as well as highlighting the

difficulties with navigating the decriminalising law in Aotearoa New Zealand as a resident migrant. Together, Bubbles, Jack, JoJo, and Laura offer a rich and nuanced lens through which to understand the complexities of navigating risk and safety in sex work. Their diverse backgrounds and experiences underscore how personal circumstances shape the ways individuals encounter and manage these challenges. Importantly, their stories also raise critical questions about the effectiveness and inclusivity of the protections promised under decriminalising legislation, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of its impact throughout this work.

The right to freedom of choice in employment, and to ‘lead the life’ one chooses, is a fundamental human right (Armstrong, 2021). This study positions itself within research that explores what such freedom looks like in practice, particularly through the lens of resistance led by sex workers who are ‘doubly marginalised’ by systems of race, gender, and migration. As Vergès asks in relation to the deep inequalities embedded in the cleaning industry, “how would we organise post-racist, post-patriarchal, and post-capitalist cleaning?” (Karmakar, 2024, p. 358). This question is equally relevant to sex work and underscores the importance of decolonial feminism as a framework for future human rights scholarship. Sex workers, like cleaners, and like all workers, are entitled to dignity, respect, joy, and safe working conditions. Their struggle is a collective one, shared by all who fight against “racism and against exploitation” (Vergès, 2021, p. 82). These rights must be upheld for all sex workers, without exception based on personal characteristics such as migrant status or gender identity. As Bohrer (in Vergès, 2021, p. xvii) notes,

“Denial has never worked as a revolutionary strategy.”

The voices of lived experience must not only be included but prioritised and authored by those who live them. Returning to Vergès’ provocation: how might we imagine and organise a post-racist, post-patriarchal, post-capitalist form of sex work?

Research Questions and Rationale

This thesis explores these tensions through two central research questions:

RQI: To what extent are risk and safety intersectional in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand?

RQII: How do migrant and gender-expansive sex workers actively resist discrimination?

These questions are approached through an intersectional lens that foregrounds the lived realities of participants as sites of both vulnerability and resistance. While the narratives presented here do not claim to represent all sex workers, they reveal urgent insights into the uneven ways in which sex work is experienced on the ground. In the chapters that follow, I trace how risk and safety interact with identity and power across multiple axes, and how those at the margins of legal protection continue to navigate - and challenge - systemic inequalities in their everyday lives.

A Note on Language

*“Most Romance languages use a variant of puta (Spanish), such as putain (French) or puttana (Italian) to mean ‘prostitute’, evoking the Latin putida (‘stinking or rotting’, giving us words like **putrid**), connecting to a long European tradition of associating sex workers with **sewers or drains**”* (Mac & Smith, 2018, p. 229, emphasis added; citing Hopkins, 2004).

I use the terms ‘people who sex work’, ‘sex worker’, and ‘sex work’ when discussing all legal models - albeit the terms ‘prostitute’ and ‘prostitution’ will be mentioned when discussing the legal models that continue to criminalise sex work as ‘prostitution’. ‘People who sex work’, ‘sex worker’, and ‘sex work’ are terms used more freely throughout this thesis given the consensus in the community that these terms capture the breadth of work done in the industry and they attempt to destigmatise workers in the industry (see Glossary of Terms, NZPC, 2025). The ‘sex work’ movement began in the 1970s and 1980s with Carol Leigh and Margot St James pioneering the change in terminology (Jeffreys, 2015). Notably, this movement was born from grassroots and had strong ties with the queer community. The counter-culture movement sought to resist against police violence as well as the heavy stigma-status affixed to the ‘prostitute’ community. Solidarity with the queer community also formed new discourses in feminist literature that began to highlight the issues faced by lesbian, bisexual, and trans women (Jeffreys, 2015). Sex work was also a useful umbrella term to bring solidarity with the various forms of sex work (cam-work, escorting, full-service, girlfriend experience, massage, stripping, and so on). Therefore, the terms ‘sex work’ and ‘sex worker’ are not value-free, although the terms were born from an inclusive movement seeking to empower and destigmatise the community.

I use the term ‘prostitute’ and ‘prostitution’ mostly when discussing legislative models that continue to criminalise sex work, this includes any element of sex work that is criminalised; for example, in the neo-abolitionist model where only the clients are criminalised. I also include these terms when quoting scholars that hold an abolitionist

view and subsequently do not see selling sex as work freely chosen, but as inherently exploitative.

I challenge these scholars by reflecting Bernstein (2017) who argues that unlike other offences in law, the term 'prostitute' ascribes immorality, corruption, and degradation to the person. Deriving from the Latin *prostitutus* meaning to fix in an upright position, Bernstein (2017) argues that a *prostituto* is a 'statue-like thing'. Negative connotations affixed to this term helped shape the very language we have today (Hopkins, 2004). As Mac and Smith (2018) highlight, the Spanish and the Portuguese slang for prostitute is 'puta' (also meaning 'bitch' and 'slag'). Latin by origin, this word derived from *putida* (feminine form of *putidus*), which bears relation to the English word 'putrid'. Therefore, the term 'prostitute' unhelpfully connotes more meaning than the original definition, ascribing too much of a negative status-noun to the person (Mulvihill, 2019). Moreover, literature tells us that women are more readily affixed with this term (Bernstein 2017). Whether the term is 'prostitute', 'hooker', 'whore', 'harlot', or 'puta', it is the 'fallen woman' status that is ascribed; however, Hopkins (2004, para 3) explains that during the classical Latin period, there were several "technical and abusive" terms for both female and male prostitutes. In short, 'prostitute' and 'prostitution' are unhelpful and restrictive terms that do not encompass the diversity of people in the field and the field itself (Mac & Smith, 2018; Mulvihill, 2019). What's more, the connotations embedded in the soil are rotten, continuing to stigmatise people in our society. There is much history and meaning behind these terms and I have carefully chosen to use certain terms where necessary and with acknowledgement of their etymologies, histories, meanings, and politics that accompany them.

Methodology

This thesis draws on findings from a peer/ally-designed, qualitative and arts-based study of sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. At the core of the methodology was an intersectional lens aligned with decolonial feminism, centring participant agency and valuing multiple forms of knowledge production. The study utilised in-depth, semi-structured interviews as one data collection method. This approach was chosen for its flexibility, allowing participants to guide the conversation, reflect deeply, and speak in their own terms about their experiences and perspectives (Tracy, 2020). To complement the interviews, a group "craft session" (GCS) was held, functioning similarly to a focus group but incorporating arts-based methods (Hall, 2020). During this session, participants were invited to create a piece of art while discussing key topics related to the research. This arts-based approach supported collaborative reflection, created a more relaxed and accessible space, and emphasised the value of creativity as a mode of

expression beyond words. It is appropriate to incorporate Arts-Based Research into an intersectional study as it challenges stereotypes, dominant ideologies, and creates a space for marginalised voices to share their experiences. Art also has the capacity to “make long-lasting, deep impressions.” (Leavy, 2025, p. 17).

Art was woven throughout the project, used to help in my own reflections, not only in data collection but also in data analysis. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, a method chosen for its emphasis on the researcher’s active role in the construction of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This analytic approach aligned well with the project’s epistemological stance, allowing for deep engagement with participants’ narratives while embracing subjectivity, reflexivity, and the complexities of meaning-making. One innovative aspect of the analysis was the use of ‘Code Leaves’ in Microsoft Visio, a visual coding tool that enabled patterns and relationships in the data to be mapped creatively and non-linearly. Across all stages, art was not an addition to the research but a central, legitimised tool for meaning-making.

Outline of Chapters

This thesis is structured into seven chapters:

Chapter I, *Introduction*, situates myself and the participants in the research topic. It outlines the aims, and research questions and positions the study within relevant theoretical and policy contexts.

Chapter II, *Positionality*, discusses my positionality in entering this research space. I chose to structure this chapter before the *Literature Review* to intentionally acknowledge how my identity and background shape the research lens. Given that this project employs reflexive thematic analysis and reflects my commitment as an ally to sex workers, it is essential to situate my positionality at the outset, framing the research within a context of accountability and critical self-awareness.

Chapter III, *Literature Review*, reviews existing literature on sex work, highlighting key issues and dominant discourses within the field, as well as identifying gaps that this study seeks to address. It also introduces the conceptual frameworks that inform the research and outlines the five global legislative models currently used to govern sex work.

Chapter IV, *Methodology*, outlines the methodological approach underpinning this research, detailing the processes of the project’s design, data collection, and the thematic analysis. It explains the rationale for the chosen qualitative methods, including intersectional feminism aligning with decolonial feminism, and arts-based research. The chapter also considers ethical issues, particularly in relation to working with the sex work

community and addresses the methodological limitations, including challenges encountered during the project, participant recruitment, and what I would do differently in future research.

Chapter V, *Findings*, presents the research findings, organised thematically. Six themes were identified and structured across the micro, meso, and macro levels. At the micro level, three themes were identified: *Managing Self*, *Managing Others*, and *Managing Space*. These emerged from participants' individual experiences and reflected the continuous navigation and negotiation of risk and safety within sex work. At the meso level, one theme was identified: *Sanctuary: A Hub of Wrap-Around Support*. This centred on the community's need for support systems, whether a physical space or a strong social network, offering consistent, wrap-around care for all sex workers. At the macro level, two themes were identified: *It is Exhausting Being Other* and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe*. These drew from both individual and collective experiences expressing deep exhaustion and an urgent call for cultural, legal, social, and political change. They centred systemic issues such as racism, xenophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and the ongoing struggle for workers' rights.

Chapter VI, *Discussion*, discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and theory and considers the implications of the research. The purpose of this chapter is to interpret these findings through a range of intersecting theoretical frameworks (decolonial feminist, queer, and Foucauldian), while remaining grounded in the lived experiences of sex workers. The discussion is organised into four key sections: 1) *Entitlement, Desire, and the Politics of Access*; 2) *Domination, Agency, and Strategic Power*; 3) *The Empowerment/Trauma Binary: Rethinking Resistance*; and 4) *Dirty/Clean and (Il)Legitimate Labour*.

Chapter VII, *Conclusion*, closes the thesis by summarising the key findings and reflecting on their broader implications. It also addresses findings that were significant but did not align directly with the central thread woven through the findings chapter. Finally, it identifies additional areas for future research, highlighting where further inquiry could expand understanding, address existing gaps, and inform sex work policy and praxis.

Positionality

“The key to good research is relationships, and your positionality determines relationality, or your connectedness to the world around you” (Worchel, 2025, p. 1).

Intersectional Feminism Countering White Feminism

Feminism is past, present, and future all at once (Crenshaw, 1991; Schuller, 2021). The struggle is continuous, and we must resist the assumption that time naturally brings progress. The recent UK Supreme Court ruling on the Equality Act 2010, which redefined “woman” as referring to biological sex, exemplifies this. Though the Act itself was not amended, the reinterpretation has enabled exclusionary policies that disproportionately affect transgender people (Kumar & Khan, 2025). Following the ruling, guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission has allowed organisations to bar trans individuals from single-sex spaces, such as toilets, changing rooms, and shelters, an alarming rollback of rights. It wasn’t long before murmurs from Aotearoa New Zealand echoed this sentiment. New Zealand First leader Winston Peters proposed a bill to legally define “woman” as “an adult human biological female” and “man” as “an adult human biological male,” aligning with the UK’s decision (Morning Report, 2025, para 2). Though not yet law, the bill reflects a growing political appetite for biologically essentialist definitions of gender and signals a broader cultural regression.

This moment feels like a leap backward. Drawing on *Unruly* (Mitchell, 2024), I find a historical analogy in the Dark Ages: after the fall of the Roman Empire, England entered a period marked by famine, disease, and social regression. Mitchell calls this a “handy warning” (p. 22) that time’s passage does not guarantee progress. The current erosion of LGBTQIA+ rights echoes this regression. The rhetoric used to justify trans exclusion today eerily mirrors that of fifty years ago, as if progress is unravelling at the seams (Tourmaline, 2025). One might exclaim, “But this is 2025!”, yet this very disbelief underscores the flawed assumption of linear progress.

I find the metaphor of the Roman Empire’s fall apt, especially when considering how some white feminists may view this ruling as a strategic strike, akin to a shot into the “Death Star” of the so-called *Transsexual Empire* (Raymond, 1979). But history reminds us that resistance always rises. As Stone (1987) and others have shown, the trans community always *strikes back*. Feminism, like time, is not linear, it is contested, and alive in every moment.

White Women's Tears

As a white woman engaging in feminist research, I recognise the cultural and historical weight of what Kyla Schuller and others have termed "white women's tears." This refers to the ways in which white women's emotional expressions, particularly crying, have been used, consciously or not, to deflect accountability and re-centre whiteness in conversations about race. I include this reflection to remain critically aware of how my own positionality may shape the research process, and to commit to practices that resist these dynamics. When I read this in Shuller's *the Trouble with White Women* (2021), it was a moment of being humbled and sitting with that uncomfortable feeling of the thing she was pointing to. It wasn't a feeling of shame, but an honest acknowledgement that tears take up space and consequently, it is essential I am conscious of this when conducting research and engaging with intersectional feminism, oppression, and colonisation.

Becoming Tangata Tiriti

In the summer of 2025, I was privileged to serve as a Teaching Assistant on AUT's UniPrep programme (www.aut.ac.nz/uniprep). This experience was pivotal in deepening my understanding of positionality, particularly in relation to space, power, and identity. I came to recognise that not all spaces are mine to enter, and when I am invited into certain spaces, it is essential to understand my role within them. I had already begun a journey of decolonising the coloniser (Worchel, 2025), but the UniPrep programme and the aroha of the teaching team revealed this journey to me. This realisation initially conflicted with my prior understanding of feminism, which had been shaped predominantly by white feminist discourse that encourages women, particularly white women, to assert dominance in spaces historically occupied by men. However, this framework does not align with Indigenous feminisms, which are grounded in relationality, respect, and collective responsibility, kaupapa that are woven, for example, into the stories in Eteuati and Young (2021).

White feminism often replicates colonial logics by encouraging women to emulate the behaviours of their male oppressors, thereby reinforcing systems of domination. As Vergès (2021) argues, civilising feminism has historically excluded women of colour and Indigenous women, framing them as 'patriarchal throwbacks' incompatible with Western ideals of progress. The marginalisation of cultural traditions such as the moko kauae during the settler colonial period exemplifies this (Lopati, n.d). Moreover, France's 2015 ban on the burqa exemplifies how white feminist liberation can coincide with the erasure of non-Western women's identities (Vergès, 2021). The paradox at play here is

that the West, having imposed patriarchal oppression on the Global South, later positioned itself as the liberator of women, just as it once gave itself “the good role in the abolition of colonial slavery” (Vergès, 2024, p. 9). In doing so, it claimed the authority to define and deliver liberation through a civilising feminism that often excludes or erases Indigenous and non-Western women. Thus, feminism must be decolonised and must be intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991). It must be practiced through Indigenous lenses that challenge not only patriarchy but also racial-coloniality, capitalism, and other intersecting systems of oppression. As Lopati discusses, wāhine have the right to reclaim the moko kauae which civilising feminism attempted to erase. This requires feminists themselves to undergo a process of decolonisation, learning new ways of being and relating that are anti-colonial, anti-racist, and post-patriarchal. Decolonial feminism, with its ethics rooted in embracing difference and recognising the joy and difficulty of sustained struggle, offers a “springboard for creative change” (Karmakar, 2024; Lorde, 2007, p. 115).

As a Pākehā researcher, I acknowledge my responsibilities as Tangata Tiriti under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. I approach this work with an awareness of the colonial histories that shape sex work policy and discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand, and I am committed to ensuring that my research does not reproduce these harms. Prior to relocating to Aotearoa, I engaged in independent study of Te Tiriti and the impacts of colonisation on Māori. This included visiting museums, attending AUT’s Te Tiriti training, and learning from Indigenous colleagues. My Master’s coursework further deepened my understanding of colonisation and Indigenous criminology, where Indigenous perspectives are prioritised. I have had the privilege of learning about Kaupapa Māori (Mita, n.d.) and Pasifika methodologies such as Talanoa (Tunufa’i, 2016).

Key texts that have informed my understanding include the *Story of a Treaty* (Orange, 2015), *Struggle Without End* (Walker, 1990), *Indigenous Criminology* (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016), *Decolonising Methodologies* (Smith, 2021), *Ngā Kupu Wero* (Ihimaera, 2023), and *Te Awa o Kupu* (Rapatahana, 2023). I have also drawn on narrative and arts-based research literature, which are recognised as decolonial methodologies, including *Indigenous Storywork* (Archibald, 2008) and *Liming as Research Methodology* (Nakhid et al., 2019).

While the criminology department at AUT emphasises the decolonisation of justice, my experience on UniPrep 2025 revealed areas where my own research could have gone further. For example, Worchel’s (2025) use of weaving in her doctoral methodology highlighted my omission of Indigenous artistic expression in my craft session, an oversight that may have discouraged Indigenous participation. Although my project did not specifically aim to recruit Indigenous sex workers, literature indicates that many

gender-expansive sex workers are Indigenous (Escaravage, 2016). I included Indigenous terminology for ‘gender-expansive’ identities in recruitment materials, but more could have been done to ensure cultural inclusivity and to seek guidance from Indigenous communities.

This became particularly clear through a conversation with a Sāmoan colleague during UniPrep 2025, where we discussed the potential of doctoral research with the Sāmoan sex work community. That dialogue underscored the importance of relational accountability and the need to centre Indigenous voices not only in theory but in every stage of the research process.

Nō wai koe?

Tēnā kotou katoa.

Greetings to all.

Ko Ingarangi te whakapaparanga mai.

England is my ancestry.

Ko Ingarangi te whenua tupu.

England is where I grew up.

Nō Staffordshire, West Midlands, au.

I’m from Staffordshire, West Midlands.

Kei Tāmaki Makaurau au e noho ana.

I am living in Auckland.

Ko Bonnie, Ko Hannah ōku ingoa.

Bonnie, Hannah are my names.

Ka tika me tuku mihi ki te iwi, me ngā hapū, nei matau e tū irunga i ngā whenua o Tāmaki Makaurau; Tēnā koutou.

It is right for me to acknowledge the iwi and hapū, in the lands that we stand on in Auckland. Thank you.

Nō reira, Tēnā kotou, Tēnā kotou, Tēnā kotou katoa.

Thus, greetings to one and all.

Small Pain, Big Ripples

There have been moments in my life marked by pain, times when I’ve been invalidated and felt unseen. While I don’t name these experiences directly, their impact lingers in the form of self-doubt and the quiet ache of worthlessness, intrusive thoughts I must work hard to combat. I have reflected this may be part of what draws me to the sex work community: a recognition, however different our experiences may be, of what it means to be dismissed or unheard. As a global community, sex workers’ rights are too often denied, and their voices pushed to the margins. One of my professors once advised that

a research topic should either impassion or enrage you. The fight for sex workers' human rights does both.

I have no experience of sex work, nor do I have current plans to enter the industry. I am an unshakeable ally for a long-marginalised community who have the right to live with dignity, to work, and to experience joy. It is not for me to discuss whether sex work itself is problematic, but rather to add my voice to discussions on problematic practices alive in sex work, such as discrimination. I add my voice only to aid in the fight to attain rights and safer working conditions for sex workers. As introduced by Mac and Smith (2018), sex workers are our neighbours, our students, our friends, and members of our communities. They are also unshakable allies for other diverse communities and will often be on the front line marching for a better, more equitable society. Let us not forget that the 1969 Stonewall Riot was headed by Black trans sex workers, such as the revolutionary activist Marsha P. Johnston (Tourmaline, 2025), which cuts deep when such history is now being erased following the commencement of Donald Trump's Presidency (Nowell, 2025).

Prior to moving to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2024, I had a career spanning six years working across the criminal justice system of England and Wales. My various roles, paid and voluntary, included working as a Restorative Justice Practitioner, a Thematic Lead for Adults at Risk (Police Staff), and a Research Assistant for the Home Office. My various roles have given me access to police stations, courtrooms, prisons, and probation, supporting and advocating for vulnerable adults enmeshed in the criminal justice system. This work involved rapport building with vulnerable adults, both victim and offender, bereaved families, and young people. I have also assisted on multiple research projects, including research for the Home Office on adult exploitation and working with the National Police Chiefs' Council to coproduce guidance on policing sex work in England and Wales. Whilst I learned a lot from these roles and enjoyed aspects of them, I altogether found working in the criminal justice system stifling and oppressive. I went from advocating for prison abolition at university to working within the very system I advocated to abolish. Naively, I thought as many do, that change can take place from inside and that with the right attitude, with dedicated heart and perseverance, we well-meaning folk could revolutionise a system that was not set up to operate in any other way than how it currently operates. The system is meant to be oppressive and functions well at this. I can confidently say as former police staff, that there are many great people working in the field as well as many awful people. Nevertheless, the system is designed to be oppressive and so it must be abolished. It is a system that renders human rights for certain people negotiable despite the fact that human rights are fundamental; in other words, they cannot be negotiated.

The journey I have been on has profoundly shaped my positionality as a researcher. My lived experience of working within a system I fundamentally oppose has sharpened my critical lens and deepened my commitment to abolitionist praxis. It has taught me that proximity to power does not equate to influence, and that meaningful change often requires stepping outside of oppressive structures rather than working within them. Moreover, the decolonising journey I continue to tread has been the most invaluable of my life. I have been blessed with the aroha of friends, family, and colleagues. Thanks to my partner, who has enriched my life with Sāmoan proverbs, I came across one that aptly fits here: *O le tele o sulu e maua ai figota, e māmā se avega pe a ta amo fa'atasi - my strength does not come from me alone but from many.* As I now undertake research in Aotearoa New Zealand, I carry with me not only the insights gained from my past roles and former self, but also a renewed dedication to centring the voices of those most affected by systemic harm. My positionality is thus rooted in both critique and care, a refusal to accept the status quo, and a belief in the transformative potential of justice that is truly restorative, liberatory, and grounded in human dignity.

Literature Review

Introduction

“Sex work is not inherently exploitative because of patriarchy; rather, patriarchal oppression is possible because of the punitive regulation of sex workers” (Gallant & Lam, 2024, p. 12).

Views on the sex industry are polarising, with it often seen as “morally repugnant, an outcome of patriarchal oppression, an inevitable result of social inequalities, or as work freely chosen” (Abel, 2018b, p. 1925). Indeed, some call the ‘prostitution of women’ as inherently exploitative and in breach of human rights (Raymond, 2013), although this has been critiqued as hijacking human rights work (Wijers, 2022). According to Weitzer (2005, p. 934), “[i]n no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in writings on the sex industry”. For Weitzer (2005), knowledge on the sex industry is heavily conflated and politicised with some scholars turning their work into ‘moral crusades’ (Weitzer, 2005), reflecting a long-standing tradition of ‘prostituted women’ reduced to a rescue project for law-makers and law-enforcers, the agents and their agencies removing the agency from people who sell sex (Gallant & Lam, 2024). Furthermore, this crusading rescue project also reflects what Vergès and others call ‘civilising feminism’, another long-standing feminist tradition of assimilating and ‘civilising’ certain communities to a restrictive and selective liberation, or ‘the (white)right way’ (Schuller, 2021; Vergès, 2021).

This makes clear that sex work and human rights are a global issue (Goldberg et al., 2021). Voicing sex work *as work* and sex workers *as workers* with a fundamental and *elemental need* (Vergès, 2024; Weinhold, 2023) for safety has been argued as protecting their human rights (Abel, 2018a). Advocacy for sex workers’ rights has been captured in discussions on the various legislative models governing sex work across the globe (Brooks-Gordon et al., 2021; Gallant & Lam, 2024; Mac & Smith, 2018; Sanders, 2017; Weinhold, 2023). Research has consistently shown that criminalising any aspect of the sex industry creates unsafe working conditions for sex workers (Gallant & Lam, 2024; Goldberg et al., 2021; Mac & Smith, 2018; Sanders et al., 2025; Weinhold, 2023). Decriminalisation is essential for diminishing life-threatening situations, but decriminalisation is merely the foundation in which to construct safer working conditions (Abel, 2018a).

It is, therefore, crucial that human rights research in this space is a life-affirming and humanising process rather than dehumanising (Boonzaier, 2019). Indeed, the social sciences have historically perpetuated the harms researched, through “repackaging and recirculating stories of pain, oppression and damage without explicitly addressing questions of social justice” (Boonzaier, 2019, p. 468). The voices of sex workers are seldom heard over dominant groups talking about them without them (Easterbrook-Smith, 2019). If human rights research is to be life-affirming in this space, then the voices of those whom it concerns must be central, as demonstrated by Sanders et al. (2025), who open their introduction with a single, unaccompanied quote from “Abbey”: “Just because you think what I do is wrong, doesn’t make my safety and life worth less” (p. 1). This editorial choice resonates with a growing body of literature authored by sex workers themselves, which insists on the legitimacy and urgency of their lived experiences as foundational to any meaningful discourse on rights and justice.

As this project is based in Aotearoa New Zealand, this chapter focuses on issues with the decriminalisation of sex work as seen under the Prostitution Reform Act 2003 (PRA) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Firstly, it succinctly discusses the main legislative models on sex work across the globe, aiming to establish the unique context in which decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand sits. Secondly, it critically discusses the key issues with the decriminalisation model through an intersectional lens, highlighting how marginalised communities are disproportionately impacted by these issues. This leads to a key failing in the PRA and a human rights violation, which is Section 19, an amendment that excludes non-resident migrants from legal sex work.

The chapter turns finally to a relatively under-researched area on gender-expansive sex workers. The term ‘gender-expansive’ or ‘gender-diverse’ is defined as identities that expand on the male/female binary; such as, gender-fluid, gender-queer, transgender, transsexual, trans man, and trans woman (see Oliphant et al., 2018; Polkinghorne, 2020). In this chapter, gender-expansive encompasses Māori and Pasifika terms of gender that cannot be translated to Westernised concepts; such as, Tāhine (Aotearoa, see InsideOut, 2021) and the acronym MVPFAFF (see Brown-Acton, 2011; Polkinghorne, 2020) which stands for “māhū (Tahiti and Hawai’i), vakasalewalewa (Fiji), palopa (Papua New Guinea), fa’afafine (Samoa and American Samoa), akava’ine (Cook Islands), fakaleiti or leiti (Kingdom of Tonga), and fakafefine (Niue)” (Polkinghorne, 2020, p. 6). The lives of gender-expansive people are consistently at risk and at the mercy of political whims (Faye, 2022). There is an on-going erasure of gender-expansive people from public spheres, including the erasure of language and history, which constitutes as epistemic violence (Anthony et al., 2020). This extends to the erasure of gender-expansive sex workers, their body and identifying presences kept under surveillance and subject to discussion and control

(Easterbrook-Smith, 2019). The erasing of gender-expansive identities is active discrimination and constitutes a human rights violation. The chapter concludes with outlining the difficulties of navigating freedoms in a late-capitalist economy and highlights critical areas of research yet to be (fully) platformed (Lennox & Yildiz, 2019).

Legislative Models Governing Sex Work

This section discusses the legal models governing sex work across the globe. As set out in Weinhold (2023) and others, there are five main legislative models governing sex work globally: prohibitionism, abolitionism, neo-abolitionism, legalisation (also known as regulation), and decriminalisation. There are also instances where countries blur some of these models together, resulting in direct and indirect penalisation through the use of municipal ordinances (Adán, 2024). Scoular (2010) argues that these terms are heavily politicised and go beyond legal classifications. It is through understanding the different legal models that one can get a full picture of how sex work and the sex industry are perceived across the globe and consequently, how people working in the industry are seen and treated; what rights they are entitled to, and what, if any, consequences they face if they break the law.

Under the umbrella of ‘criminalisation’ sits prohibitionism, abolitionism, and neo-abolitionism (Mac & Smith, 2018). This umbrella encompasses both full and partial criminalisation (legalisation and decriminalisation sit outside as distinct models). The criminalisation umbrella will be discussed first, followed by legalisation before turning finally to decriminalisation.

Criminalisation

Countries governing under prohibitionism include the United States (excluding Nevada and Maine), the Caribbean, and much of Asia and Africa (GNSWP, 2025). Prohibitionism criminalises all aspects of sex work, including the activities of workers, clients, and third parties such as landlords and managers. Under this model, rights for sex workers are effectively absent, as they are subsumed within what Gallant and Lam describe as “a grinding architecture of carceral control” (2024, p. 6). This punitive framework disproportionately impacts racialised and migrant workers, who are often subject to the conflation of sex work with trafficking, an association that, as the authors argue, renders migrant sex workers and organisers as “helpless victims” (p. 8) in public discourse and policy. This ideological conflation is not confined to academic or policy contexts but is deeply embedded in popular narratives as well. For instance, in an audiobook authored

by a former FBI Assistant Director (Figliuzzi, 2024) - originally encountered in an informal context but ultimately revealing in its ideological framing - sex workers are consistently referred to as “trafficked victims” (for example, see chapter eight). The book, which focuses on serial killer truck drivers, portrays many of the victims as having been trafficked into prostitution, presenting them as inherently vulnerable and easy targets. While not an academic source, the text nonetheless exemplifies how dominant narratives around sex work in prohibitionist contexts like the United States rely on depictions of workers as devoid of agency, reducible to figures of pity, and in need of rescue. These depictions reflect the broader ideology Gallant and Lam critique, in which sex workers are only considered ‘grievable’ when understood as victims of trafficking, rather than as autonomous individuals entitled to labour rights and protections (Butler, 2016).

Abolitionism

Abolitionism sees sex work itself as legal, but many or all forms of activities associated with it, such as soliciting and running a brothel, as illegal (Mac & Smith, 2018; GNSWP, 2025; Weinhold, 2023). Countries such as India, England, and much of South America govern under an abolitionist model (GNSWP, 2025). In England, brothel-keeping legislation criminalises circumstances in which two or more sex workers live and work together, despite the well-documented safety benefits of such arrangements (Brouwers, 2022). This has led to police raids on properties where individuals, often friends or colleagues, were cohabiting for mutual protection (see Mac & Smith, 2018, ch. 4). More recently, the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) has issued guidance advising against the criminalisation of sex workers who ‘gather together’ at a property for safety purposes (NPCC, 2024), marking a potentially progressive shift in policing practices. However, despite this policy development, the visual imagery accompanying the NPCC report is notable: each chapter is illustrated with individuals depicted in poses of shame or distress - heads in hands, eyes cast downward - which implicitly reinforces the notion that sex work is inherently degrading. This visual rhetoric stands in tension with the document’s stated aim of improving safety and rights for sex workers, revealing the persistent stigma that continues to shape institutional attitudes.

In short, criminalisation under abolitionist and prohibitionist regimes has been decried as infringing on human rights (Armstrong & Abel, 2020; Mac & Smith, 2018; GNSWP, 2025; Weinhold, 2023). These regimes are associated with a range of harms, including pervasive stigma, exposure to violence, and barriers to healthcare and justice, amounting, in many cases, to the erasure or denial of victimhood itself (Stardust et al., 2021). Despite operating within what has been described as a carceral system

determined to surveil and control sex workers' bodies, sex worker communities continue to organise and resist. Such resistance may manifest in subtle but significant ways, as illustrated in Boonzaier's (2019) decolonial and intersectional narrative analysis of sex workers in South Africa. Although working under prohibitionist law, participants exercised agency in managing their health, particularly in relation to HIV. One participant, for instance, described her proactive response to exposure: "I run immediately... I run to the first hospital... I don't go and sit and keep myself shy" (p. 484). This act of self-determination, though seemingly small, exemplifies what Fleetwood et al. (2019) identify as the strength of narrative, that power and resistance are embedded within it.

Neo-abolitionism

Neo-abolitionism, implemented through what is commonly referred to as the 'Nordic Model' or 'Swedish Model', seeks to 'end demand' by criminalising the purchase of commercial sex while ostensibly decriminalising its sale (Jordan, 2012). Countries that have adopted this model include Sweden, Norway, Canada, France, Ireland, and the U.S. state of Maine, (GNSWP, 2025). The model is premised on the belief that prostitution is intrinsically linked to violence against women and girls and reflects broader gender inequality (Watson & Flanigan, 2020). Supportive services under this framework typically include housing, financial aid, and psychological support (Watson & Flanigan, 2020), although these are generally conditional upon an individual's willingness to exit the sex industry (Weinhold, 2023).

The Nordic Model has drawn criticism for its reliance on selective, sensationalised, and often harrowing accounts that focus primarily on trauma and victimisation (Abel, 2018a; Weitzer, 2005). Weitzer (2005, p. 934), for example, highlights "several theoretical and methodological flaws" in such research, centred on the imperative to 'end demand' for the sake of so-called 'prostituted women' (Weitzer, 2006). Within both prohibitionist and neo-abolitionist discourses, 'prostitution' is frequently conflated with trafficking, and it is assumed that any move toward legalisation or decriminalisation would result in an increase in trafficking (Raymond, 2013; Watson & Flanigan, 2020). This perspective dismisses frameworks that position sex work and trafficking on a continuum of situational and interpersonal harm, where sex work can be understood as distinct from trafficking (Brooks-Gordon et al., 2021). Critics argue that the Nordic Model operates as a form of state-led 'rescue' - akin to protectionist legislation - designed to exert control over already marginalised populations who are presumed to lack autonomy (Gallant & Lam, 2024; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). In short, the Nordic Model is not as liberatory as it purports to be, as it fundamentally denies the possibility of self-governance and agency among sex workers.

Legalisation

Legalisation, or regulation, relies heavily on state oversight of activities associated with commercial sex (Mac & Smith, 2018; GNSWP, 2025; Weinhold, 2023). This model is in place in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Turkey, Colombia, parts of Australia, and the U.S. state of Nevada (Mac & Smith, 2018; GNSWP, 2025; Weinhold, 2023). Although legalisation removes criminal penalties for sex workers, clients, and third parties, it is, as Weinhold (2023, p. 10) notes, “not without issue” due to the extensive regulatory controls imposed by the state. These controls often require sex workers to register officially, undergo routine health checks, and operate within designated zones (GNSWP, 2025; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). Underlying these measures are enduring moral concerns, particularly around public hygiene and the perceived need to limit the visibility of sex work. Stigma persists in the assumption that sex workers are ‘unclean’, and brothels are sites of disorder requiring spatial containment.

Weinhold (2023) draws attention to the exploitative practices of some licensed brothel operators and the increased vulnerability of workers unable to secure employment within the limited number of authorised establishments (see also Mac & Smith, 2018). Recent events in Amsterdam further highlight the tensions inherent in the legalisation model. In 2023, sex workers led protests against a proposal by Mayor Femke Halsema to relocate the city’s red-light district to a newly built ‘erotic centre’ outside the city centre (Dutch News, March 2023). Protesters argued that the move would undermine existing protections and fail to safeguard sex workers’ rights. As of 2025, the future of the plan remains uncertain due to legal and financial challenges, with public consultation still ongoing (Dutch News, March 2025). What remains evident, however, is that the legalisation model continues to frame the sex industry as a public nuisance, something to be managed, relocated, and controlled, rather than recognised as legitimate labour deserving of autonomy and rights.

Decriminalisation

Decriminalisation has been uniquely established in Aotearoa New Zealand for over two decades under the PRA 2003. In more recent years, several other jurisdictions have followed suit, including the Northern Territory in Australia in 2019, the states of New South Wales and Victoria in 2022 and 2023 respectively, and Belgium in 2022 (see GNSWP’s global map). These legislative shifts reflect that progress towards sex workers’ rights exists on a continuum. For instance, although Belgium’s initial legislation was

celebrated as a step toward decriminalisation, concerns were raised that it resembled a regulatory model due to inconsistent and restrictive local-level laws (GNSWP, 2022). However, this was subsequently addressed through the introduction of new labour legislation in May 2024, which enables sex workers to work under employment contracts and access social protections such as healthcare and social security benefits (GNSWP, 2024).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the PRA is positioned as a model for making sex work safer by enabling sex workers to operate as independent contractors and improving their working conditions. Crucially, the legislation affirms the human rights of sex workers (Abel, 2018a; Armstrong, 2021; Mac & Smith, 2018; GNSWP, 2025; Weinhold, 2023). Nonetheless, as Mac and Smith (2018) caution, decriminalisation - even when implemented by a progressive government - is no 'silver bullet', as the legislation remains shaped by prevailing societal prejudices. Similarly, Weinhold (2023) argues that the PRA contains moral caveats that perpetuate structural inequalities, particularly affecting the most marginalised within the sex work community, including migrant, Māori, Pasifika, Black, gender-expansive, pregnant, disabled, and fat sex workers. These limitations, and the complexities of decriminalisation in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, will be explored in the following section.

Legitimising a 'Whorearchy'

Importantly, a substantial body of research following the enactment of the PRA has celebrated the increased safety experienced by sex workers overall (Abel, 2018a; Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Abel & Ludeke, 2021b; Armstrong, 2021; Armstrong & Abel, 2020; Brooks-Gordon et al., 2021; Cory-Wright, 2019; Gilmour, 2020; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). As Abel and Ludeke (2021a, p. 1) argue, decriminalisation is "essential" to "protecting the human rights of sex workers," as it enables individuals to exercise greater autonomy. Decriminalisation also creates space for workers to raise complaints regarding poor conditions, particularly against exploitative brothel operators. As outlined in section 3 of the PRA, the Act's stated purpose is to safeguard the rights of sex workers, protect them from exploitation, and promote their welfare, health, and occupational safety. Research further suggests that decriminalisation contributes to destabilising conditions of violence, coercion, and blackmail within the industry (Weinhold, 2023).

However, several limitations of the PRA have been identified, particularly in research that centres the voices and lived experiences of sex workers (Armstrong et al., 2020; DeCat, 2019; Gilmour, 2020; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). These concerns can generally be grouped into four key areas: operator control, ongoing stigma, systemic

discrimination, and the challenges associated with mainstreaming sex work. Collectively, these critiques expose how the PRA, while progressive in many respects, has also helped legitimise what sex workers have termed a ‘whorearchy’ (NZPC, 2025), a socially constructed hierarchy that reinforces stigma within the sex industry. As a result, not all sex workers enjoy equal access to the rights and protections ostensibly afforded by the PRA.

Operator Control

Many sex workers report a preference for working in brothels, which are often perceived as safer environments offering a sense of community and camaraderie among workers (Abel & Ludeke, 2021a, 2021b; Armstrong, 2021; Weinhold, 2023). Under the PRA, brothel operators are required to undergo a clearance check, hold a Brothel Operator’s Certificate, promote safer sex practices, and are explicitly prohibited from compelling individuals to provide commercial sex. The Act also affirms a sex worker’s right to refuse services at any time. However, research has shown that these protections are not always straightforward in practice (Abel & Ludeke, 2021a; Weinhold, 2023). Operators typically control the roster, define service ‘packages,’ and regulate how workers present and conduct themselves, effectively determining workplace norms (Abel & Ludeke, 2021a; Weinhold, 2023). This dynamic can exacerbate harmful stereotypes about sex workers, particularly those who do not conform to narrowly defined expectations of appearance and behaviour.

As Weinhold (2023) notes, the conduct of brothel operators within a decriminalised system can mirror those operating in criminalised contexts. While sex workers theoretically have the right to challenge exploitation and raise complaints, doing so is complicated by economic precarity and the pressures of maintaining financial stability. As independent contractors, sex workers do not enjoy the employment protections afforded to employees, such as sick leave, annual leave, or formal grievance mechanisms (Weinhold, 2023). Within a capitalist framework, sex workers are incentivised to perform in ways that maximise productivity and appeal, often according to hegemonic standards of desirability. As Cruz (2013) argues, this reinforces an ideal rooted in whiteness, heterosexuality, cisnormativity, and slimness, while marginalising bodies that do not conform. Embedded within this model are intersecting systems of oppression - racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and fatphobia - which render some sex workers more vulnerable and less visible within the industry.

Ongoing Stigma

Easterbrook-Smith (2022) highlights how enduring negative stereotypes about the sex industry continue to shape public discourse and policymaking, even within decriminalised contexts. Inherent within the PRA are moral caveats that preserve stigma through mechanisms such as local bylaws that restrict the location of brothels (Abel & Ludeke, 2021a; Weinhold, 2023). These bylaws often mirror regulatory practices seen under legalisation models, effectively confining sex work to marginal spaces and reinforcing a politics of invisibility. Additionally, while the promotion of safer sex practices under the PRA is crucial for health and safety, the requirement that all commercial sex must be protected, enforced through financial penalties, reflects a longer historical narrative that positions sex workers as threats to public hygiene (Walkowitz, 1980). Rather than supporting sex workers' agency, these policies may inadvertently reinscribe the idea that sex work is inherently unsanitary and in need of regulation for the public good.

Such regulatory frameworks, paired with ongoing 'not on my street' discourses (Easterbrook-Smith, 2019), demonstrate that decriminalisation alone is insufficient to dismantle deeply embedded societal stigma. These negative stereotypes disproportionately impact marginalised communities, particularly Māori, Pasifika, migrant, disabled, and trans sex workers, who already face systemic inequalities and are overrepresented within the criminal justice system (Carvalho et al., 2023; Cruz, 2013; Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; DeCat, 2019). In short, the moral undertones embedded in the PRA's implementation risk reproducing structural discrimination. While decriminalisation is an important step forward, without intentional efforts to confront stigma and address intersecting forms of marginalisation, it risks reinforcing the very harms it seeks to eliminate (Polkinghorne, 2020; Weinhold, 2023).

Discrimination

The PRA, despite its progressive framing, has been critiqued as structurally racist (Armstrong et al., 2020; Cruz, 2013; DeCat, 2019; Weinhold, 2023). As Weinhold (2023) argues, one of the core concerns under decriminalisation is the persistence of a 'whorearchy' that privileges certain bodies while marginalising others. Drawing on Gira-Grant (2014), Weinhold explains how this hierarchy fetishises sex workers who fall outside dominant norms, particularly Māori, Pasifika, Black, migrant, gender-expansive, disabled, pregnant, and fat individuals. These workers are often excluded from brothel rosters altogether or tokenised as the only 'exotic' body included, with their presence commodified for productivity rather than welcomed as equal participants in the industry. This pattern of exclusion mirrors broader structural inequalities (Cruz, 2013; Gilmour, 2020; Polkinghorne, 2020). While the PRA ostensibly creates space for autonomy and

rights, these do not apply equally in practice, especially for those most impacted by racial and gender-based discrimination.

The legal framework compounds these inequalities. Sex workers are not recognised as a protected group under the Human Rights Act 1993, significantly limiting their access to justice under the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (Abel, 2018a). Similarly, the Human Rights Act fails to provide explicit protection for gender-expansive people (Polkinghorne, 2020), further marginalising those already structurally disadvantaged. These legislative gaps discourage many sex workers, especially those from marginalised communities, from engaging with government agencies, which are often seen as complicit in their marginalisation (Polkinghorne, 2020).

Although decriminalisation offers more avenues for redress than other legal models, significant barriers remain. Abel and Ludeke (2021b) argue that if brothels are to be treated as ‘businesses like any other’, then protections against workplace discrimination should be extended to sex workers under the Human Rights Act. While there have been instances of successfully pursued complaints (Healey et al., 2020), many are settled privately or never reach court. Access to justice remains limited, not only because of legal exclusion, but due to a prevailing narrative that such mechanisms are unavailable or inaccessible to sex workers (Weinhold, 2023). As Weinhold notes, while workers in other industries are also subject to bullying, harassment, and exploitation, they are more likely to benefit from “policies and mechanisms by which to identify and address those behaviours and provide some level of support” (2023, p. 236). This disparity underscores the persistent inequalities within supposedly decriminalised frameworks.

The Problem with Mainstreaming

As Armstrong (2021) stated, it is the relationship between harms and the policies in place rather than sex work as a harm inherently within itself. There is also a created issue of trying to see sex work *as work* and brothels as ‘businesses like any other’ (Abel & Ludeke, 2021b). The employment sector can be intensely precarious, exploitative, and discriminatory for marginalised populations (Polkinghorne, 2020). Framing sex work as work like any other excludes those who are already marginalised by the employment sector, an issue which led many to work in the sex industry originally (Abel & Ludeke, 2021b; Armstrong, 2021; Polkinghorne, 2020; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). According to Weinhold, framing sex as work in which workers claim rights gives way to “tepid legitimacy” and delivers sex workers into their “oppressors as rescuers” (2023, p. 248). However, as Cruz (2013, p.486) reminds us, it is “hopelessly pessimistic” to dismiss the idea of sex workers demanding a basic income as utopian. Nonetheless,

particularly in the context of a brothel, framing it as a ‘business like any other’ in a late capitalist and neoliberalist market, where reliability and profitability are prioritised, gives power to operators, new disciplinary powers that keep the autonomy and self-governance of sex workers precarious (Weinhold, 2023).

In ‘The History of Sexuality’, Foucault (1978) introduced the repressive hypothesis, proposing that repression functions not merely by silencing, but by inviting individuals to articulate their truths in ways that are embedded within power relations. Within this framework, encasing sex work as legitimate labour can be liberatory; however, such a framing remains deeply entangled with broader systems of power and a historical discourse steeped in stigma (Weinhold, 2023). Power, at its most insidious, encourages sex workers to assert the legitimacy of their work and claim rights within existing structures, which can simultaneously empower and expose them to new forms of exploitation. As Weinhold (2023) highlights in her concluding remarks, this paradox reflects the dual-edged nature of recognition within hegemonic frameworks. Foucault (1982, p. 789) articulates that power “incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects.” Decriminalisation in a capitalist context can be seen as a form of incitement, encouraging workers to claim rights, even as these claims may be strategically instrumentalised. Those actors who enable these claims may also stand to benefit from the visibility and legitimacy such recognition confers. As Vergès argues, “[the state] with one hand it strikes and with the other, it tries to assimilate” (2021, p. 8). She further warns against the colonising force of capital, and its capacity to absorb and neutralise radical demands, turning them into “empty slogans” with disconcerting speed and ease (2021, p. 15).

Nonetheless, this remains a nuanced issue. Sex workers themselves are the authors of their demands and articulate these rights out of a fundamental need to live the lives they choose (Weinhold, 2023; Armstrong, 2021; Sullivan, 2021). This resonates with what Vergès (2024) conceptualises as the *elemental*: the basic needs that enable us to survive, and care that must be decolonial in practice, removing the reality that the elemental in everyday life is regularly denied to the most marginalised communities. These needs are not only politicised but grounded in legal and human rights frameworks. For instance, Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirms the right to work and to freely choose employment. Similarly, Section 19 of the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act (1990) guarantees freedom from discrimination, including in employment, as elaborated in section 22 of the Human Rights Act (1993). The International Labour Organisation’s Violence and Harassment Convention (2019) further underscores the imperative to eliminate violence and harassment as preconditions for dignified and

productive work. However, the implication that the PRA grants sex workers agency and autonomy is problematic. Framing these rights as conditional upon legislation suggests they may also be withdrawn, as demonstrated by the exclusion of non-resident migrant sex workers under Section 19. If rights are indeed fundamental and elemental, they cannot be selectively granted or revoked. This exclusion, therefore, constitutes a violation of human rights and reflects what Vergès (2021) terms ‘civilisational feminism’, a feminism that carefully selects its language to appear liberatory, but reinforces state power, marginalising racialised and migrant communities. The implications of this exclusion will now be examined in detail.

Partial Decriminalisation

In *A Decolonial Feminism*, Vergès (2021) poses the critical question, “Who cleans the world?” (p. 78), drawing attention to the vast, invisible labour performed daily in offices, restaurants, universities, and restrooms by underpaid and undervalued Black and brown bodies. These workers, often rendered invisible and silent, operate in the background - yet without their gruelling, often exploitative labour, capitalist systems would cease to function. Vergès emphasises that it is the exploited work of cleaners, predominantly migrant women of colour, that sustains the everyday operations of a capitalist society. She illustrates this through the example of a French cleaning company’s advertisement featuring a blonde woman in a pantsuit confidently walking through an office. Unseen in the background are the male and female cleaners whose labour enables her productivity and access to a clean workspace. For Vergès, this reflects the workings of civilisational feminism, a form of white feminist imperialism that invites non-white women into a selective liberation – freedom to work, but it is undervalued and underpaid. As she writes, “white women can be assured of finding everything clean, but without confronting the reality of who is doing the cleaning” (2021, p. 80). This critique underscores the value of decolonial feminism as a theoretical framework, revealing the intersecting structures of race, gender, and class that shape women’s lives. Similarly, hooks (1984) highlights the significance of Black feminism by critically questioning who would be relied upon to care for children and homes while white women entered professional spheres alongside their male counterparts. Civilisational feminism, as Vergès (2021) argues, is ultimately regressive, assimilating racialised bodies into a model of liberation that serves the ideals of late capitalism.

Civilisational feminism is evident in Section 19 of the PRA, which excludes non-resident migrants from engaging in legal sex work. As a result, non-resident migrant sex workers continue to be criminalised. Scholars and advocates argue that, due to this exclusion, Aotearoa New Zealand cannot be considered ‘fully decriminalised’ (Armstrong et al.,

2020; Corey-Wright, 2019; DeCat, 2019; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). The experiences of sex workers operating under criminalisation reveal a wide range of harms, including coercion, exploitation, and persistent stigma, as well as violence and harassment perpetrated by clients, operators, and law enforcement (Mac & Smith, 2018). These are the conditions non-resident migrants continue to face in Aotearoa New Zealand due to their exclusion from the protections of the PRA (Armstrong et al., 2020; Corey-Wright, 2019).

The former Minister of Immigration, Lianne Dalziel, introduced an amendment to the PRA with the intention of ensuring that protocols on human trafficking “can be fully engaged in respect of prostitution and commercial sexual services” (Dalziel, 2003, para 72). Dalziel further stated that she aimed to ensure the PRA would not “unwittingly allow people to be brought into the country for the purposes of prostitution” (Dalziel, 2003, para 72). However, such language reflects a protectionist legislative approach that positions migrant sex workers as inherently vulnerable and in need of saving. Paradoxically, by excluding migrants in this way, the amendment exposes them to the very forms of exploitation it purports to prevent, conditions that resemble those associated with human trafficking (Armstrong et al., 2020; Corey-Wright, 2019).

Many such incidents go unreported due to fear of police involvement and the threat of deportation, further silencing migrant workers (Armstrong et al., 2020; Corey-Wright, 2019). Armstrong et al. (2020) argue that Section 19 is both racialised and gendered, as Asian women are disproportionately refused visas based on suspicion of sex work and are subsequently deported for engaging in illegal sex work. This reveals the intersectional discrimination embedded in the legislation. At the same time, Asian women, alongside Māori and Pasifika women, are disproportionately employed in the cleaning industry, forming the second-largest cohort in that sector (Ring A Hora, 2023). This contrast underscores the functioning of civilisational feminism, wherein the state determines which forms of labour are deemed acceptable for racialised and migrant bodies. The result is a selective empowerment that permits exploitative forms of labour while denying agency and rights in others.

This positions the state as sanctimonious, particularly considering Aotearoa New Zealand’s status as a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which obliges states to grant migrant women the same rights as citizens (Roguski, 2013). By excluding non-resident migrants from protection under the PRA, Aotearoa New Zealand fails to meet this obligation, leaving migrant sex workers in precarious labour conditions that heighten the risk of exploitation and criminalisation. DeCat (2019) identifies the racialised implications of partial decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly noting that the exclusion of non-

resident migrants under the PRA has led to the disproportionate arrest and deportation of Asian women on working visas. These outcomes are especially concerning when considered in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand's membership to the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, alongside Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Te Pā Whakamarumarū, 2025). This alliance facilitates the collection and exchange of intelligence data between member states, including information related to immigration, law enforcement, and individuals flagged as potential security risks (Bonnett, 2024). Consequently, migrants deported from one Five Eyes country may face long-term repercussions, such as automatic data sharing with other member nations, visa refusals, blacklisting, and heightened surveillance (Bonnett, 2024). These punitive consequences can persist for a lifetime, compounding the precarity experienced by migrant sex workers who are already excluded from legal protections.

As Armstrong et al. (2020, p. 130) observe, "(the PRA) was not a perfect law that remained untouched by the agendas of politicians and the global politics of migration and trafficking." Although there are no documented cases of sex trafficking in Aotearoa New Zealand, research consistently highlights the harms arising from the exclusion of migrants from the protections afforded by the PRA (Armstrong & Abel, 2020; Armstrong et al., 2020; Corey-Wright, 2019; DeCat, 2019; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). These scholars challenge the persistent conflation of sex work with trafficking, identifying it as both inaccurate and harmful. While protectionist legislation may be designed to address public concern about trafficking, its implementation often results in paradoxical and detrimental outcomes for sex workers, particularly those already marginalised by immigration status or racialisation. DeCat (2019) calls on proponents of decriminalisation to subject their own frameworks to the same critical scrutiny applied to models such as the neo-abolitionist 'Nordic Model'. Likewise, Armstrong (2021, p. 941) contends that "full decriminalisation is the only responsible option for societies seeking to reduce harm."

Importantly, DeCat (2019) cautions that what is frequently celebrated as full decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand remains only partial, as not all sex workers are equally protected under the current legislative framework. This critique extends to gender-expansive sex workers, to whom the discussion now turns.

Emancipatory Decriminalisation

There is limited research focusing specifically on non-binary and gender-expansive sex workers (Easterbrook-Smith, 2019; Escaravage, 2016; Gilmour, 2020; Mac & Smith, 2018; Sullivan, 2021; Weinhold, 2023; Worth, 2000). Gender-expansive sex workers,

particularly those who are Māori or Pasifika, often experience isolation within brothel settings, frequently finding themselves as the only gender-diverse person on the roster. As a result, brothels can be alienating environments that lack a sense of shared community or inclusion. Consequently, street-based sex work remains a more accessible, though riskier, option for many of these ‘doubly marginalised’ individuals. This overrepresentation is shaped by the exclusionary practices of brothels, which often refuse employment based on racist and transphobic discrimination (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Easterbrook-Smith, 2019; Escaravage, 2016; Gilmour, 2020). These conditions further illustrate the compounded marginalisation faced by gender-expansive sex workers, particularly those at the intersection of racial and gender-based oppression.

Gender-expansive sex workers have frequently been subjected to harassment and over-policing (Brooks-Gordon, 2008; Easterbrook-Smith, 2019; Lyons et al., 2017). While the decriminalisation of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand has, in principle, enabled sex workers to report abuses to the police, many gender-expansive individuals remain reluctant to do so. This hesitation reflects the complex and intersecting factors that shape their experiences, particularly the long-standing history of harm and abuse perpetrated by the state and its agencies (Brooks-Gordon, 2008; Carvalho et al., 2023; Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Gilmour, 2020). Interviews with brothel operators reveal candid admissions of discriminatory practices, including the enforcement of informal quotas that limit the presence of workers who do not conform to dominant norms of cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle-class, and slim-bodied femininity (Abel & Ludeke, 2021b; Weinhold, 2023). Such practices legitimise racist, transphobic, and moralistic discourses, pressuring gender-expansive sex workers to suppress or ‘give up’ their identities to access economic opportunities and minimal protection.

Brothels that frame their business models around middle-class capitalist values often claim to endorse the PRA and uphold the autonomy of workers within their establishments. However, in practice, workers who do not conform to dominant ideals are frequently excluded from these protections (Weinhold, 2023). In her critique of civilisational feminism, Vergès (2021) highlights its appropriation of neoliberal values to produce women who maximise productivity and economic value. As Weinhold (2023, p. 145) argues, “nowhere is this more evident than in the organisational form and cultural positioning of the brothel.” Within this context, the promise of emancipation under a decriminalisation model remains unfulfilled. Weinhold (2023, p. 152) suggests that decriminalisation functions as a “legitimising catalyst to organise business as relentlessly mainstream,” shaping not only the structure of sex work establishments but also the idealised image of who qualifies as a legitimate worker. This logic marginalises and fetishises “brown, black, fat, and gender-expansive bodies as... outsiders,” (p. 152)

perpetuating harmful stereotypes and excluding these individuals from full participation in the industry. The impacts of this exclusion are particularly severe for already marginalised communities, who disproportionately experience poverty, ill-health, and unemployment. For gender-expansive people, the effects are compounded by the lack of explicit legal recognition of their identities, leaving them both socially invisible and legally vulnerable (Polkinghorne, 2020).

The International Labour Organisation's Violence and Harassment Convention (2019) recognises that gender-based violence disproportionately affects women and girls, noting that such violence is shaped by "gender stereotypes, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and unequal gender-based power relations" (para. 13). These concerns are equally relevant to all sex workers, including gender-expansive individuals, particularly when read alongside the Yogyakarta Principles, specifically Principles 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12, 22, 25, 26, and 27, which affirm the rights of individuals to be free from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Polkinghorne, 2020; ICJ & ISHR, 2007). These principles encompass rights to dignity, legal recognition, work, freedom of expression, and participation in public and cultural life. Despite the decriminalisation of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand, research indicates that gender-expansive sex workers face significant barriers to inclusion. They are often excluded from brothel environments (Weinhold, 2023), marginalised in on-street sex workspaces (Easterbrook-Smith, 2019), and remain without explicit legal protection against discrimination (Polkinghorne, 2020). As a result, gender-expansive identities are not only unrecognised but actively suppressed within both legal and social structures. This systemic erasure constitutes a form of active discrimination, amounting to a human rights violation with potentially life-threatening consequences (Polkinghorne, 2020).

Racialised, migrant, and gender-expansive populations have been treated as separate categories in existing research and policy discourse, though their experiences often overlap in meaningful and compounding ways (Tourmaline, 2025). For racialised, migrant, and gender-expansive sex workers, exclusion from legal protections is not just a matter of immigration status or gender identity alone, but the result of intersecting systems of racism, cisnormativity, and state surveillance. Attending to these intersections is essential for understanding how partial and confining decriminalisation continues to reproduce inequality, and for imagining full and emancipatory legal and social reforms.

Conclusion

As Wijers (2022, p. 64) observes, “[human rights are] as much a site of power as any other politics of inclusion and exclusion, who belongs and who does not.” In Aotearoa New Zealand, the historical fight has been for the decriminalisation of sex work - a struggle that continues in many parts of the world. Central to the discourse around legitimising sex work is the argument that sex work is economically productive, akin to other forms of labour (Abel & Ludeke, 2021a). However, within a late capitalist neoliberal market, decriminalisation does not necessarily grant sex workers the agency it promises. This assumption can be further problematised by developments such as the rise of digital platforms and entrepreneurial sex work, which alter the landscape of labour and autonomy (Sanders et al., 2021). These structural shifts affect all working bodies, and the dynamics of resistance extend beyond the state or brothel operators to encompass the broader conditions of labour itself. Decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand, therefore, cannot be assumed to be fully emancipatory, as the nature of work has fundamentally changed. As Weinhold (2023) argues, this is particularly evident within brothels, where the commodification of sex workers undermines the narrative of liberation. Inclusion and legitimacy alone do little to dismantle the persistent stigma surrounding sex work. While decriminalisation is often framed as delivering freedom, human rights, worker satisfaction, and choice, the challenge lies in navigating these ideals within the constraints of the contemporary labour economy - a struggle shared by all precarious workers.

Methodology

Introduction

Who am I to write?

I have pain. I feel others' pain.

Our voices are ink.

Since the decriminalisation of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand, a substantial body of research over the past two decades has highlighted improvements in sex workers' safety and a reduction in associated risks (Abel, 2018a; Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Abel & Ludeke, 2021b; Armstrong, 2021; Armstrong & Abel, 2020; Brooks-Gordon et al., 2021; Cory-Wright, 2019; Gilmour, 2020; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). Despite the apparent success of the PRA, several issues within the legislation persist, revealing important nuances in how 'safety' and 'risk' are conceptualised and experienced by individual sex workers (Armstrong et al., 2020; Gilmour, 2020; Mac & Smith, 2018; Weinhold, 2023). Of particular concern is the exclusion of non-resident migrants from the protections of decriminalisation, due to the amendment of Section 19, which prohibits non-residents from engaging in sex work legally. As a result, non-resident migrant sex workers are denied the legislative protections afforded to citizens and permanent residents (Armstrong et al., 2020; Corey-Wright, 2019; DeCat, 2019). Research involving this group highlights the persistent harms associated with working illegally, including coercion, exploitation, sexual violence, criminalisation, and the threat of deportation (Armstrong et al., 2020; Corey-Wright, 2019). These findings parallel those from prohibitionist contexts such as the United States and neo-abolitionist Canada, where migrant sex workers face systemic oppression and serious human rights violations (Gallant & Lam, 2024).

By creating a two-tier system that determines who is afforded legal protection and who is not, the legislation enables the persistence of discrimination within the sex industry. This discrimination manifests across both tiers despite some explicit legal safeguards that protect certain characteristics (for example, the International Labour Organisation's Violence and Harassment Convention and the Yogyakarta Principles). Sex workers who are already marginalised due to personal characteristics, such as ethnicity, gender, Indigeneity, migrant status, body size, disability, neurodiversity, language, religion,

pregnancy status, and parental status, are particularly affected (Cruz, 2013; DeCat, 2019; Escaravage, 2016; Gilmour, 2020; GNSWP, 2025; Weinhold, 2023). While there are accessible pathways for lodging complaints through organisations such as the Aotearoa Sex Workers' Collective (NZPC) and the Human Rights Commission, with evidence of successful outcomes in some cases (BBC, 2020; Healey et al., 2020; Leask, 2024), these avenues are not perceived as viable by many in the sex work community. As Weinhold (2023) argues, the continued perception of sex work as illegitimate, despite its legal status, undermines access to justice. This perception sustains a broader narrative in which the human rights of marginalised communities remain negotiable. Within the sex industry, this remains especially true for those already subjected to intersecting forms of stigma and exclusion, who must continually assert their right to exist within a stigmatised profession.

These concerns point to the existence of a 'whorearchy' within the sex work community in Aotearoa New Zealand, whereby some sex workers benefit from the protections afforded under the PRA, but only insofar as they meet certain personal and legal criteria (see NZPC, 2025). In short, while research on decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand has demonstrated improvements in safety for sex workers, these benefits are not experienced equally or uniformly across the community. This disparity highlights a critical gap that the present study seeks to address through its first research question:

RQI: To what extent are risk and safety intersectional in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand?

This study focuses in particular on two key, intersecting marginalised groups within the sex work community: migrant sex workers and gender-expansive sex workers. Research has consistently documented the harms resulting from Section 19 of the PRA for migrant sex workers (Armstrong, 2017; Armstrong et al., 2020; Corey-Wright, 2019; Easterbrook-Smith, 2018). Similarly, gender-expansive sex workers experience acute discrimination and marginalisation, as evidenced by a growing body of scholarship (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018; Gilmour, 2020; Weinhold, 2023). Consequently, a secondary research question asks:

RQII: How do migrant and gender-expansive sex workers actively resist discrimination?

This methodology chapter is organised into three overarching sections: the research approach, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations alongside quality assurance and methodological limitations. As an arts-based researcher, I have embedded poetry and visual art throughout these sections. This creative process

functioned as a reflexive method in itself, supporting my engagement with the research journey and offering an embodied means of critical self-reflection.

Section One: How I Approached the Research

*My pain feels very small
when faced with the tsunami
of collected pain.*

Research Design: Intersectionality, decolonial feminism, and arts-based research

The framework for this study is grounded in intersectionality and decolonial feminism (Crenshaw, 1991; Vergès, 2021), developed to honour and respect the communities with whom I worked alongside, and to recognise that their experiences are shaped by unique and intersecting lived realities (Boonzaier, 2019; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 2012; Vergès, 2021, 2024). In line with this, my own positionality also required careful reflection. As a white, cisgender academic with no lived experience of sex work, I approached this project from an outsider position, acutely aware of the responsibilities, limitations, and power dynamics this introduces (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Worchel, 2025). This awareness was expressed visually through the two contrasting images depicted below:



Figure 2: 'Colonising research can look like this', own drawing taken from reflexive journal.

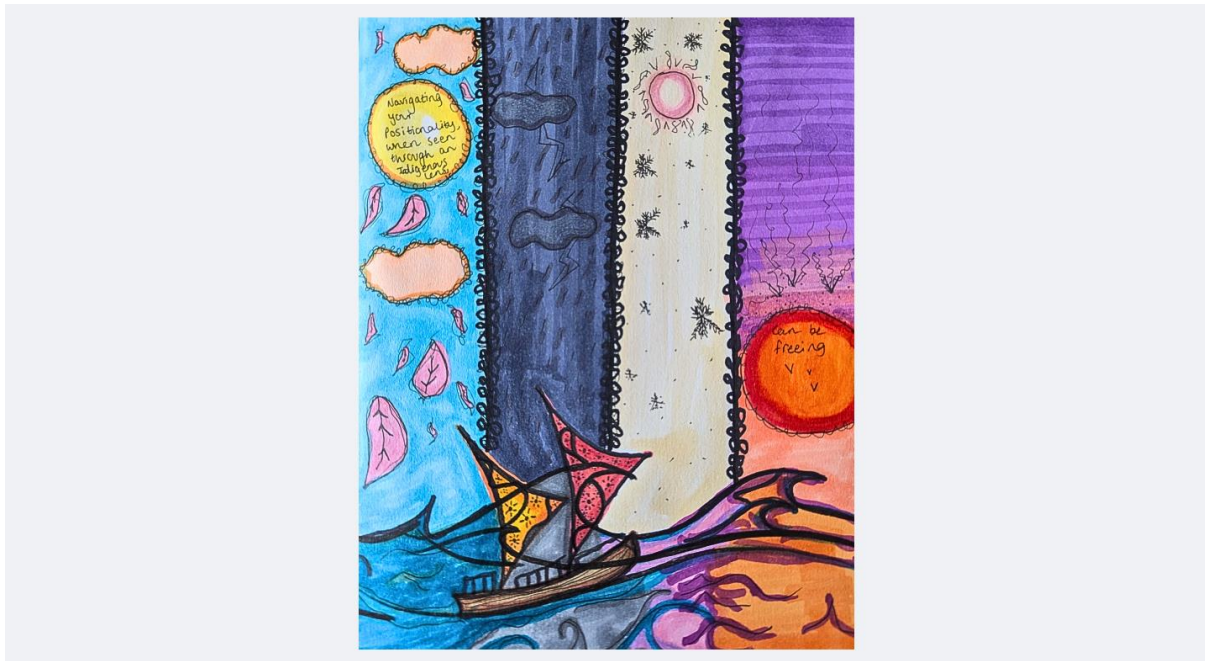


Figure 3: 'Navigating your positionality when seen through an Indigenous lens can be freeing', own drawing taken from reflexive journal.

These represent my evolving understanding and conscious reflection of privilege, marginalisation, and accountability (Worchel, 2025). Rather than replicate research that has historically resurfaced harm, I aligned this project with decolonial and intersectional feminist research principles that foreground relationality, humility, and the ethics of representation (Boonzaier, 2019; Vergès, 2021; 2024; Schuller, 2021; Smith, 2021).

The project adopts a qualitative, arts-based, and emancipatory approach, grounded in a worldview that seeks to challenge colonial and carceral structures through an ethic of advocacy and co-production (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018; hooks, 1984). A qualitative design was chosen to prioritise depth over generalisability, and to allow the complexity of intersectional lived experiences to emerge through narrative and reflection. An intersectional lens was used to examine how overlapping identities, such as gender, migration status, race, and sexuality, influence sex workers' experiences of safety, risk, and systemic discrimination (Boonzaier, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991; Vergès, 2021; 2024). This lens encouraged participants to articulate the multiplicity of their realities without requiring them to conform to essentialist or singular narratives. Importantly, this framework recognised both participants and myself as capable, self-determined individuals, and did not assume that the research project needed to 'give' power to the sex work community - whose strength and autonomy are already well established (Deckert, 2017).

As an arts-based researcher (Arts-Based Research, ABR), I understand creative practice not only as a tool for dissemination, but also as a legitimate method of inquiry and reflexivity (Leavy, 2025). Poetry, drawing, and visual metaphors were used throughout the research process to support meaning-making, relational thinking, and to deepen engagement with complex experiences. ABR often extends beyond traditional academic boundaries into public spaces, such as exhibitions, performances, and protest art, where knowledge is generated and communicated outside of formal institutions. It is inherently evocative and intentionally provocative, aiming to elicit affective responses and critical reflection. For example, Welch et al. (2002) examine public responses to avant-garde flag art in the United States, while Paewai (2024) highlights the recent art-based protest at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds. In this sense, ABR is a useful vehicle for social justice as it can illuminate and challenge invisible or normalised power structures, particularly those unnoticed by privileged groups (Leavy, 2025).

ABR is therefore well suited to an intersectional framework, as it disrupts dominant ideologies, challenges stereotypes, and creates space for marginalised voices to be seen, heard, and validated. I previously engaged with ABR in my undergraduate dissertation, where I explored the extent to which poetry writing supported desistance from substance use and reoffending (Thompson, unpublished). The current study expands on that foundation. Within its intersectional frame, participants were positioned as storytellers and knowledge-holders, each bringing their own valuable realities and experiences to the research process (Boonzaier, 2019; Elke, 2024; hooks, 1984; Vergès, 2021, 2024).

Ontologically, this study embraces the existence of multiple realities, and epistemologically it is grounded in the belief that knowledge is produced through close, participatory relationships, not objective distance (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Axiologically, this means the research is openly value-laden, it does not pretend neutrality but instead acknowledges the emotional, political, and ethical dimensions of engaging with marginalised communities. The emancipatory intent is to resist neo-colonial and exclusionary structures by centring voices of resistance within a human rights framework, and to challenge the ongoing conflation and politicisation of sex work in academic and public discourse (Abel, 2018a; Weitzer, 2005; Wijers, 2022).

At the heart of this research design is a commitment to intersectional and decolonial feminism, which shaped every stage of the project, from the formulation of research questions to the methods of engagement and analysis (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984, 2000; Schuller, 2021; Vergès, 2021, 2024). Centralising the voices of sex workers, particularly those who are Indigenous, migrant, gender-expansive, or otherwise structurally marginalised, was essential for producing research that is transformative

rather than extractive (Carvalho et al., 2023; Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; George et al., 2020; Smith, 2021). I was mindful that the discipline I sit within has historically perpetuated colonial harm and exclusion (Boonzaier, 2019; Smith, 2021), and I remain committed to challenging these legacies by seeking out new, collaborative, and accountable pathways for knowledge creation (Agozino, 2023; Belknap & Portillos, 2023).

While this project was not participatory action research in the strictest sense, where participants are involved in all stages including analysis and dissemination (Cornish et al., 2023), it was shaped by participatory values and community engagement. The NZPC collaborated in the co-design of the research, sharing knowledge and literature, as well as dedicating time and space to discuss topical research. The NZPC also helped to shape the research questions and ethical framework in alignment with community needs and this will be discussed in the next section. As an outsider to the sex work community, I approached this partnership with humility and engaged in ongoing dialogue with the NZPC to ensure accountability and alignment with community priorities. I also had the opportunity of speaking with and gaining guidance from Dr Lynzi Armstrong who has researched sex work extensively in Aotearoa New Zealand (Armstrong, 2017, 2021, 2024; Armstrong et al., 2020). In short, these experiences have benefitted me both inside and outside of academia as I was able to learn from the community and the context surrounding the community working under a decriminalised model.

Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to review and edit their interview transcripts, ensuring that their voices were represented accurately and with consent. These processes reflected a relational ethic that prioritised mutual respect, transparency, and participant autonomy throughout all stages (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This included being flexible with interview conditions, honouring participant agency at every step, and drawing on trauma-informed and affirming practices to ensure comfort and trust (Braun & Clarke, 2022). While this design foregrounds depth, reflexivity, and collaboration, it also brings limitations; the findings are necessarily situated and subjective, shaped by my positionality and by the co-constructed nature of qualitative inquiry. Although the study was not fully co-produced, it was consciously designed to challenge extractive research practices and to centre accountability to the communities involved.

Co-Production with the NZPC

Upon arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand, I captioned a photo from my first day with the words: “Exhausted but elated.” This phrase has continued to resonate throughout this project. My prior work in policing in England, where sex work remains partially

criminalised, left me constrained by legal frameworks that often silenced or penalised sex work. In contrast, Aotearoa New Zealand offered a distinct socio-political environment in which decriminalisation, although not without exclusions, created a foundation for more collaborative, community-based research. The freedom I felt, having been granted a scholarship by the Leverhulme Trust, was like a bird stretching its wings and flying across many waters.

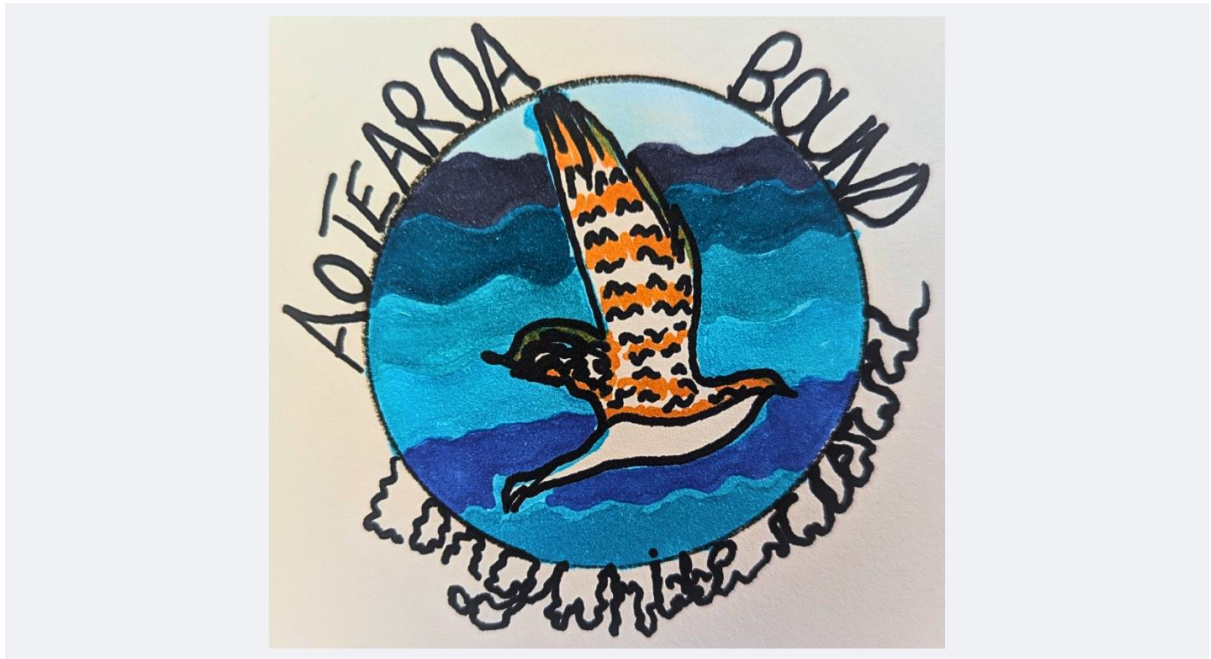


Figure 4: 'Land of the Long White Cloud', own drawing taken from reflexive journal.

My engagement with the NZPC preceded my physical relocation to Aotearoa New Zealand. This early collaboration helped ensure that the project would be aligned with the needs and aspirations of the community (Thompson, 2023). Shortly after arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand, I connected with the NZPC and began volunteering at their Auckland branch. Volunteering with the NZPC has been an integral part of this project. It has been a reciprocal relationship that I am most thankful for. I started volunteering last year, twice weekly, getting to know the staff and workers who visit. I have laughed a lot, had incredibly meaningful discussions, and helped where I could. I have folded hundreds of wet wipes and have fumbled a variety of colourful condoms for the outreach packs. I have received several papercuts from putting together informative documents. My hands have sweated in gloves cleaning, and I have enjoyed feeling the textures of donated clothes as I hung them up on the rail. The staff at the NZPC Auckland have become my friends and have been generous with their time, with their energy and efforts to speak with me and support with this project. I have been honoured with invitations to special events; one such event took me to Wellington to celebrate the 21st anniversary of

decriminalisation on the 26th June 2024. As soon as I got back to my hotel room, I felt that familiar “exhausted but elated” feeling and wrote down my reflections on the events and my time at the NZPC.

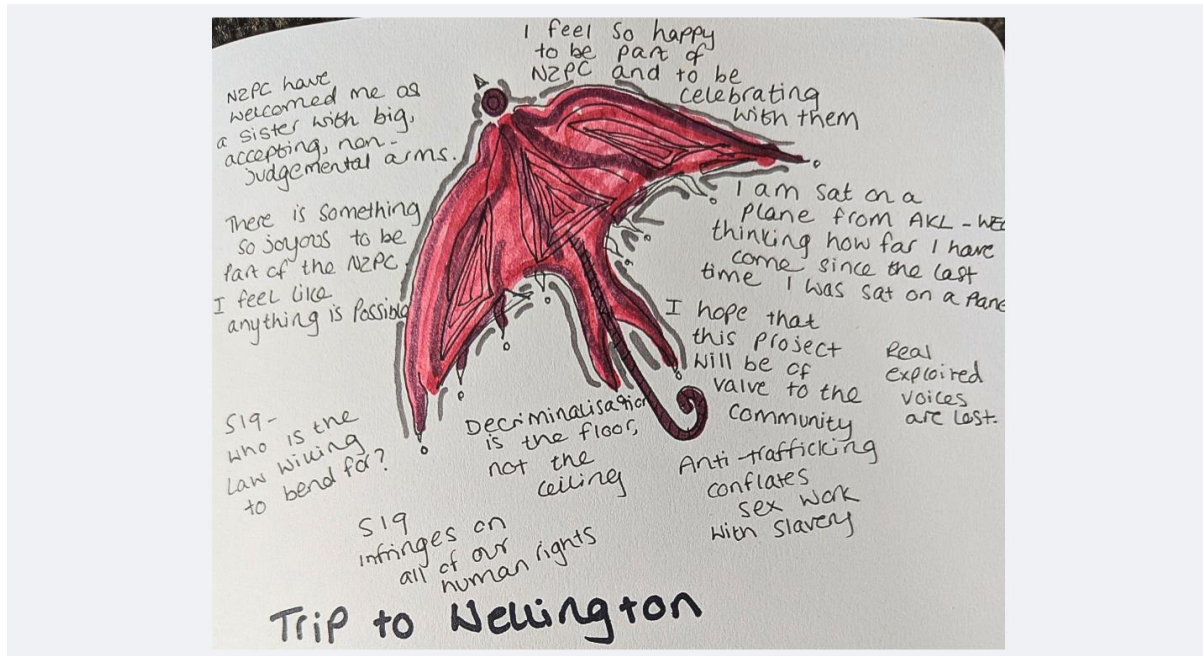


Figure 5: 'Trip to Wellington', own drawing taken from reflexive journal.

Formal consultations took place with key NZPC leaders, including Dame Catherine Healy (National Coordinator) and Annah Pickering (Auckland Manager), alongside ongoing informal discussions during volunteering hours. These consultations were essential to co-designing the research, ensuring its relevance to the community, and facilitating connections to other organisations and researchers. NZPC’s role as a peer-led organisation and trusted support hub for sex workers meant that their endorsement was vital, not only to ethical practice but to the study’s legitimacy within the community (Shay & Sarra, 2024; Smith, 2021). The NZPC also contributed to the research design by suggesting an interview question and granting access to their office as the primary site for data collection.

Our partnership fostered a co-learning dynamic, wherein knowledge and experience flowed both ways between the research team, the NZPC, and the participants. The familiarity established through my volunteering directly impacted the tone of the interviews and the group craft session (GCS) I facilitated, supporting open, relaxed conversations and reducing perceived hierarchies between researcher and participants (Bucerius, 2013).

Importantly, my commitment to this partnership extends beyond the research project itself. I continue to volunteer with the NZPC and intend to do so following the study's conclusion. At a time when public sector cuts are jeopardising essential services in Aotearoa New Zealand, including the NZPC's operations, sustained volunteer support is critical (RNZ, 2025). This project has never been purely about the attainment of a qualification. Rather, it is part of a broader commitment to community-centred, activist scholarship (Lennox & Yildiz, 2020). My partnership with the NZPC is grounded in solidarity and accountability, and I remain invested in the Collective's wellbeing and future.

Section Two: How the Data was Collected

As pain ripples so

too does the healing of pain

Small pain. Big ripples.

Data Collection Methods

This study used two primary qualitative data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and a group craft session. These methods were chosen for their ability to generate rich, in-depth narratives and to honour participant agency, storytelling, and cultural safety. All sessions took place at the Auckland office of the NZPC, in private, secure rooms inaccessible to the public. The NZPC provided key support in arranging access to the venue, reviewing materials for clarity and cultural sensitivity, and advising on participant wellbeing protocols throughout the data collection process. Participants were offered a Prezzy card as a token of appreciation for their time. Those who completed both the group session and the individual interview received a total of \$90. One participant took part in two separate individual interviews only and received a total of \$70.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 60 and 120 minutes, were conducted with all participants (n = 4), allowing for guided, yet flexible, conversations that centred participant narratives. Participants represented a range of identities, including various ethnicities, genders, and levels of experience in the sex industry, reflecting the diversity within Aotearoa New Zealand's sex work community (see Participant Overview in the following section).

Eight guiding questions shaped the semi-structured format (see Appendix C), but the conversational nature of the interviews encouraged participants to explore their own stories and experiences. Although I initially sought to use unstructured narrative interviews due to their emphasis on storytelling and participant agency (Archibald, 2008), Auckland University of Technology's Ethics Committee (AUTEC) advised a semi-structured approach to better align with the research aims. This compromise retained narrative richness while ensuring the key themes of "safety," "risk," and "discrimination" were addressed (Davies & Francis, 2018; Tracy, 2020). Participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions before and during the session.

Group Craft Session (GCS)

The Group Craft Session involved three participants and took place in the same NZPC location. The session centred on the theme: Diversity and Discrimination in Sex Work in Aotearoa New Zealand. Each person created a piece of artwork responding to this theme, whilst I facilitated, observed, asked questions, and joined in the discussion. I brought a range of art supplies, refreshments, and options for those less inclined to draw, including a mandala colouring book (Hinkler Pty, 2024).

The session was designed as an informal, creative space where participants could express themselves and share experiences related to key themes: "risk," "safety," "discrimination," and "moments of empowerment" (see Appendix D for the GCS Schedule). Participants were given the schedule in advance and another copy at the session. The session lasted two hours, was audio-recorded and later transcribed. To foster safety and confidentiality, I introduced the Chatham House Rule at the outset, ensuring that while discussion could be shared outside the group, no identifying details could be disclosed (Chatham House, 2025).

Each session began with a karakia used previously in my teaching with the UniPrep 2025 programme to bring grounding and collective intention to the space:

Mauri oho, Mauri tu, Mauri ora, ki a tātou. Haumi e! Hui e! Tāiki e!

(Life force awaken, Life force stand tall, Life force all wellness, good health for all. Join together! Unite! The group is ready to progress for the purpose of coming together!)

All interviews and the GCS were recorded and transcribed verbatim by me; each participant was given a copy of their interview transcript to review and a thematic summary of the GCS transcript. It was important to me that these transcriptions preserved the authentic voices of the participants. This meant retaining the natural flow of speech, including the use of slang, colloquialisms, and instances of what might be considered 'broken English' by those for whom English was a second language. This includes the use of verbal hedges (for example, "um," "like," "you know"), pauses, and

non-standard grammar or syntax. Such features are retained as they reflect natural speech patterns and may offer insight into participants' thought processes or emotional states (Tracy, 2020). Where necessary, [sic] is used to indicate grammatical or lexical errors that may appear unusual or incorrect to the reader, but which are part of the original speech. Minor edits (for example, removal of repeated words or filler sounds) have been made in some cases for readability, and these are noted accordingly. I also chose to keep in seemingly incidental comments, such as "*Laura: I'm just gonna have a sip of my coffee*", as these added to the conversational tone and contextual richness of the data. I was deliberate in avoiding the erasure or sanitisation of how participants spoke, as this authenticity was central to honouring their lived experiences and maintaining the integrity of their narratives.

Participants could choose whether to keep their artwork or allow me to keep the original copy and use photographs of the artwork for research purposes. With permission, photographs of the pieces were taken for academic outputs, captioned using pseudonyms. The artworks also served as conversational prompts in the individual interviews, strengthening the connection between methods. For instance, Bubbles created a reflective piece of what 'safety' meant to her, a concept we were unpacking in the interview, and so her piece provided a visual depiction of what 'safety' meant to her as a sex worker.

The Interplay of Methods and Participant Leadership

The GCS and interviews complemented one another effectively. The GCS, akin to a focus group (Hall, 2020), created a relaxed, collaborative space that encouraged dialogue, laughter, and creativity. This atmosphere helped to build rapport and laid the foundation for deeper individual interviews. Conversely, the one-on-one interviews allowed for personal reflection and elaboration on themes raised during the group session.

Throughout data collection, I explained that the project was grounded in an intersectional and decolonial feminist framework (Boonzaier, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984), which recognises the diverse realities of participants. The sex work community in Aotearoa New Zealand is multicultural, and the study's design respected that by using culturally grounded, strengths-based, and "bottom-up" approaches that prioritised community voices without re-traumatisation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Participants had full control over how much to share, whether to respond to particular questions, and how their contributions were used. This ensured that the research remained participant led. The creative and narrative approach also made space for strengths-based discussions, even when sharing experiences of discrimination or harm.

Reflections on Researcher–Participant Dynamics

Having volunteered at the NZPC for a year, my presence was familiar to the participants. This familiarity created a relaxed atmosphere where storytelling could thrive. The interviews were often humour-filled, emotionally open, and directed by the participants themselves. All interviews and the group session were conducted in English, which was a second language for some of the participants, so care was taken to use accessible language and avoid academic or legal jargon. Participants were not just respondents; they were co-authors of this research. By reviewing their transcripts and co-shaping the narrative focus of the study, they helped to ensure the research reflected their experiences with accuracy and respect (Belknap & Portillos, 2023; Deckert, 2017).

In keeping with this collaborative ethos, I proposed a final community feedback event in partnership with the NZPC. This event, to be held after the study's conclusion, will exhibit participant artworks (with consent), and act as a celebration and knowledge-sharing opportunity within the community. This forms part of the study's commitment to giving back to the community and supporting wider academic and community-based impact.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

The sex work community includes individuals who experience heightened vulnerability, with research documenting mental health challenges, substance use, self-harm, suicide, and exposure to violence, exploitation, and criminalisation (Armstrong & Abel, 2020; Armstrong et al., 2020; Sanders, 2017; Sanders et al., 2025). Although the current study did not specifically seek individuals with such experiences, previous research indicates that migrant and gender-expansive sex workers are disproportionately affected by these harms (Cory-Wright, 2019; Lyons et al., 2017). To mitigate potential distress, both the GCS and individual interviews were designed from a strengths-based perspective. Participants were not directly asked about traumatic experiences; instead, the structure allowed for participant-led reflection and narrative sharing.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure alignment with the study's aims and focus (Tracy, 2020). Recruitment sought individuals with lived experiences relevant to the research topic, with particular attention to migrant and gender-expansive sex workers. The process was guided by ethical considerations and a strong commitment to inclusivity, transparency, and cultural safety. Recruitment materials, including a poster, were displayed at the NZPC Auckland office. In addition, the study benefitted from snowball sampling, which is particularly effective when

working with hard-to-reach or stigmatised populations (Tracy, 2020). For example, one participant shared the poster within a private Discord channel. Opportunistic sampling also occurred during my volunteer hours at the NZPC, further highlighting the relational benefits of that ongoing engagement. Once interest was expressed, potential participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix A), consent and release forms (Appendix B), the interview and craft session schedules (Appendix C and D), and a copy of the recruitment poster (Appendix E).

The study involved participants aged 18 and over and was conducted in Auckland. Recruitment criteria included individuals who identified as gender-expansive, defined as having a gender identity different from the sex assigned at birth, or identifying as ‘trans’ (Polkinghorne, 2020). Pasifika gender-expansive identities were acknowledged using the acronym MVPFAFF, as outlined in the *Literature Review* (Brown-Acton, 2011). Migrant participants were required to have New Zealand permanent residency. This decision was guided by Roguski’s approach in Armstrong et al. (2020), which prioritised the inclusion of those less vulnerable to deportation under Section 19 of the PRA. While this ethical decision helped reduce legal risk, it also highlights the silencing effects of Section 19 on non-resident migrant workers and the methodological limitations that this creates.

As established in the *Introduction*, the study included four participants: Bubbles, Jack, JoJo, and Laura. Each participant brought a distinct background and set of experiences within the sex industry:

Bubbles is a white European cisgender woman with over twenty years of experience in the sex industry. Although originally an immigrant, she considers herself strongly “Kiwi.” She self-identified as a “larger lady” and discussed the impact of size-based discrimination. As one of the few sex workers who are ‘out and proud,’ she reflected on the privilege and risks associated with this visibility, both during her interview and the GCS.

Jack was the only male participant and brought unique insights as a gay Asian migrant sex worker. He discussed experiences of racialised stigma, Queer community dynamics, and challenges specific to navigating Aotearoa New Zealand’s sex industry as a man of colour.

JoJo, a woman of colour and refugee from the Middle East, offered a deeply intersectional perspective. Her reflections highlighted how transphobia, racism, and xenophobia shaped her navigation of the sex industry, particularly the restrictive norms surrounding femininity and how she was expected to advertise herself in certain ‘categories’.

Laura is an Asian cisgender woman working in the dancing sector of the sex industry. She spoke powerfully during both the interview and GCS about anti-Asian racism in Aotearoa

New Zealand, helping to illuminate the racialised undertones of Section 19 and its broader implications.

Although the sample size was small, the use of rigorous and in-depth qualitative methods yielded rich and meaningful data. Migrant and gender-expansive sex workers are often difficult to recruit due to the legal, social, and safety implications of their positionalities, particularly in light of Section 19. The time constraints of an MA project further limited the recruitment period, in contrast to the extended timelines typically available for doctoral research.

Transparency was upheld throughout the study (Flavell & Cunningham, 2023). All interested individuals received information and consent materials, along with both session schedules. Participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and, for those who participated in the GCS, a summary of key themes was shared for feedback. This process allowed for corrections or clarifications and aligned with the study's commitment to participant voice and agency.

All participants gave informed consent prior to taking part in either method. Respect and confidentiality were paramount, and participants were given the opportunity to create their own pseudonyms. This practice, recommended by the NZPC, aligned with common community protocols, whereby sex workers use 'working names' to protect legal identities. Participants were advised to choose pseudonyms unrelated to either their legal or working names. In one case, however, Bubbles - an 'out and proud' worker - chose to be identified by her well-known working name, reflecting an important space in research for participant autonomy in naming (Svalastog & Eriksson, 2010). This participatory approach recognises participants as self-determining agents capable of deciding how they are represented.

All research materials were securely stored on an AUT-encrypted OneDrive and a password-protected AUT device. Consent forms were stored in a separate folder from interview transcripts and participant data to ensure additional confidentiality.

Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). RTA was selected for its alignment with the study's theoretical framework, including its flexibility, its emphasis on researcher subjectivity, and its ability to centre participants' voices while acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role. This was especially compatible with the intersectional and arts-based orientation of the research, where multiple realities and positionalities were both honoured and critically unpacked.

Verbatim transcription was central to preserving participants' voices, including dialects, slang, hesitations, and side remarks, all of which contributed to the authenticity and emotional texture of the data. Memoing was used throughout both data collection and analysis to trace early conceptualisations and connect them to theoretical frameworks (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Additionally, insights from a reflexive journal, often expressed through drawings, helped visualise and deepen the analysis process.

The analysis included both deductive and inductive phases. Deductive coding was initially guided by theoretical concepts drawn from intersectionality and decolonial feminist theory, which shaped how the data were first approached (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018; hooks, 1984; Schuller, 2021; Tracy, 2020; Vergès, 2021, 2024). This was followed by inductive analysis, where codes and themes were developed from within the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Both semantic (surface-level) and latent (underlying) meanings were analysed, ensuring that the thematic construction captured both explicit content and implicit socio-political nuances.

As outlined in Braun and Clarke (2022), there are six phases of conducting RTA:

Familiarisation

This phase involved repeated engagement with the transcripts and craft session notes. I immersed myself in the data by listening to recordings, reading transcripts, and annotating both physical and digital copies. This was a particularly emotional and embodied experience, with the voices and phrasing of participants staying with me throughout my daily life. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance, I did not rush this phase, allowing for deep and prolonged immersion that supported subsequent analytical stages.

Coding

During this phase, I generated initial codes using Microsoft Visio. Traditional qualitative analysis software, such as NVivo, were considered; however, I opted to use Microsoft Visio and Whiteboard due to their visual and tactile flexibility. These tools aligned more naturally with the arts-based, decolonial, and intersectional ethos of the project. Rather than categorising data through pre-set hierarchies or rigid structures, Visio and Whiteboard allowed for open-ended spatial organisation, intuitive movement of codes, and an embodied sense-making process that mirrored the relational nature of the research. This approach supported my commitment to creative and reflexive analysis by offering a more fluid visual medium for code development and theme construction. Each code was visually represented as a "Code Leaf" (see image below), a metaphor chosen intuitively but later recognised as fitting within the decolonial and arts-based ethos of the research. Each leaf reflected the organic, relational, and diverse nature of the

participants' knowledge. This method provided a more fluid and reflexive alternative to rigid or mechanistic coding strategies (Leavy, 2025). Codes were generated from both craft session and interview transcripts, and no pre-established codebook was used. This openness allowed the participants' own language, metaphors, and themes to shape the direction of the analysis.

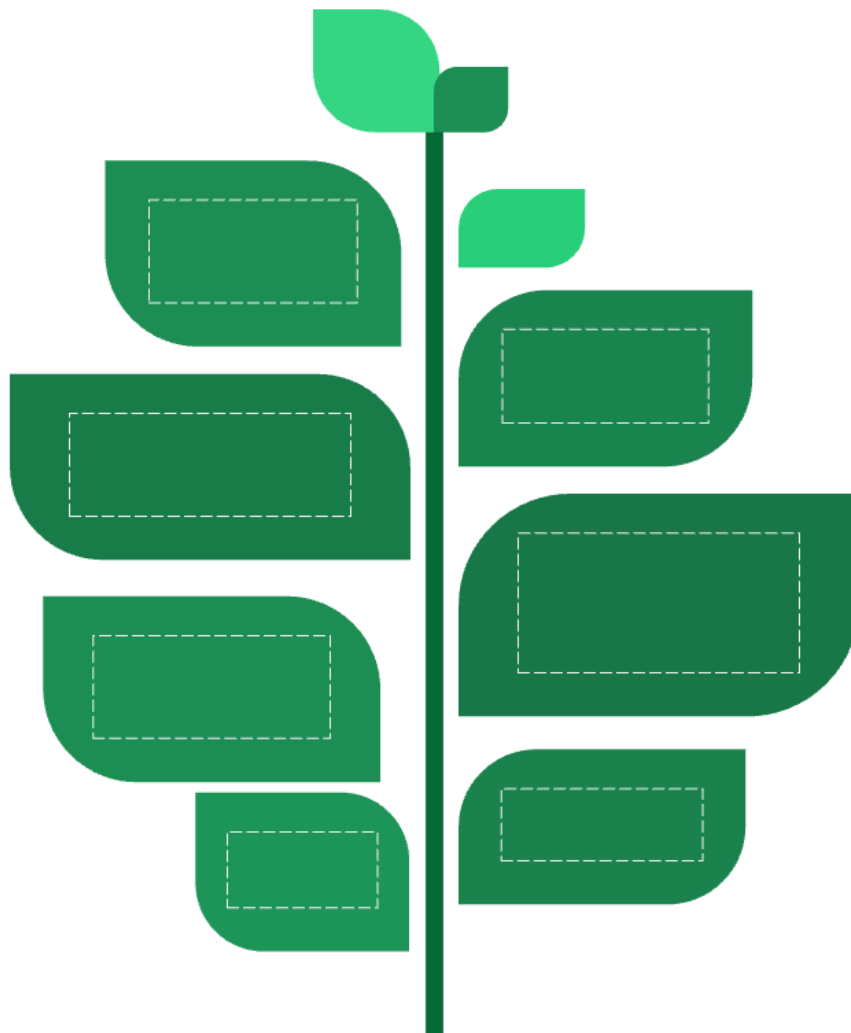


Figure 6: Template taken from Microsoft Visio which I turned into "Code Leaves" during the analysis phase.

Theme Development

In this phase, I began constructing broader patterns of meaning by grouping and re-grouping the Code Leaves into conceptual clusters using Microsoft Whiteboard. This was a non-linear and iterative process, marked by ambiguity and exploration. Some codes were discarded when they did not align with the central story generated from the dataset. Others were merged, repositioned, or redefined as I searched for a unifying “golden thread” that connected the data meaningfully (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

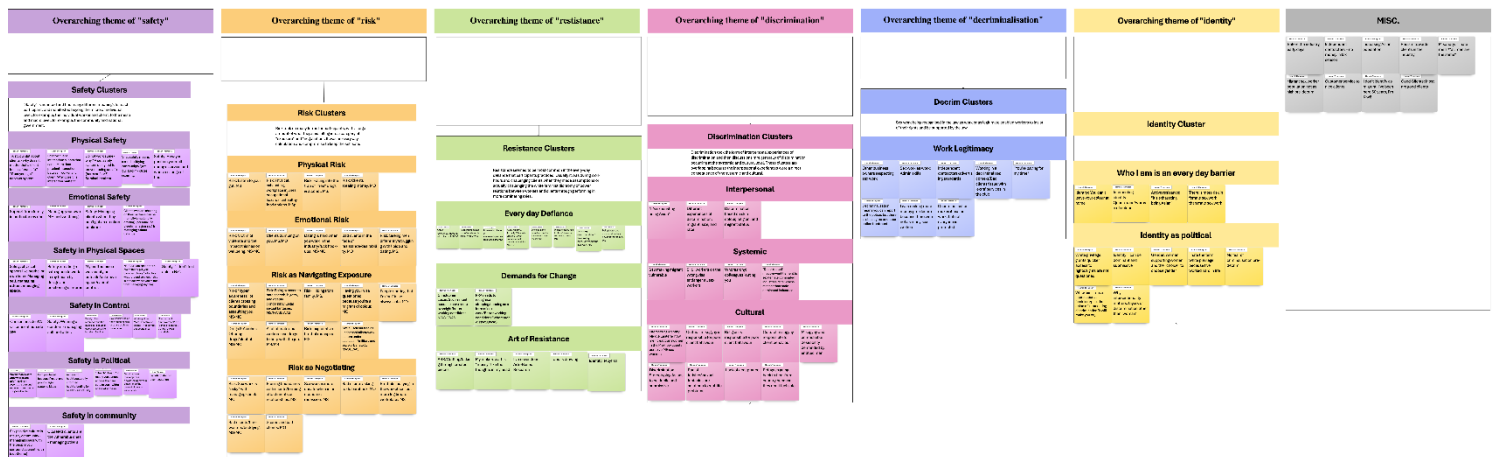


Figure 7: 'Initial Theme Map', taken from Microsoft White Board.

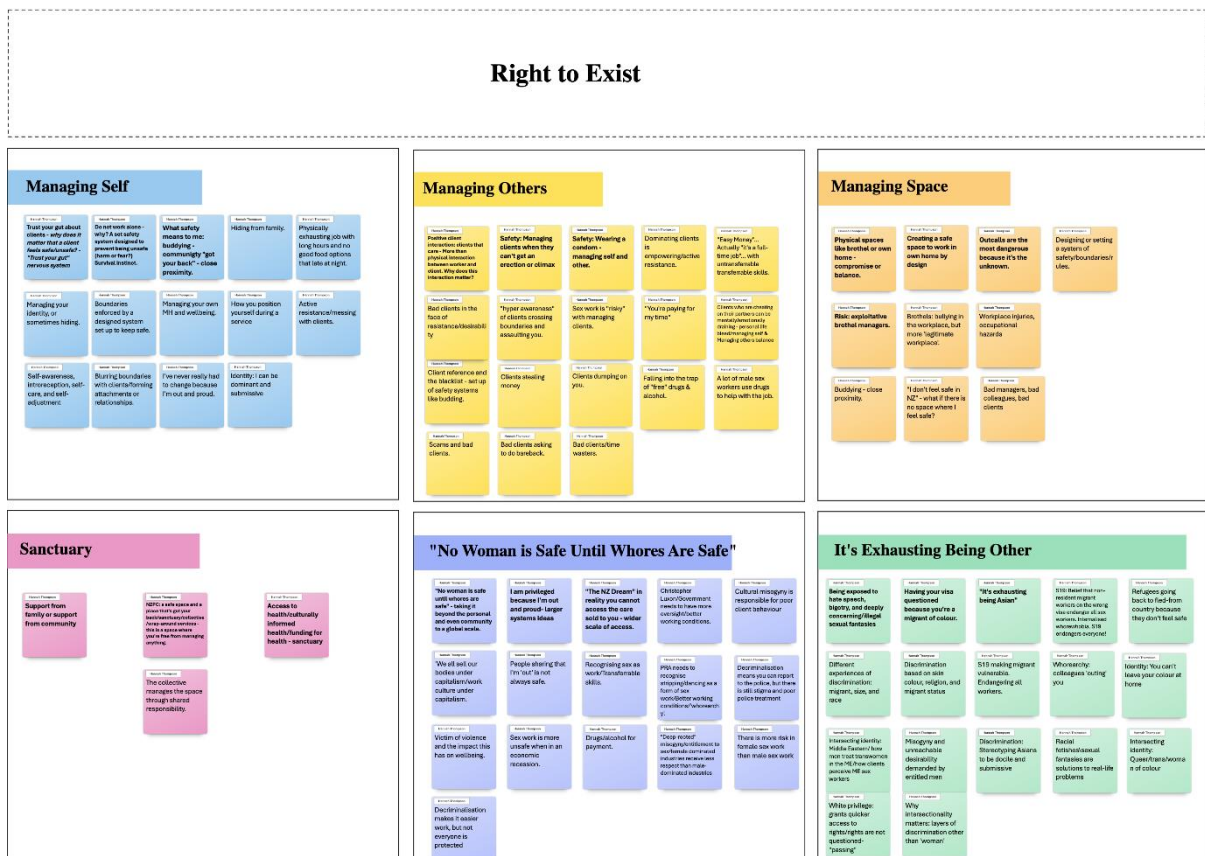


Figure 8: 'Theme Map', taken from Microsoft Whiteboard.

Theme Review

Themes were then refined by reviewing them in relation to both the coded data and the full dataset. I moved between the Whiteboard tables and the original Code Leaves in Visio to ensure that themes were grounded in participants' narratives and that no interpretive leaps were made without textual support. This recursive checking process

ensured that the final themes were coherent, internally consistent, and analytically distinct.

Theme Definition and Naming

Once the themes were stabilised, I named and clearly defined each theme to reflect its core narrative. These themes are presented as a graphic at the start of the *Findings* chapter (see Figure 11 on p. 58). Theme names reflect three levels of meaning: micro (individual), meso (community), and macro (structural/systemic). For example, at the micro level, a theme such as *Managing Self* captured individual narratives of safety. At the meso level, the theme *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support* reflected community-level dynamics of mutual care within the sex work community. At the macro level, a theme *It is Exhausting Being Other* (a slight adaptation of a participant quote) represented wider systemic racism, xenophobia, contradictions around legal protections, policy failures, and structural stigma. This triplex structure helped situate participants' experiences not in isolation, but as shaped by individual realities, community dynamics, and broader structural forces. This stage finalised the analytic structure of the dataset and clarified how each theme contributed to the overall story of the research.

As a reflexive researcher, I remained acutely aware of my positionality throughout the analysis process. My background in criminal justice, my current academic employment, and my volunteer position with the NZPC shaped how I interpreted the data. Furthermore, my experiences as a woman, as Queer, as a survivor of abuse, as a feminist, and as a socialist, were influential in how I interpreted the data. As reflected in Braun and Clarke (2022), this was not a problem to be fixed, rather it was an integral to doing the analysis. I consistently returned to my reflexive journal to interrogate my assumptions and to ensure I did not impose dominant or institutional narratives onto the participants' stories. While my interpretative lens was essential to the process of meaning-making, I took care to centre participant voices, particularly where those narratives resisted neat categorisation or challenged normative understandings of sex work. I see my role not as a detached observer, but as a co-narrator, co-weaving threads that participants generously shared.

Writing Up

In the final phase, I integrated the data extracts with interpretive narrative. In line with the principles of RTA, the *Findings* chapter was designed to foreground participant voices, with minimal interpretive commentary from me. Quotations were selected not only for their relevance to the theme but also for their evocative and expressive quality (Tracy, 2020). I prioritised quotes that captured the emotional weight, cultural nuance, or

metaphorical power of the participants' voices. Some were chosen because they challenged dominant narratives; others because they illuminated a moment of humour, vulnerability, or resistance. Where participants used slang, pauses, or tangents (for example, "JoJo: Um. I forget [sic] the word I wanted to use", I chose to retain these as part of their narrative rhythm (Tracy, 2020). Additionally, I kept lengthy excerpts to show the nature of free-flowing dialogue. These decisions were rooted in a commitment to authenticity and a desire to preserve the texture and cadence of each speaker's voice (Tracy, 2020). Participants' own words lead the narrative in this chapter. Deeper interpretive analysis, theory integration, and broader implications are addressed in the *Discussion* chapter, allowing the *Findings* to remain participant centred.

Section Three: Ethical Considerations, Quality Assurance, and Methodological Limitations

We have all spoken.

*Pain, joy, and the space between -
our voices still ring.*

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to the research design and implementation. Ethical approval was granted by AUTEK on the 16th December 2024, following the submission of a full application detailing the risks, mitigation strategies, and planned support structures for participants. All ethical procedures adhered to the principles of informed consent, participant autonomy, and cultural safety, particularly given the creative and group-based nature of the research activities. AUTEK required clear mechanisms to mitigate potential harm, including outlining access to referrals for counselling support and providing participants with the autonomy to skip any question or withdraw from any session at any time. In response, I included written reminders of participant rights in the Information Sheet (see Appendix A) and ensured that verbal reminders were given at the start of each session with participants. These safeguards were seen as essential given the possibility of distressing topics arising, despite the project's strengths-based framing. I also ensured to provide supportive information that was readily available in leaflet form at the NZPC. Information included signposts to supportive agencies, crisis numbers, and support available at the NZPC. The participatory and arts-based methods required

special attention to emotional and relational dynamics, confidentiality in shared spaces, and the potential for both discomfort and empowerment through storytelling.

Informed consent in a group setting like the GCS presented additional ethical considerations. All participants were made aware in advance through in-personal conversations, email or text exchanges, and explicitly detailed on the Information Sheet. Written consent was collected prior to all sessions, and participants were regularly reminded that they could withdraw at any point without needing to explain why. Sensitivity to group dynamics was crucial, and I monitored for signs of discomfort or fatigue throughout.

The use of the Chatham House Rule (Chatham House, 2025) was another key mechanism for managing confidentiality. I explained this at the start of the GCS, clarifying that while participants were free to carry forward insights gained during the session, they were not permitted to disclose any identifying information about others. This approach was ethically justified as it balanced the collective nature of knowledge-sharing with the importance of safeguarding individual identities within a small and potentially overlapping community.

Where participants created visual artworks during the GCS, I asked for consent to photograph these pieces for use in academic or community-focused outputs. This consent was integrated into the consent form, and participants were informed that their individual pieces would be captioned using their pseudonyms (except Bubbles whose working name is used), given the option to keep or permit me to keep and use in academic outputs or decline any use entirely. The purpose and limits of future use were clearly outlined, in line with ethical best practices for arts-based and participatory research (see consent form/Appendix B).

Navigating institutional ethics was a complex and emotionally demanding process. The ethics approval process required me to balance the protective priorities of AUTEK with the collaborative and peer-informed contributions of the NZPC. A key point of tension emerged around a question submitted by the NZPC for inclusion in the interview schedule (see Question 8 in the Interview Schedule/Appendix C). The committee raised concerns that the question might trigger distress or trauma for participants. While these concerns were valid and reflected institutional responsibilities to safeguard both researcher and participants, they also highlighted a disconnect in how risk and agency were understood between institutional and community stakeholders.

From the NZPC's perspective, the feedback risked reinforcing the very patterns of infantilisation and exclusion that sex workers often face when others speak on their behalf without direct engagement (Easterbrook-Smith, 2019). Their frustration was not

just with the content of the feedback but with the lack of opportunity to meet for a hui and engage directly in a dialogue. Upon reflection, I could have made efforts to secure this.

I was placed in a mediating position, working to revise the wording of the question in a way that retained its purpose and alignment with the NZPC's vision, while also satisfying AUTEC's requirements. This process was ethically and emotionally taxing. I felt a strong sense of duty to honour the NZPC's contributions while also meeting my obligations as a student under institutional governance. The experience illuminated the asymmetries of power that can exist between academic institutions and community partners, particularly in research with marginalised communities. It also surfaced personal feelings of doubt and pressure - shaking the unsettled dust off the books stacked in my 'self-doubt library' (see below). Despite these challenges, the process strengthened my commitment to ethical reflexivity and highlighted the importance of future ethics frameworks that are more dialogic, relational, and respectful of community expertise.

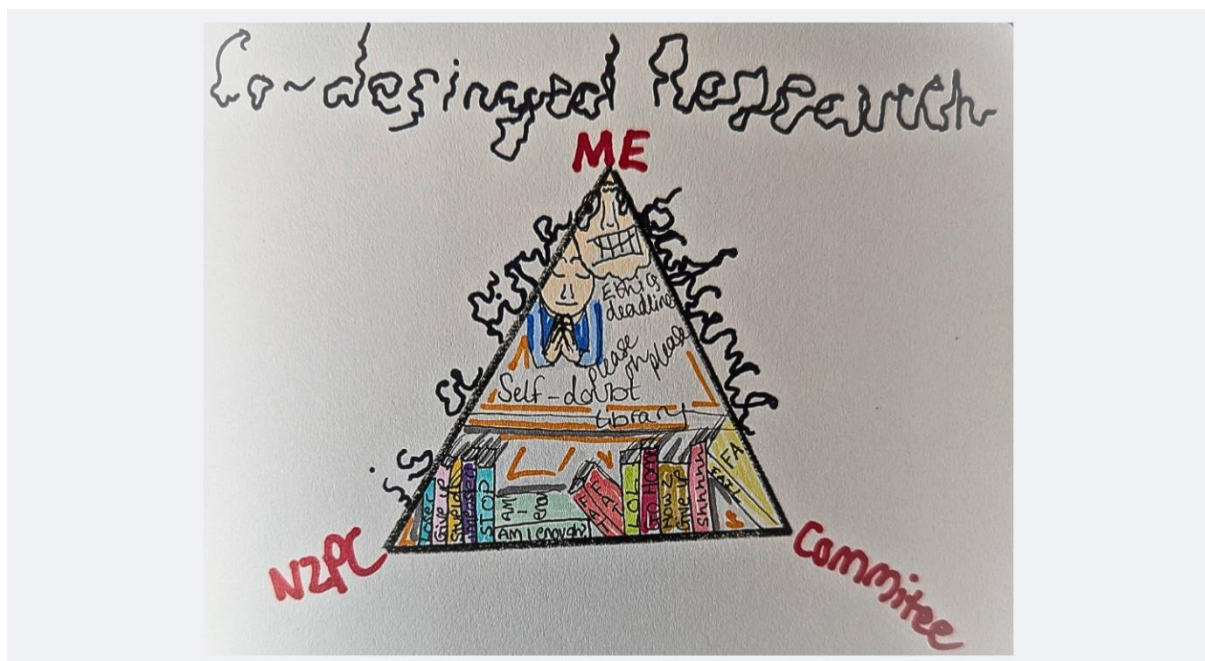


Figure 9: 'Co-designed Research is a fine balance', own drawing taken from reflexive journal.

Ensuring Quality and Rigour

In qualitative, reflexive, and arts-based research, traditional measures of validity or reliability are neither appropriate nor sufficient (Tracy, 2020). Instead, I approached rigour as a practice of transparency, reflexivity, and relational accountability. The following criteria outline how I sought to ensure quality throughout the research process.

Credibility and Reflexivity

Credibility was supported through sustained engagement with the NZPC and the sex work community as a volunteer, a position I continue to hold. This allowed trust and rapport to build gradually and contributed to how the data was collected and the data itself, challenging conventional hierarchies of academic expertise by foregrounding peer-based knowledge (Deckert, 2017; Boozaier, 2019; Smith, 2021). This collaboration was grounded in mutual trust and respect, resisting extractive research practices and ensuring ethical accountability remained a living, negotiated process rather than a static checklist. I engaged in continuous reflexivity through a creative journal that captured my emotions, my responses to events, my thoughts and ideas, the ethical tensions I faced, and the overall journey I had been on. These reflections, both visual and poetic, supported a layered understanding of both data and self (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). To further enhance credibility, all participants were given their interview transcript to review and had four weeks to make any amendments. They were also given a summary of themes from the GCS. This process honoured their agency and allowed for collaborative meaning-making.

Transparency and Dependability

I documented each stage of the research process, including the six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), coding decisions, and visual representations of theme development (for example, the “Code Leaves” and Whiteboard mapping). Rather than relying on conventional software like NVivo, I used Microsoft Visio and Whiteboard to support a flexible and arts-aligned approach to analysis. These platforms allowed for visual pattern-making that helped me digest and analyse the dataset. Memoing was used throughout to situate participants’ experiences and attend to how intersecting identities shaped their narratives. The triplex thematic structure (micro, meso, macro) framed participants’ stories across personal, communal, and systemic levels. For instance, Laura’s reflections as an Asian woman of colour revealed racism and xenophobia embedded in everyday interactions and broader institutional structures. Preserving the authenticity of participants’ voices was central to maintaining integrity in representation. This involved retaining original phrasing, hesitations, slang, and non-standard grammar in both transcripts and quotes, allowing the emotional, metaphorical, and cultural textures of their speech to remain intact.

Limitations of the Methodology

I set out on this research journey aiming to recruit at least eight to ten participants from a diverse range of backgrounds, hoping to answer the research questions with as much

representational breadth and depth as possible. However, due to the structural confines of MA-level research, including limited time, resources, and the ethical approval process, I worked with a smaller sample than anticipated. While the data collected were rich and deeply insightful, the limited number of participants means the findings may not fully reflect the breadth of experiences within Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse sex work community. While generalisability is not the aim of qualitative research of this nature, this limitation is important to acknowledge (Tracy, 2020).

While the GCS enabled solidarity and collective reflection, it may also have shaped how participants expressed themselves. There is always the possibility that individuals moderated their stories in the presence of peers, even with safeguards in place. Group settings can both deepen and constrain disclosure, and this dual dynamic is important to acknowledge (Hall, 2020). Moreover, participating in a group setting may have dissuaded provisional participants from fully engaging with the project; for example, Bubbles shared in our interview together that whilst she enjoyed the creative element of the GCS, she would have preferred to create something in the interview. A group-based setting that asked participants to be participatory through creating art, may have been exposing, which although can be empowering for some, may have been unfamiliar with others (Leavy, 2025).

From the outset, I wanted the study to be inclusive and to reflect the intersectional aims underpinning its design. I sought to involve participants who identified as gender-expansive, migrant, and working across different sectors of the sex industry, and I ensured the inclusion of Pasifika and Māori terms for gender-expansive identities, such as Tāhine and MVPFAFF, in all study documentation (Brown-Acton, 2011; InsideOut, 2021). However, it became apparent during the recruitment phase, particularly while working as a teaching assistant on the UniPrep programme (crucially this was *after* I was granted ethical approval), that I had not done enough to ensure meaningful inclusion of Indigenous voices, nor designed my methodology in a way that centered Indigenous knowledges; for example, the arts-based research element had no inclusion of Indigenous creative practices (Worchel, 2025). As a Pākehā researcher from England, I recognise that my cultural positioning and outsider status may have shaped the research design and interpretation. Through engaging with course materials on colonisation and decolonising education, and in conversations with colleagues, I came to realise that a deeper and more proactive commitment would have been required to engage with Māori and Pasifika sex workers.

For instance, I might have sought out relationships with Indigenous academics at AUT who could have facilitated respectful contact with hapū and iwi of Tāmaki Makaurau, supporting an approach to recruitment led by Tangata Whenua, in collaboration with the

NZPC. However, I also recognised that to do so ethically would have likely required a significantly different research design, one involving Indigenous co-production and design, co-governance, and ideally, co-authorship (Smith, 2021). In retrospect, I understand this work was not mine alone to do and may not have been my place or space to enter, particularly without long-term relationship-building and shared power. This realisation has been central to my evolving understanding of what inclusive and decolonial research practice requires.

Additionally, certain groups remained underrepresented in this study, including Māori and Pasifika sex workers, as well as sex workers with intersecting characteristics and identities, such as neurodiversity, disabilities, pregnancy and parenthood-status, and more. Intersectional perspectives from across the community are critical to understanding sex work experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their absence speaks to the ongoing challenge of conducting intersectional research without perpetuating the very exclusions it aims to interrogate.

These limitations have sharpened my understanding of the ethical responsibilities of intersectional and decolonial feminist research. Moving forward into doctoral work, I am critically reflecting on how best to approach the under-researched Sāmoan sex work community, a direction of personal significance, given my partner's Sāmoan heritage and the deep interweaving of that culture with my own life. I now better understand that inclusion is not about representation alone, but about long-term trust-building, ethical co-design, and whether it is my place to conduct the work at all. This learning will inform every aspect of future research design.

Conclusion: Trusting the Process

This chapter has outlined the philosophical, methodological, and ethical frameworks that shaped this research project. Guided by an intersectional, decolonial, and arts-based approach, the study prioritised the voices and lived experiences of gender-expansive and migrant sex workers. Each phase of the research, from building reciprocal relationships with the NZPC, to co-designing methods, to conducting Reflexive Thematic Analysis, was underpinned by a commitment to ethical integrity, relational accountability, and authentic representation. While limitations were acknowledged in terms of sample size, community representation, and the emotional and structural complexities of conducting research within marginalised communities, these were addressed reflexively and with transparency. The use of creative and participatory methods opened rich possibilities for meaning making, while also requiring careful attention to power, positionality, and voice.

Findings

Introduction

This chapter is organised into three levels of thematic analysis: individual, community, and structural, or: micro, meso, and macro levels that fall under an overarching theme of “Right to Exist” (see illustrative graphic below). The individual (micro) themes are: *Managing Self*, *Managing Others*, and *Managing Space*. The community (meso) level theme is *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support*, and the final two structural (macro) themes are: *It is Exhausting Being Other*, and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe*. Excerpts from individual interviews and Group Craft Session are distinguished by ‘INT’ (interview) and ‘GCS’ (group craft session) within each excerpt presented in this chapter.

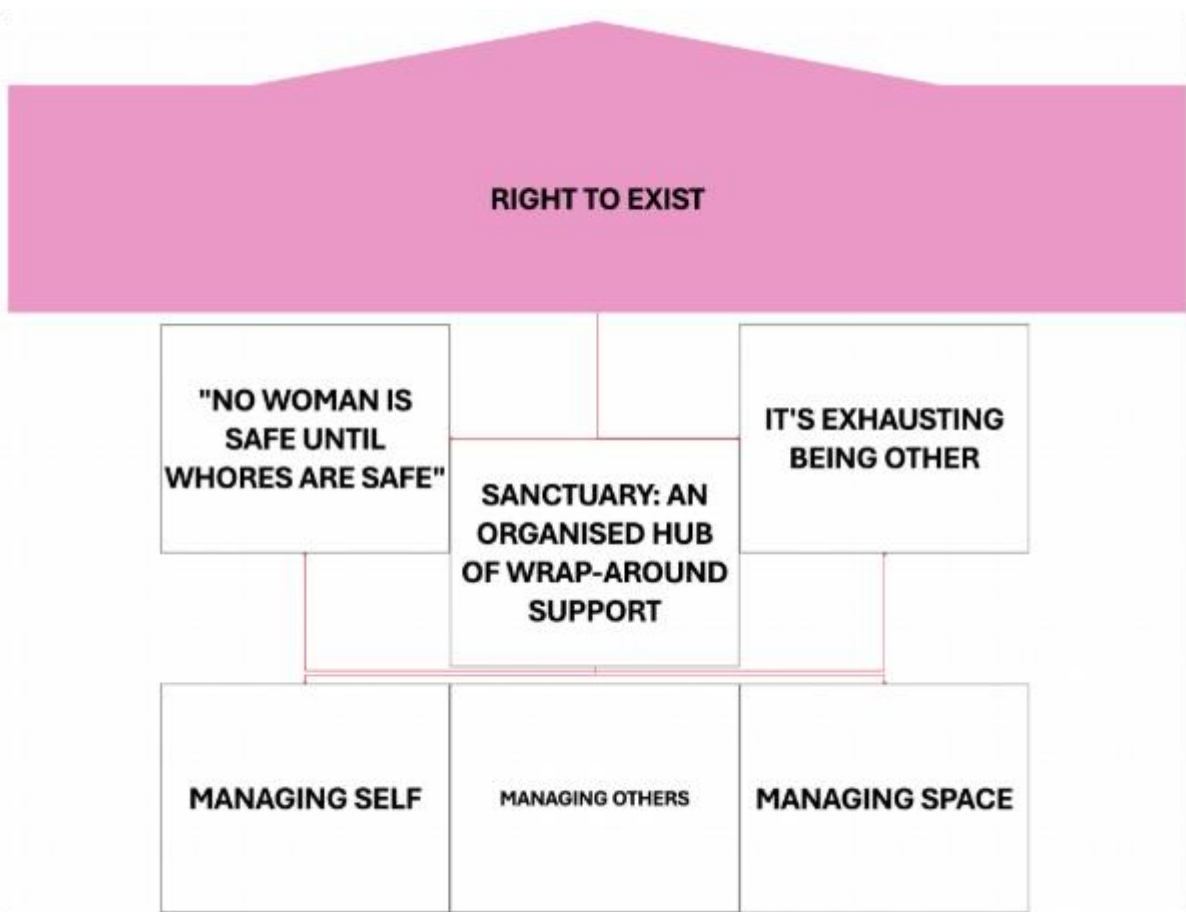


Figure 11: 'Theme Map' graphic, taken from Microsoft White Board.

Micro-Level Themes: Individual Strategies and Agency

Participants shared three ways in which they managed themselves, other people, and their environment. These three themes highlight individual strategies that sex workers must navigate to ensure they can safely engage in their work.

Managing Self: “Listen to your Gut”, Buddying, and Boundary-Setting

Participants discussed how intuition, ‘buddying’, boundary-setting, and profound self-awareness assists them in navigating risk and safety in sex work, as well as to maintain autonomy. For instance, Bubbles discusses how it is essential to “listen to your gut” and to trust this physical, somatic, bodily feeling as a vital safety measure when working:

Bubbles: The risk for us as private workers is they come through our door. We have like, a minute or two, we need to work out if this is gonna be safe or not.

Bonnie: Do like a really quick analysis.

Bubbles: I tell girls, listen to your gut.

Bonnie: Yeah, absolutely. So, is that how you navigate it? It's relying on those kind of gut instincts?

Bubbles: Yeah, and how they speak. I've actually even a couple times I've said, and people have come to my door, and... I've got a funny feeling about them, or they've been drinking or something... I've actually apologised and said, “sorry, I've just got a family emergency... rebook me” ... and then [I] blocked their number. (GCS).

This extended to noticing when you are feeling burned out and need to take a break from work. Jack discusses how he must constantly be aware of how he is feeling, regularly checking in with himself, and evaluating whether he is fit to work:

Bonnie: So, you have to always manage yourself?

Jack: Yeah, basically always have to be aware mentally. Whether you are fine today, you know, and then also planning as well. Like, because I'm studying as well, more like, "can I manage this assignment while doing some work on the side as well, or should I just slow down the business and focus on my assignment?" So, always aware of, basically, lots of things.

Bonnie: Yeah, yeah. Which is, actually, an amazing skill to have. To have that kind of self-awareness.

Jack: That coordination, right? (INT).

Discussions with colleagues at the NZPC highlighted how interoception, a developed 'sixth sense' involving the perception of internal bodily signals such as hunger, pain, and heart rate, is particularly heightened among sex workers, whose work demands a constant state of self and somatic awareness - of 'gut feelings', or "hyper awareness" as Laura reflects:

Laura: You can have bouncers at the club; you can have cameras; you can have panic buttons; you can have, um, other people with you in the room... but you know, men will be men, and there's always the risk... of someone crossing your boundaries and you getting assaulted. So, you have to have that hyper awareness, you know, that, "where is his hands or, is [sic] his pants zipped up?" (INT).

This management of self to keep safe is imperative, particularly for independent workers – Bubbles, for instance, expressed that no worker should work entirely alone, "*you never tell a client that you work by yourself. Ever.*" (INT). To help with working independently, 'buddying' was discussed to manage own safety, particularly for independent workers. Whether the buddy was physically nearby and followed a rigorous protocol, as described by Bubbles and depicted in her artwork, or they were just a phone-call away, as described by Jack, buddying suggested a safety net was in-place, 'just in case'.

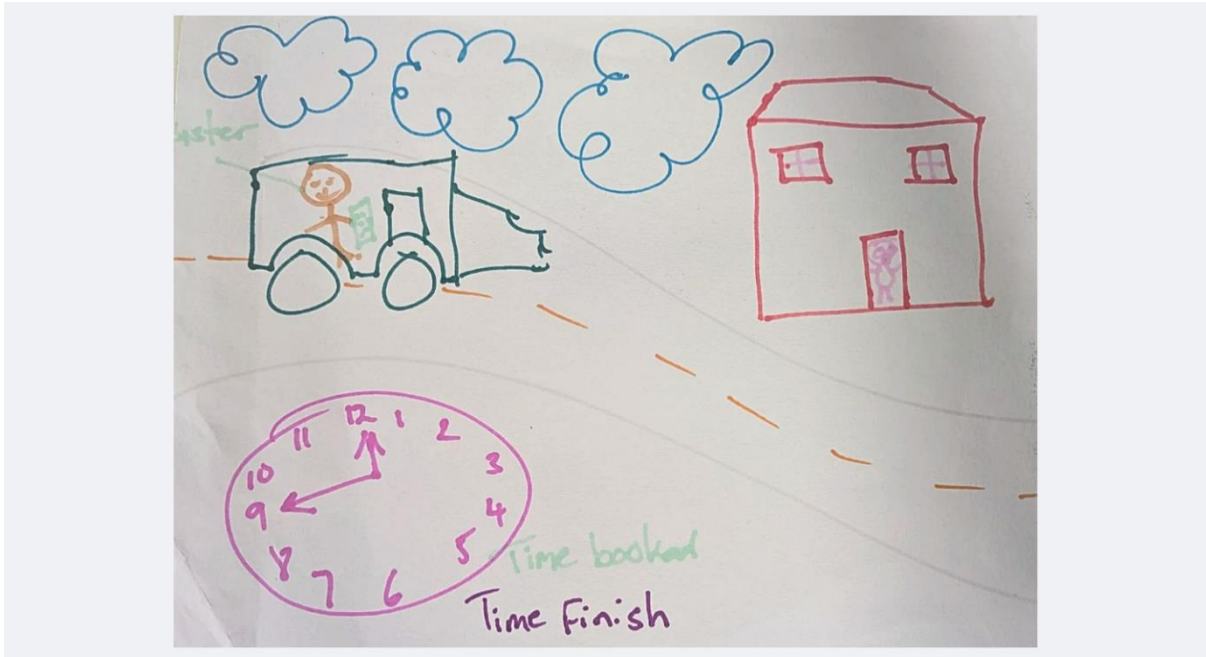


Figure 12: 'What safety means to me' by Bubbles, created in the Group Craft Session.

Bubbles: My [crafted] piece was around my safety when I go on outcalls... I always have a driver now... [explaining her drawing] This is my car, my driver in my car, going to a house, and that person keeps time of my time in the house or motel... Like, when we get there, I text them saying “yes, all good, got money, all good”.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Bubbles: So, they know not to disturb me for at least 50 minutes. Um, when the 50 minutes is up, they'll text me “10 minutes to go”. Then I'll text them “okay”, then I shower, then I say, “on my way out now”. Then they pick me up and take me home. That's what this is all about, it's all about safety. I keep myself safe. Having a driver, giving that driver a time of, um, how long I've been in the room/the house...

Jack: There is like a buddy system online. Sometimes when I'm working alone... I get someone to check me. (GCS).

Interconnected to gut instincts and implementing safety measures, such as buddying, was also establishing solid boundaries. This manifested through participants saying that

they needed to be in control, or “be the boss”; for example, JoJo expresses how she feels like the boss, but this is an unfamiliar experience:

JoJo: [I’m] like a different person when I’m with a client, and like, usually, I remind them of my rights and their rights.

Bonnie: Because there are rules, and it's like the boundaries are very clear, and you said that you feel more powerful... Do you associate [sex work] with an empowering experience?

JoJo: Yeah, I feel like I'm the boss... Like, I'm in control and I know if he do [sic] anything bad, I will just ask him to leave, or I can just call the police. (INT).

JoJo describing how she feels like a different person is reflected in what Bubbles shares about the imperativeness for sex workers to be in control, but how this is an unfamiliar experience for many:

Bubbles: In the room you have to be the boss. I've had to tell a lot of young women. They [the clients] are not the boss, you are. They may be paying you, but you are the boss. You are the one that controls that room, not them. That's the empowering part of sex work, the fact that you are the one in charge, not the client. So, you need to get to grips with you being in charge. And that's why a lot of girls fall down, they don't know how to be authoritative enough. They haven't had enough life experiences to be able to manage that. (GCS).

Jack discusses how boundary setting includes limiting what information you share about yourself with clients and how boundaries can slip when you potentially ignore signs of fatigue and burn-out:

Jack: You have to filter your life a little bit. More like, you have to like, share something similar, but not really you... because you have to separate the activity... There is [sic] one time where, I actually out of character because I was burnt out, and then I just tell [sic] him that, “well, I was on antidepressants”. He tell [sic] me that “yes”, he was on

antidepressants as well. And suddenly, well, he did not book me anymore... I should not do that, you know, I really have to keep that clear line. But there's a time where I was well burned out, and then I cannot separate the two life [sic]. And he share [sic] their life as well. I share a little bit of my life as well, and they... see me not as an object anymore, but as a friend. (INT).

Jack discusses how it is easier to be in control and implement boundaries at work, connecting to JoJo's experiences of, potentially, easier and clearer boundary-setting at work as opposed to outside of work – this is made clear with Jack's experience of work, dating, and 'hook-up culture:

Jack: If you are dating, sometimes you can have an abusive relationship, but in doing sex work, sometimes you just do it for money, but sometimes you have fun as well, and the boundaries is [sic] there every time.

Bonnie: That's like what you were talking about earlier about the boundaries being clearer.

Jack: Because if you're hooking up, sometimes the boundaries are not clear. Sometimes they can take advantage, so be like, "oh, you're on PrEP, I would like to bareback you". I'm okay with that, but sometimes like, I feel like I'm more power [sic] when I'm doing work. Like, I said, "no, you cannot". I've been [sic] hook up, or in relationships sometimes, they just ask you and then just cannot say "no", you know?

Bonnie: So, do you think that when you're working, you feel a bit more in charge?

Jack: Yep. (INT).

Managing Self: Hiding, Expressing, and Navigating Identity

Many people who sell sex protect their identities by creating a 'working name' to minimise risk to their safety from clients, community, friends, and family (Mac & Smith, 2018; Sanders, 2005; Sanders et al., 2025). Identity protection is invaluable (Sanders et

al., 2025), and exposure, or being 'outed', can lead to community stigmatisation and shaming (Mac & Smith, 2018; Petro, 2024). Jack describes below how 'coming out' to his family about his work led them to stop asking him for money, indicating a possibly stigmatising response:

Jack: Your family and friends is [sic] risky sometimes. But basically, my mom [and] my sister, knows [sic] what I do in [redacted], you know [laughs], but they don't want to know. Basically, uh, my mom and sister sometimes, they [sic] proud of me because I make good money in [redacted] and they keep asking me for money two years ago, so I decided to come out to them last year that, well, "just to let you know, that when I was in [redacted], I did a [sic] sex work", and well, they did not ask for money anymore. (INT).

JoJo describes the complex and often precarious navigation of identity politics with clients as a post-operative (post-op) trans woman. She reflects on the narrow boundaries within which she can advertise her services while maintaining her safety, highlighting the serious risks associated with being 'clocked' by clients.

JoJo: For being transgender as well. I told you like; there's this fetish for pre-op trans and that's why they manage to get a lot of work. If I advertised as a post-op trans, I don't get any bookings. I'm not exciting anymore to them [laughs]. Um. Yeah, so I had to advertise as cis girl, and I have to face the risk of that. Um, because some of them, they can become really nasty if they find out. And I've heard from one Indian trans girl, post-op, a client clocked her, and he actually beat her up. So, yeah, um, it is very scary.

Bonnie: Yeah, and really difficult for you with, like having to pull yourself from one box into the other and trying to, like, you want to be yourself and advertise the way you want to advertise, but because of other people...

JoJo: Yeah, for me. Personally, I don't like the word 'trans' because I don't see myself as a trans, I see myself as a female, just a female.

Bonnie: Yeah.

JoJo: Full stop. But like. To tell someone. Um, the journey I've been through and who you are and be comfortable with yourself and that person, it's different. Um, but to be anxious the whole time and worried about many things, like when I'm with a client, even moaning, I'm scared. Maybe he will clock me for the way I moan during sex, and he will realise, "oh, she's actually not a cis girl". Everything like, how we practice sex, it is very scary, I'm like, I don't want to be clocked in any way, just to be safe. So, it's not comfortable. (INT).

Contrastingly, Bubbles talks about how she doesn't need to hide from clients because she is "out and proud", and she reflects that the need to hide and "lie" changes many workers:

Bubbles: I'm who I am.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Bubbles: When I'm with a client, I'm a sex worker... My personality changes slightly because of what the business is, but if it's a regular customer, my personality is out and proud... My identity has never really changed... I didn't have to hide, I think that's what changes people, when you have to hide. Keep up with the lie. (INT).

Despite mixed comfortability levels between participants with sharing their full selves with their family or clients, they all demonstrated a strong self-awareness of their identities; for example, Jack's artwork represents his identity as colourful, fluid, and unfixed - like a jellyfish: gentle in appearance, but capable of delivering a sharp sting.



Figure 13: 'My identity' by Jack, created in the Group Craft Session.

Jack: Basically, it was this jellyfish to represent me. You can see there is the rainbow colour there to represent my identity. I would tend to use a softer colour just to say that, well, I'm soft as well. Yeah, there is something like that [sic] means I also have a side of mine that is, well, can be bitchy, or just, you know, dominate others.

Bonnie: So, there's lots of different sides of you. You're not just one colour.

Jack: Yeah. It's also because, well, I would say, I want as many colours as possible. That's because, well, I was raised in the domestic violence families [sic], and if I remember is [sic], life is kind of a bit dull. So, yeah, I like to colour my life more colourful, you know? (INT).

Knowing oneself and feeling comfortable in one's own skin was reflected by JoJo on her decision to undergo gender-affirming surgery. She described a sense of relief in no longer having to hide certain aspects of herself, and expressed, for the first time, a genuine feeling of happiness and self-acceptance:

JoJo: At some point, I forgot what happiness means because I never been [sic] happy until I got my surgery done. I felt happy for the first time

because I know this is who I am. I can feel comfortable in my own skin now, in my body. (INT).

Similarly to Jack, Bubbles expressed how she doesn't like being put into a box, or defined by one category:

Bubbles: I don't put myself in a box. They may do, clients may put me in a box; I'm large, I'm what they're looking for, but do they put me in a box? I don't know. I don't put myself in a box because I'm a very talented lady, I grow my own vegetables, I'm a sex worker, I'm a social worker, I work here [NZPC], so yes... I wear lots of different hats at different times. I don't actually put myself in one box. I can't do that. That would be very boring [laughs]. (INT).

Discussions on identity also revealed the multifaceted nature of participants' self-concepts; for example, Jack described how sex work has enabled him to explore and cultivate a more dominant aspect of himself - an extension of his earlier jellyfish metaphor - which he finds both personally and professionally useful. This dynamic also extends to the clients he sees, who appear to be 'playing' with different sides of their own identities. Jack expresses some ambivalence about this shift, perhaps reflecting the tension between personal authenticity and the performance of a professionally powerful persona. This tension is particularly significant within a capitalist framework, where certain roles, such as a "CEO", are understood to be powerful positions for powerful identities.

Jack: My family is [sic] no good, you know? I have to be submissive to my father. I had to respect all the elders... Sometimes you will get a client, which [sic] is a powerful man, CEO or upper managers. What they want is being tied up and being flog [sic], and sometimes there is a sense of being in power... You know, I was submissive. I was small before, but now I can dominate someone's [sic] literally, and they are someone that is respect[ed] [by] others, and sometimes there is no other sense of being important than dominating an upper manager, you know?

Bonnie: Yeah, yeah, that's really interesting and I remember, we spoke about it a little bit in the craft session that, um. Lots of people who in

everyday life, I guess, have these very powerful positions. They like to perhaps play with a different side to themselves.

Jack: Yeah, basically, there's no other sense of being important... because, yeah, I always be [sic] a submissive in my life, you know? Being that dominating is something that I found like, hey, I have this side of me that I can dominate others and I feel it's good for me.

Bonnie: Yeah and you feel like that has helped you.

Jack: Basically, sometimes a client wants me be [sic] submissive to them, but then, when I being [sic] submissive and when they know me more as a person, they become a friend, but when someone, like that, like in the power they want to be a submissive ones [sic].

Bonnie: Yeah... in a way you both get to play with different sides?

Jack: Basically, it's like, I thought...it is a place where I can explore myself... sometimes... I have the control. I can be dominant to others. Is something that, well [is] empowering me about that. Yeah, you know, this job is risky, you know, just that sense of power. I can dominate others, and I can explore that side of me where I can dominate others.

Bonnie: Yeah... There's not a lot of other areas where you can access that so raw. I guess so, like, um. So intensely, maybe?

Jack: Yes, it's quite intense. Yeah. Basically, and then, when money and sex involved, is kind of become messy. Yeah, but that is something that I found that. Well, actually, I have that side of me that I can put boundaries there, you know? ... The side of me that people wanting, you know?

Bonnie: [it] kind of... Like, speaks to the more vibrant tentacles [jellyfish painting].

Jack: And then, like, there's like poison things, you know?

Bonnie: Yeah.

Jack: Or like, yep, I have vibrance. I can be poisonous sometimes.

Bonnie: Yeah, so be careful [laughs]. (INT).

Managing Others: Asserting Roles, Rights, and Agency

Just as managing the self was essential, participants also emphasised the importance of managing others, particularly clients and client interactions, to assert control and resist exploitation. This form of relational management often required clear assertion of roles, rights, and boundaries to maintain safety and respect. Bubbles, for example, described how some clients could become aggressive when sessions did not meet their expectations, such as in situations where they were unable to ejaculate or experienced erectile difficulties:

Bubbles: A lot of guys think that because they can't get hard it's our problem, but it's not our problem, it's [their] problem. It's [their] dick... that does happen, that can be a risk for you because then they fought [sic] back on you "you're not doing your job properly" ... A guy can't get hard and that's because they've had too much to drink or they're on drugs... So, he [recent client] was a very nice person because he admitted it was his own fault. A lot of guys don't do that; it's always the girl's fault [both laugh]. (INT).

Challenging clients can be difficult and, at times, may lead to unsafe situations. JoJo reflects on instances where asserting control or challenging a client's behaviour resulted in aggression, highlighting the risks that can arise when power dynamics are disrupted:

JoJo: You know, when someone attack you with, like, telling you bad things about yourself? It will break you. It will hurt you. And then I feel weak. And I feel, like, confused, I don't know what to do. Like sometimes, when some of them don't bring the money, and they said, "oh, I don't have money at this time.", and they don't want to leave. Yeah, like in that moment, I might feel, like, I don't know what to do. I think it's something psychological as well, like, um. I remember a few times, like when clients come and then they said to me, "oh. I didn't want to do it.", and then, I'm like "you came to me, you saw me naked. You have to pay for that, even if you didn't do anything". And they refused to pay, so I just stand by the door and don't let them out until they give me some money.

But sometimes when they start, like, telling me bad things about myself, like “you look ugly, you look fat, you don’t look like your pictures.”, or something like that. It makes me feel bad about myself, and then I feel, like, I don't know what to do. (INT).

Assertion over safety measures is also imperative, such as ensuring condoms are used, which is also the law in Aotearoa New Zealand; however, as Jack explains, sometimes clients attempt to breach that boundary:

Jack: Well, the risk is as male worker... this one customer... he just sit [sic] on my genitalia without condom, and I'm, like, "wow", it should be like a rape, right? But it feels like I just quite shocked... because I was shocked, so I just cannot maintain the erections, you know? He said he wanted to charge me for that. So, I went to NZPC for advice and basically, to my understanding... he was like forcing me. (INT).

Laura described using humour or performative naivety, “acting dumb”, as a strategic way to assert boundaries and challenge clients without direct confrontation. This teasing mode of interaction allowed her to maintain control while playing within, or subtly undermining, client expectations of passivity or compliance. As Bubbles explains toward the end, this style of managing boundary-breaches is crucial for workers’ wellbeing:

Laura: My favourite is like acting, like, dumb, they're [clients] like, “do you watch porn?” I’m like, “what's porn? ... what do you mean? ... Do people do that? Put their genitals in other people's genitals?”

Bonnie: “I thought a stork came with a baby”.

Laura: Exactly, “what do you mean?”. I use that all the time... because in the clubs that I work at... we're not allowed to sell extras and sometimes they're like... “you want me to suck your dick? What's a dick? ... I don't know how to do that, I'm sorry, like?”.

Bonnie: I like that because it's like... these shitty experiences happen but also, like, you can have real fun with them sometimes.

Bubbles: You have to... Um, like, you have a shitty experience, but that cannot become your life. That's that person. You just delete that number. You don't have that person back to see you again because you know, he's not going to behave himself and it's not worth that little bit of money.

In the GCS, participants discussed how adopting a more dominant role with clients could be a source of boundary-setting, assertion, empowerment, and even enjoyment. This playful engagement with power dynamics was framed not only as a professional strategy but also as a means of exploring alternative facets of the self. Within the discussion, the enjoyment and humour were palpable, as participants enthusiastically shared stories of dominating clients and experimenting with power, and challenging racialised perceptions of powerlessness, in ways that blurred the lines between performance, control, and pleasure:

Laura: I refuse to be a Sub and that also ties into the discrimination because I feel like if you were a sub and you are not a woman of colour, then people don't have that inherent racial bias against you, where they think that you're weaker, and you're even more submissive...I'm not putting myself through that, absolutely fucking not. So, I am a Dom at work, um, and I love beating up men. It's my favourite thing to do. I love doing it. I love beating men! Give them to me! [laughter]. Uh, moments of empowerment is like, when you... I love when you have a really stressful week at work and everyone's just getting on your motherfucking nerves, right? And people are so disrespectful, and then you have a guy come in, and he books you to, like, you know, beat him up, and I'm, like, "oh God! Thank you!" And you get the whip out. Obviously with consent, you know. You ask him like what your boundaries are and stuff.

Bubbles: Safe words and all that.

Laura: But yeah, this one week, I was having just... the... one of the roughest weeks at work, and this guy comes in. He was like the most sub of all subs, and he was like "I just want you to beat up my ass" and I was, like, "thank you, I need this!" [starts acting out whipping the client]. "I needed this!" ... And he had a great time. That's what he wanted and that's what I wanted too...

Jack: Basically, I was in a domestic violence families [sic] and then suddenly I am doing a dom job as well. [It] was sometimes fun to see it, you know? The client was a manager or CEO.

Bubbles: They always are.

Jack: And then they just want to be blindfolded and be beat up. And I'm like, "yep". I'm beating up this person that always say something to others and then.

Laura: It's always the CEOs. It's always the bosses.

Jack: I don't know why.

Bubbles: Because of the stress being a CEO. They can't be submissive, that's where it comes from.

Laura: Finance bros must be studied. The number of finance bros who come in and ask me to step on their balls until they pop like...

Bonnie: Wow.

Laura: "Does HR know about this? Does HR know about these fantasies? Mark?"

Bonnie: "Mark!" "John!"

Laura: "Craig!"

Bonnie: "Graham."

Jack: I guess that is the pleasure of not deciding something. Yeah, sometimes it's just fun, you know... Someone's manager on the higher ups now is in your management and you're beating him up. And I feel like, "wow".

Bonnie: And it's for money.

Laura: What could you ask more for? (GCS).

Managing Others: Money Management and Scams

Participants' accounts revealed how money, its value, exchange, and denial, was deeply entangled with broader social perceptions of sex work and the power dynamics within client interactions. A recurring theme was the stereotype of sex work as "easy money," which undermined the legitimacy of the labour involved and contributed to clients treating it as less than real work. This devaluation often manifested in harmful behaviours: clients refusing to pay, demanding sex for free, or even stealing money from workers. Some clients went further, framing sex work itself as a scam, thereby justifying their own exploitative actions. These experiences highlight the ways in which financial disrespect intersects with structural stigma. In response, participants described protective strategies; for example, Jack discusses vetting clients to see if they have been blacklisted, highlighting a form of resistance and boundary enforcement:

Jack: For me safety means, like, taking a reference...

Bonnie: So, reference, you mean like a good client reference?

Jack: Yeah.

Bonnie: So, from other workers?

Jack: Yes.

Bubbles: Some of our sites have like a blacklist. (GCS).

Some clients viewed sex work as a scam in and of itself, revealing underlying discriminatory attitudes. As JoJo and I discuss below, this perception appeared to stem from prejudice and a belief that sex should be freely available, rather than paid for:

JoJo: Because they don't see sex work as a real job.

Bonnie: Yeah.

JoJo: So, like, they don't respect your time, they don't respect the way you are surviving in life and how you make money. Um, for them, just an [sic] easy money you are making.

Bonnie: Yeah.

JoJo: And they feel like they are entitled to have sex with you, but they shouldn't pay for it and that's why, like, for [redacted] clients as example. Because they pay you, they think they are entitled to do anything they want with you, so they become very forceful, they want to do sex with no protection, um. Want to do many things, even if you don't provide them, and they can be very pushy about it as well. And some of them. If you refuse to do what they want, they become a bit aggressive. They might ask you to give them the money back. Yeah, so yeah, that's many things.

Bonnie: Yeah, yeah, and interesting that money is, like, kind of like a theme here in that either they refuse to pay it because they think it's a scam, or because they're paying for something, they think they can abuse it. (INT).

Similarly, some clients resort to stealing money, a risk that, as Bubbles reflects, increases significantly during outcalls, where workers may have less control over the environment:

Bubbles: Risk to me is, um, money, okay. Like, you know, um, if you're on an outcall, if they don't pay you enough, the risk is, um, they've taken all your money, and you get like, I always get money up front.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Bubbles: There's a risk, um, that you have to, because your risk of not doing that, they're not going to pay you. Okay, so it's always up front first, but when you're in a motel, you've got nowhere to put your money but in your purse. Okay, so that's a risk you have to take that, um, the client can, um, pin you down or get angry with you and take your money.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Bubbles: But under the law, though, you can bring the police in. But a lot of girls probably won't do that because a lot of family members don't know what they're doing. I would [laughs] not a problem. (INT).

In JoJo's view, there was a pervasive assumption among clients that the money earned through sex work was not taken seriously, treated more like play-money than legitimate income. This perception appeared to reflect the broader belief that sex work is not a 'real job,' in part because the earnings are seen as 'easy':

JoJo: Many clients have said to me it's "easy money". I say, "it is not an easy money".

Bonnie: Yeah.

JoJo: It's a full-time job. I have to do washing. I have to keep, like, keeping track [sic] for my health and these things and provide condoms, lube, everything. It's a full-time job. And I have to be ready mentally for it.

Bonnie: Yeah.

JoJo: It's not easy.

Bonnie: You're navigating a hell of a lot.

JoJo: Yeah. But for them it's an easy job, easy money.

Bonnie: Yeah.

JoJo: Um, because they don't get the full picture. Um. Yeah. Um. Some of them are very understanding. But yeah, mostly they think it easy money. Last week, one of the clients I had, he said to me, "easy money, hey?". I said, "no, it's a full-time job", and he said, "no judgment, you know, if I was a girl, I would do the same". (INT).

Managing Others: The "Free Drugs?" Trap

Drugs and alcohol featured prominently in discussions about managing others, particularly in relation to challenging client assumptions that substance use is common among sex workers. Laura, for instance, spoke about how many clients offer her drugs for free - a tempting trap, she explained, but one she is determined to avoid:

Laura: So, um, personally... I can't drink large amounts of alcohol, so I've stayed sober my entire career. Um, but that's a trap that a lot of girls fall into. It's way easier to talk to strangers when you've had a bit of alcohol in you. So, there's the risk of that, and then you know it's all free because the customers will get it and so it's like, why not have five shots of tequila if they're free, you know? And you fall into that trap, and... it's really fun, you know, just to get drunk at work... there's the risk of alcohol. There's obviously also drugs, so a lot of customers, they're on crack, they're on meth, they're on coke, MD. Everything under the sun, ketamine, uh, weed, and so they often bring these substances into the club, and sometimes they really... pressure you into doing it, or they really want you to do it, or like, you know, you could just have this for free, you know "have this gram for free". So, it's again, like, that's another risk of the industry. (INT).

Jack also spoke about this "trap." As the only male sex worker in the study, he offered a unique perspective on navigating risk and safety within sex work, particularly in relation to the LGBTQIA+ community and the specific contexts faced by gay men. As he explains below, chemsex is relatively common among gay men, including within sex work. While Jack does not use drugs himself, he expressed an understanding of why many others do:

Jack: I think this job is empowering, but in [sic] the same time I can understand as well why in some research before for NZPC, it said that sixteen percent of the male workers are on drugs, and yeah, I can understand why. I'm not taking drugs. But yeah, I can understand why because sometimes afterwards just feel... Uh, the happiness of the sex can become more dull after a time. More like you do it because you got to do it. Not because it's just for pleasure...

Bonnie: You can understand why other people, other workers are taking the drugs, um, is it because it helps with the job?

Jack: Yeah, that's because sex is something that is very fun, right? But then, if you do it over and over... You kind of feel tired of it. So, I can understand why for some males, they just need to have the drugs because it's something that keeping them happy and then energetic, you know? But yeah, I'm not using it, you know, but yeah, I can understand why. Because when I was busy, I had to, like, uh, I think "I'm not going to work anymore for next week. I just want to turn that person down". Yeah, cause this job itself is, well, when the business is good, it's good, but this week is bad, you know? You just don't know what will [sic] the world give you for this week and next week. It's always like that. (INT).

JoJo spoke about instances where clients offered drugs as a form of payment, rather than money. This practice not only reflected a lack of respect for her labour but also reinforced harmful assumptions about drug use in sex work:

JoJo: Many clients will offer drugs as a payment, and they just assume that every working girl is a drug addict, which is not true... This is the really scary thing... Personally, I never seen drugs before in my life, 'till here with clients when they take them out of their bags and start like doing drugs in front of me, and that was very scary because I've never seen that before. (INT).

Managing Space: Working from Home, Outcalls, and Brothels

Participants discussed how they created or adapted physical and emotional spaces for safety. This was reflected in their varied working environments, including working from home, doing outcalls, and working in brothels. Feeling safe while at work was essential and often contributed to broader feelings of safety in everyday life and in Aotearoa New Zealand more generally. JoJo, for example, shared that as a refugee, she does not “feel safe in general in New Zealand,” highlighting how the navigation of safety within sex work is deeply entangled with broader experiences of marginalisation, migration, and systemic insecurity.

Bubbles discussed how she managed space and safety by carefully organising the layout of her home in ways that help mitigate risk:

Bubbles: I've been very fortunate with my houses that, um... no one can see the actual house itself inside... so they can't see what I've got, what I have there. So, then they can't come back to burgle me because they have no idea how the house is set up. I've kept that separate so no one can see my house.

Bonnie: So, like, the physical spaces?

Bubbles: Yeah, like, my first house in [redacted], um, the back door came into like the wash house then straight into a hallway into the bedroom and bathroom. They couldn't see the kitchen, the kitchen had a sliding door, and a connected lounge, and it was all closed off and the house now, um, I don't even give out my house number. I give them directions to around the back of the house... they come to my door; into a sunroom to my bedroom into a bathroom. So, they don't get to see anything but me and my bedroom. (GCS).

Working alone presents significant risks, and JoJo reflected on the need to create a sense of security by lying to clients, such as claiming someone else is in the house, or setting up security measures, even if these are fake, and relying on clients believing her:

JoJo: Yeah, but when you work for yourself, they don't really take you serious.

Bonnie: Unless you've got lots of money to hire a bouncer on the door [laughs].

JoJo: Um, I used to lie to clients like they asked me, "are you alone?"

Bonnie: Yeah.

JoJo: I tell them "the security next door" [laughs] and I bought some fake cameras to scare them as well [laughs]. Like, yeah, once they enter, they can see there is cameras, but it's all fake [laughs].

Bonnie: But they don't know that [laughs]. (INT).

Some spaces were experienced as unsafe precisely because they were unfamiliar. This was a particular concern with outcalls, where sex workers often entered environments they had never been in before, limiting their ability to anticipate or control potential risks:

Bubbles: That's the first thing that popped in my mind was how I keep myself safe on outcalls. It's how I keep myself safe because everything else to me, because I've been in the industry so long, like wearing condoms, blah, blah, blah, that's just all basic shit for me now, but outcalls are different because... I don't do a lot of outcalls, so I have to keep myself safe on those outcalls. You're not at home, you're not secure on your own premises, you're in somebody else's house or somebody else's room. So yes, lots of things can happen. (INT).

Spaces can be created outside the home; for example, in brothels, however, participants described both positive and negative experiences of brothel environments, suggesting that safety is always a compromise, where some risks are mitigated while others may be exacerbated.

Jack: The reason why I an [sic] independent worker, that's because, uh, when I was working in [redacted] before, the manager was very, they just, he just take [sic] everyone, so no screening. And then sometimes I get a difficult clients [sic], and it is something that I don't want to do. You know, that's why I do, uh, when I just had to come back to [indistinguishable] as independent first, and see how it goes because sometimes your manager, you don't, the manager is not you. Sometimes accidentally, or purposely, you will get the clients that is [sic] very hard. Very hard very demanding, and then also, if you're working with like [sic] abroad or something, sometimes, you have less control of your life as well. More like, you have a booking, you finish, and fifty minutes later, you have a client. Sometimes it's just too much. (INT).

JoJo discusses bullying in brothels as an additional risk, highlighting both internalised whorephobia and the dynamics of the whorearchy:

JoJo: Um. Yeah, so from two or three shifts there [at the brothel] I gained regulars. Yeah, so [colleagues] start, like, to spread rumours about me, "she's trans", "she used to be a boy", things like that...

Bonnie: Oh wow, so, the brothel management itself, was actually really good for you, but... the other workers were not.

JoJo: Yeah. And again, the sad thing it was from, like, women of colour. (INT).

In that same brothel, JoJo also experienced discrimination from management:

JoJo: I had some bad comments from some clients, but the manager was good like to deal with that, um. She was very protective. Um, but she was a brown woman. The white manager, she was very aggressive with me, and she wanted me to out myself, and she was, like, “no, I need to know if you are trans”. The owner, when they heard about that experience, they said, “okay, you can do the other shift, so you don't have to do this one”, and I was like, “that's it”, they won't do anything to her, but I realised I think she's a friend to them. (INT).

Reflecting on this experience, JoJo decided it was safer to work independently from home rather than in the brothel; however, this choice involved compromising certain aspects of her safety:

JoJo: The only thing is that there is security, there's other people, so if a client is being aggressive or something, um, you will be protected by those people. But yeah, like I was, like, “okay, I feel like it's safer for me to do it. Um, from my place”, yeah. And just keep the whole money [laughs]. (INT).

This section has presented the micro-level themes of the analysis: *Managing Self*, *Managing Others*, and *Managing Space*. Within these themes, participants described experiences that impacted them on an individual, everyday level, where sex work involved the constant navigation of safety and risk. Participants spoke of the need to regularly check in with themselves, remain ‘hyper-aware,’ trust their somatic instincts, set boundaries, and monitor signs of burnout. They also explored the multiple layers of their identities and how these intersected with power dynamics and performances of power.

Managing Others involved ensuring that boundaries were respected and that their work was recognised as legitimate. Participants described ongoing prejudice and disrespect from clients who did not perceive sex work as ‘real work,’ often resulting in scams, theft, and demands for free sex. Finally, participants reflected on how they managed space to protect their safety in various working environments. This included difficult trade-offs between working independently from home or in brothels, with each setting offering different risks and forms of control.

In short, risk and safety for the participants involved constant negotiation and compromise, shaping their everyday experiences, from micro-interactions to major decisions about their work. These themes also revealed the central role of identity: how identity is experienced and expressed in sex work, how it intersects with everyday life, and how it mediates interactions with others and broader societal structures.

Meso-Level Theme: Community and Collective Support

Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support

Participants discussed how the NZPC and other support systems play an essential role for both individuals and the broader sex work community. These organisations were described as offering a ‘family-like’ sense of connection, providing safe spaces, affirming identity, and contributing to overall wellbeing. Collective care was a key theme, illustrating how structural harm could be mitigated and resistance to discrimination fostered through solidarity and support.

When asked whether her understanding of risk and safety in sex work had changed over her career, Bubbles emphasised the vital role her family had played in keeping her safe. This underscored the importance of having a strong, family-like support network - whether biological, chosen, or community-based - to ensure safety and resilience in the face of systemic challenges:

Bonnie: Over those 24 years, has your understanding of risk and safety changed much?

Bubbles: No, no, because I suppose... I was a bit mature when I started, so I've had things happen to me in my own personal life... and my dad made sure I was safe.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Bubbles: My father did. Having panic buttons in the house and things like that. So, yeah. So, he understood what men are, like.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Bubbles: So, yeah, he says, "if you're gonna do it, you gonna do it properly, and I want you to be safe".

Bonnie: That's really interesting because I think that's the first time I've heard of family being so supportive. That's quite unique.

Bubbles: It is. I am so blessed with my friends and my family.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Bubbles: But they all thought it would be something, six months or less that I was going through, but to continue doing it 24 years later, I don't think any of my friends or my family thought I'd be doing it this long. Not even me.

[Both laugh].

Bonnie: But amazing that from the beginning, you've had that support.

Bubbles: Yeah. I'm very lucky. (INT).

Later, Bubbles reflected that her confidence and self-assurance stemmed from the influence of her father:

Bonnie: You own yourself so much... where do you think that comes from?

Bubbles: Dad. My dad.

Bonnie: Your dad? Wow.

Bubbles: For sure... My submissive side is mum, my get up and go side is my dad. If he wanted to do something he'd do it. He got his own home,

built boats, he was a mechanic, he had no actual skills, but he had lots of skills. He had no certificates for those skills, but he had hundreds of skills. So, yeah, that comes from him. I'm so pleased he was proud of me before he passed away. I went back to school and started my degree. That's what made me finish my degree, was my dad. (INT).

For many participants, 'coming out' to family about their sex work was not possible, effectively removing an essential source of support. In the absence of familial acceptance, the NZPC was frequently described as fulfilling that role, offering a sense of belonging, safety, and solidarity. The Collective was spoken of as an 'essential family,' underscoring just how vital the NZPC is to the sex work community. This is particularly poignant given current threats of defunding to public health (RNZ, 2025).

JoJo expressed that Aotearoa New Zealand did not feel safe for her more broadly, due to her experiences as a Middle Eastern refugee, a woman of colour, and someone who has faced transphobia. In contrast, the NZPC provided a rare space of affirmation and safety, countering much of the marginalisation she experienced elsewhere:

JoJo: Coming here to the centre [NZPC] is very nice for me. Like, I always feel safe here and supported, um, even like when I had some struggles with, like housing, and these things, they provide a lot of support. Yeah. So, it's my safe place at the moment. Like, sometimes, I like to come here just to hang out. And, yeah, if I feel like I want to be surrounded by people. (INT).

Later, JoJo spoke about the legal support she received from the NZPC, highlighting how the Collective provides wrap-around support for sex workers across multiple areas:

JoJo: Even like in terms of legal stuff and things like that, like, I remember the rape incident. When that happened, and the police didn't help, and they were actually mean. Um, I came here [NZPC], and they provided a lawyer who I met here, but after that, like with all of the stress and these things, I decided to drop the case. (INT).

The NZPC provides vital healthcare support for the sex work community. However, Laura emphasised the need for these services to be more accessible and culturally informed, drawing on both her personal experiences and her awareness of the high proportion of

Asian sex workers in Auckland. During the interview, she referred to a specific community, which has been redacted here to protect her and others:

Laura: Safety is, um... Making sex work healthcare like accessible, and um. You know, like I would say, like, culturally informed, because that's a huge reason why I actually started volunteering here [at NZPC] is because fifty percent of the sex workers in Auckland, I think [from] my memory... are [Asian].

Bonnie: Yeah.

Laura: Which is huge. We don't even make up like ten percent of the population. You know, so having fifty percent just in Auckland alone is huge... we have someone here [at NZPC] in Auckland that can speak [redacted], you know, but we don't have people who are able to actually even be able to speak to these workers, you know, a lot of the time.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Laura: I don't know what the other NZPC centres are like, but like, that's a huge issue, because that's a huge demographic of our population that's not been given the care. And also, like, the Asian communities are really conservative. Advice that you would give an Asian sex worker probably could not apply like, [to] other sex workers. The type of racism and discrimination we face is different. Um, so safety in terms of that community would be hiring more people who can speak other languages, hiring more women of colour who have been sex workers, or who can translate, you know, um, informing other people who work in public health and social services what it is like to be a woman of colour, and a sex worker, or a migrant as a sex worker, because the way you would have to approach those workers is different. That's the thing that I think is severely lacking, but I think that, like, we have to be honest and we have way [bigger] fish to fry than that, in the sense that, like NZPC already has to cut their hours down to four days instead of five days because of lack of funding. (INT).

Speaking to the inequities in access to spaces and resources such as the NZPC, Laura reflected on the limited availability of NZPC services across the country:

Laura: I'd hate to make assumptions, but you know, there's a real risk if you are [in] ass-fuck nowhere in New Zealand and you are a sex worker and you will go and get, you know, public healthcare, they're probably not going to be super well informed on what your job is like. That's a huge issue, and that speaks to a wider issue of, you know, rural and regional healthcare, I guess you could say, and the current government, hell bent on destroying our public health systems. (INT).

This section has presented the meso-level theme: *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support*. This theme acts as a bridge between the micro- and macro-levels of analysis, highlighting how participants' everyday experiences are shaped by broader systemic and cultural forces. At the meso level, participants recognised the importance of 'family-like' support systems in providing safety, care, and identity affirmation. For many sex workers, such support exists outside of biological family structures and is instead found within community networks. This was most clearly represented through the sex work community itself, and most prominently through the NZPC, which serves as a vital hub of wrap-around support.

Participants described the NZPC's support as going above and beyond, extending across healthcare, housing, employment, food access, and legal assistance. The organisation was frequently portrayed as a foundational, even lifesaving, presence within the sex work community. Many participants expressed deep concern that the NZPC's capacity could be severely compromised by current public health funding cuts in Aotearoa New Zealand. Laura, for instance, voiced these fears while also calling for the NZPC to continue evolving, particularly by expanding culturally informed services to better reflect the diversity of the sex worker community.

Macro-Level Themes: Structural Forces and Systemic Risk

Participants discussed how intersecting identities; for example, migrant and gender-expansive, shaped experiences of marginalisation, highlighting emotional and embodied impacts of "othering". Moreover, systemic issues surrounding unsafe working conditions were contested and calls for institutional and legal change were made to improve the working conditions for sex workers, which would ultimately benefit all of society.

It is Exhausting Being Other: Challenging Asian Stereotypes

Laura discusses her frequent experiences of racism as an Asian woman, which she often confronts, thereby demonstrating resistance to both racism and discrimination. She articulates the emotional and psychological toll of not only embodying an Asian identity in a racialised society but also of continually challenging discriminatory practices. This section is particularly poignant, containing numerous powerful and significant statements from participants that underscore the profound exhaustion associated with regularly encountering both direct and indirect, as well as intergenerational, forms of discrimination.

Laura: Yeah, I had a guy, he booked me. He was very, very, very shy, very, very quiet... He had a thing for Asian women, and he straight up told me, "I like Asian women". Like, you know, yeah, and I was, like, "okay, well, have you ever been with an Asian woman?", he's like, "no". "Okay, well, have you ever been on a date with an Asian woman?", "no", "have you had sex with an Asian woman?", "no", "so, where do you get this assumption from Asian women?". He's, like, "well, I just see, you know, a lot of times, like Asian women, like they're in relationships with, you know, non-Asian men, and they're really happy". And all that, I was, like, "okay", but again, like, "do you live in their house?", "do you know what they're like?", "do you know what their kids think about them?", "do you know what their friends think about them?", "do you know what their family thinks about them?", "no, no, no", "so you don't actually know what Asian women are like". "You just have this assumption that's been told to you by porn, by the media, by those guys because..." ... The fact that, like, if you meet someone and then their Asian wife is real submissive, Asian wife don't want to talk to you, but the guy goes on and on fucking on about, "oh, my wife, she cooks and cleans for me, she sucks my dick, she wakes up in the morning, my breakfast is cooked, my house is clean, my kids are fed, like, she does everything". Like, [pause], do you think that woman is happy? Because I certainly don't think so. If I had to wake up in the morning, suck my man's dick and make him breakfast, and then go to my full-time job, and take care of my kids, and clean my house, make sure I look spotless, like, absolutely fuck that [Bonnie laughs]. You know what I mean? [laughs] Like, fuuuuuuck that, you know. And then, she's not speaking to you, like, don't you feel like you're getting a very biased, like, one-sided opinion of what this relationship is like?

Bonnie: Yeah

Laura: And it was nice because I feel like I was the first one to be able to, like, talk sense into him and be like, “realistically, looking at me like, in the way I speak to and the way I act, like, do you think I'm gonna do all that for you?”

Bonnie: Yeah.

Laura: No, I'm not. The same way the majority of Asian women, if you ask us, like, no, we're not going to do that for you [laughs]. Um, yeah, there are some Asian women that will do that and unfortunately, a reason, a really big reason why is because, well, you know, poverty, visas, citizenship, economic conditions, social conditioning, like, we are not born being like, “you know what we want? We want indentured servitude in the form of romantic relationships”. (INT).

Jack also reflects on the stereotype of Asians as submissive, noting that he feels compelled to assert dominance in order to ensure his boundaries are respected:

Jack: If the client is sometimes [redacted], I just feel like, they thought that I can accept everything. Yeah, more like they have this fantasy of Asian male as well. That is well, submissive. Every time I have to dominate, dominating them a little bit, you know, just to know that I'm the one in charge in this...

Bonnie: So, they come in with this assumption that because you're Asian, you're going to be super docile?

Jack: Yeah, also trying to always say, “no, I don't want to do that”. (INT).

During the GCS, I asked Laura to elaborate on what she meant by the phrase “it is exhausting being Asian” - a statement that ultimately inspired the theme title for this section. Her response was particularly powerful and merits being quoted in full. In her monologue, Laura addresses the enduring legacy of historical racism and its entrenchment in contemporary society. She highlights the intergenerational nature of racism and describes how she continues to suffer the consequences of events that occurred before her time. Her account is visceral, evocative, and provocative, offering profound insight into the realities of racism, particularly anti-Asian racism and xenophobia:

Laura: Okay, let's just speak in the context of New Zealand, right? I have so much shit to say about this... Um, we have always been seen as outsiders... We have never been seen as New Zealanders... [There is this] baseline hatred for [Asian] people in this country. We are seen as dirty. We are seen as only worthy of low paying jobs. Um, we are seen as, well back in the day, we were seen as drug addicts, um, we were seen as outsiders not able to integrate into New Zealand society.

Bubbles: Asians weren't the ones taking drugs, it was Europeans.

Laura: Your bitches brought this shit into [redacted], right, and then blamed us right after you force it on us... World War II happened, right? You have all these white soldiers and military personnel going into, uh, Vietnam, Vietnam War, going to Korea, the Korean War, going um into Japan for World War II. What are they doing? They're taking these women who are destitute, who have no way to feed themselves and their families, right? Because obviously, right, the ideal scenario for every sex worker is that... You don't want to be pressured to go into any job. The ideal for society is that we all have a lot of options if you choose the one that speaks to us because that's how society fucking works... So, the whole Asian stereotype of Asian women being submissive comes from war. It comes from war. It comes from the fact that Europeans just came to our country, desecrated everything, killed all the men, ruined the society, we have nothing fucking left, so what have we been doing since the start of time? Selling sex. You got kids to feed. You got food to put on the table, got bills... you have these women who are in destitute conditions who are willing to do anything, right? So, they provide sexual services, but not only just the sexual service that you will find back home, they're willing to do stuff that other women wouldn't be willing to [do]. They were willing to work in conditions that other women would not be willing to... So now you have this stereotype of like the Exotic Asian Wom[a]n willing to do everything for you willing to be submissive for you... you have the men who come into these countries, no fucking understanding how the culture works, saying, "oh well, this is a patriarch society". No, it's fucking not... Traditionally, women... are not submissive to husbands at all. They, in fact, have full control of the households' finances. They give their husbands an allowance right. You have to pay a price just to be able to... be considered for the option of marriage... So, the stereotype of our culture... Nope. Wrong. Absolutely fucking wrong... Ever since World War II, you've got this stereotype right.

And it gets passed from grandfather to father, to son, and now here we are, right? ... Soldiers come back with their Asian wives... who never get taught English. [They] don't have any society to fucking integrate with, right? So, there's a study, I remember this study I read about after World War II, New Zealand soldiers bringing home their new Japanese wives, and who they treated like shit. They treat[ed] like indentured servants, right? Well, what do you do? Go back to Japan? There's fucking nothing. Of course... they're going to do everything you say. You got no fucking option. You got your kids here too... And now... there's the rise of porn... how we are portrayed in pornography, and it just goes on and on and on and on and fucking on... It's just generation upon generation... bullshit, right?... We're sitting here and now, it affects [me], and it's like, "wow", because of a war that I had no fucking say in, because of a war that... my ancestors got killed in... here you [client] sit in front of me, telling me I should be submissive to you? Fuck you. (GCS).

It is Exhausting Being Other: Section 19 Endangers Everyone

The participants shared thoughts on the impact of migrants on sex work. Firstly, Bubbles discusses the vulnerability of migrants “on visas”, particularly those who are non-English speaking, and the risks they face such as deportation and exploitation from clients.

Bubbles: Other migrants, especially the ones on visas, they are so vulnerable. It doesn't matter what size, what age, whatever they are, they're on visas, they're really vulnerable... They still have rights in this country. They might not be the greatest rights, but they still have rights for their own safety and stuff. In some other countries, they'd probably get arrested and put in jail. They'd never get arrested, they might get deported, but they'd never get arrested, and they can still fight their deportation thing, in other countries, they wouldn't be able to fight that. So yeah, but they are very vulnerable.

Bonnie: And when you say vulnerable?

Bubbles: Clients will take advantage of them. That's why you don't tell them your story. Don't say where you're from, just say New Zealand. Don't say you're on a visa because you're just opening yourself up for a

lot of stress... Just say you were born in this country. Have a little research on where you were born.

Bonnie: Like a cover story?

Bubbles: Yeah. And speak some English. That's why a lot of migrants get themselves into trouble because they don't speak English. If you're gonna stay in this country, learn to speak English... at least the basics, so they can get away with that. Learn your story in English, sound it, so that people think "maybe she's not a migrant, maybe she's born here". (INT).

Jack highlights how this vulnerability is a lived reality for him and the impact of being a migrant, a sex worker, and speaking English as a second language. Jack discusses having his visa status questioned and receiving threats from clients.

Jack: The discrimination in the [sic] sex working more like if your English is not good enough. Some client will take advantage of you straight away...

Bonnie: Yeah, so people hear your voice, or um, can tell that English is not your first language, and they use that?

Jack: Basically, you cannot change accents. You can just improve your English here. You can a little bit, because yeah, you cannot change your life straight away, you know? This is my second language. There is nothing gonna change that. My accent will not change. And yeah, basically, yeah, sometimes in the [sic] sex working, if you're a migrant and then, your English is not good enough... people take advantage of you. (INT).

JoJo discusses how the vulnerability of non-resident migrants to exploitation can, in turn, endanger all workers within the industry. JoJo goes on to describe how clients have picked up on this vulnerability and exploit the precarious conditions migrant sex workers are forced to navigate.

JoJo: It puts us in danger because these girls who are working on the wrong visa, they don't know their rights and when they face any problems, they won't, like, involve the police, um, because they are doing something illegal. Um, and they think because they face a lot of problems with clients and clients think "oh", like, they can do the same to any other girl. Like, this guy who attacked me last Friday, I'm sure, like, he [sic] seen girls and done that before and he thought, um, I couldn't call the police, and I remember a few clients before, when I told them "I'm gonna call the police", they didn't care because they thought, um, I would be scared to call the police.

Bonnie: Yeah, or you're bluffing or something?

JoJo: Yeah, so this is the only thing I'm thinking about, like they lose their rights. Therefore, they put other girls in danger. (INT).

It seems to me that concerns about migrant sex work are a result of the legal discrimination rendered by Section 19: a two-tier system that endangers all sex workers. Furthermore, this system produces precarious conditions that clients themselves can exploit and forces all sex workers to navigate this uneven landscape lest they fall through the cracks carved out by Section 19.

It is Exhausting Being Other: Different Experiences of Discrimination and the Urgency of Intersectionality

In the GCS, participants discussed varied experiences of discrimination, each shaped by the specific and intersecting aspects of their marginalised identities. Additionally, the group shared both the challenges they face and the ways in which they resist such discrimination:

Jack: My manager was [redacted]. It was my first time working overseas, English is my second language. He said that I was stupid.

Laura: That's fucked especially coming from another person of colour...

Jack: He did not do much about my break, so I'm working seven days a week [sic]. Sometimes he was booking me with difficult clients... where's the screening, you know? That's why I prefer to be independent

because I can choose my clients, and if I do make mistake [sic], that is my mistake. It's not because someone has control over me...

Bubbles: I've been discriminated against because I'm large. I love being large. I put it back on them. I think that's my age... reversing things. And that guy who rings me and abuses me - cops can't do nothing because he just switches phones...

Laura: I've been discriminated against because I'm Asian. Um, because I have a foreign accent. Um, get people all the time (especially if you're an Asian woman). You get like real fucked people with, like racial fetishes, "oh Asian women, they're so submissive". I feel like you are more [at] risk of assault when you're an Asian woman in this industry.

[group agreeing].

Laura: Cause people assume that you're weaker. People assume that you can take more abuse and people assume that you don't fight back.

Bubbles: And you do!

Laura: And we do, we really do, and I make them learn the hard way...

Bubbles: My size has helped me in that way because they see me and there's no way they can turn me round and do things to me. I've put guys on the floor because they've misbehaved. And I said, "I'll give you one more chance, if you misbehave again then you're out the door". But yes, I'm very firm with clients. Like, I start off being very nice, but if they do something stupid, that changes very fast.

Bonnie: So, it sounds like there's been these experiences, but the strategy to kind of deal with [them]... it is actually quite positive.

Bubbles: It has to be otherwise you can't be in this industry. You're just going to get yourself very badly hurt. Or it's going to screw up your head, so you need to find a way to work through people that turn up and want to do things that you don't want to do. You just got to say "no". That's something that I do like teaching young girls here [NZPC]... So many think it's an easy job, it's not easy.

[Group agrees]. (GCS).

JoJo described experiencing discrimination as a woman, which intersected with multiple aspects of her identity, including her skin colour, migrant status, ethnicity, and gender expression. These intersecting layers compounded the discrimination she faced, particularly manifesting in the form of misogyny from clients. This led me to reflect on the broader, often unexamined forms of misogyny that exist across many societies, particularly those that hinge on rigid and exclusionary notions of femininity. Such thinking raises troubling questions like “who is feminine enough?” or “who qualifies as a woman?”, and highlights how transmisogyny, such as that expressed by Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs), reinforces patriarchal ideals that ultimately harm all women. These gendered expectations are historically contingent and socially constructed, yet they continue to produce real consequences for those who do not, or cannot, conform.

JoJo: [Some clients] are very rude, disrespectful, and treat you like “I paid for this, so I'm entitled to have anything I want”. Um, they can be forceful. Um, they can say mean things and make you feel bad about yourself. If you don't fit in their standards, they will make you feel bad about yourself. They will give you bad comments, “oh, your boobs are small”, or “why are your vagina like that?”, or um, or “you have like dark skin? Why your skin looking like that?”. “Why you have these stretch marks? Why you have these scars?”. Yeah, they want you to be like a plastic thing...

Bonnie: Yeah, but it's an impossible game, right?...

JoJo. It is impossible. I remember one client. He said to me, “there is something different about you”. After we had sex, I said to him, “what?” and he said, “you have some masculine energy”.

Bonnie: Yeah, you mentioned this last time.

JoJo: Yeah, I said “is it good or bad?” And he was like, “actually, it's good”. I said “okay” [laughs].

Bonnie: And that's the thing, isn't it? It's like, I mean, one, what does that even mean and two, like, that particular person sees that and likes it, but

then the next person might see it and hate it, and so it's just this kind of impossible standard. It's like a made-up standard. Nobody... knows it. Nobody can reach it. (INT).

The impossible standards and stereotyping imposed by clients reflect both racialised and misogynistic fetishes that are deeply harmful and dangerous. Laura highlights this dynamic and discusses how she actively challenges and resists such expectations in her interactions with clients:

Laura: No one who's mentally well has racial fetishes. That's a firm belief of mine, right? Because when you, like, just for example, Asian fetishes, right? If you want a woman who never talks back to you, is always submissive to you, like, ... will do everything for you, like, you got problems, my guy, because you don't want a normal functioning adult relationship. What do you lack that's causing you to feel like this is what you need in your life? So, you know, one positive experience is sometimes I get these guys, and they're like "I want Asian women" because I had this guy recently, he was, like, "I love Asian women because they're really loyal", and you know, "they're all really loyal... [and] they're always submissive to you. They do whatever you want", and I'm just like, "why do you think that?" [...] And then, you dig deeper, "why are [you] attracted to this?" Oh, they've been hurt in the past.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Laura: They've been cheated on, or they don't feel like they fit into their own community, so they feel like they'll fit into the Asian community, or, you know, they're shy and quiet and they see in the media that, you know, Asian girls will go for the shy and quiet type, you know, it's always something deeper... sometimes you can actually get through to them, and you can be like, "well, do you actually want Asian women because you think all this, or do you actually want Asian women because you feel insecure about something in yourself, or you had some issue in your past life, that's manifesting as this, because I don't really think that normal people approach people like this".

Bonnie: Yeah, absolutely. So, it's like a reflection of their own insecurities?

Laura: Yeah.

Bonnie: Manifesting in a very, like, racist stereotype.

Laura: Yeah.

Bonnie: Fetish.

Laura: It's like, [pause], I don't know how to say it, like, every sexual fetish is a sexual solution to a real-life problem, right? A lot of women are attracted to, uh, men in suits, men in armour, firemen and policemen. Why? Because we're often overlooked by those people. Men in power often overlook us, disregard our needs, so... it's a sexual solution to a real-life problem... CEOs, big businessmen, like men with money, men with power, a lot of them are subs, a lot of them wanna be pissed on, a lot of them want their balls stomped on... you're like, "Jesus, what the fuck is this?". A lot of them want you to slap them in their face. Why? Because they're in charge of big ass companies... They have to be in charge all the fucking time, like, for once, they don't want to be in charge, they wanna get pissed on! So, there's that. It's just a sexual solution to a real-life problem. Same with racial fetishes, it's a sexual solution to a real-life problem. You have... a racial fetish because you have certain assumptions about this group of people and that group... it stems from something that you got wrong with you, so. (INT).

White privilege was discussed in the GCS, prompting an insightful exchange between Bubbles and Laura. Bubbles expressed discomfort with the term, explaining that "privilege" felt like an unfair and inadequate way to describe her own life experiences. While acknowledging and validating Bubbles' perspective, Laura gently challenged her to consider how intersectionality shapes experiences of marginalisation, particularly for those who face multiple, overlapping barriers:

Bubbles: ... If you go like to England and stuff like that, you'll be surprised how many people actually on the poverty line that are white.

Bonnie: Um, I guess then it's like this study, right? It's intersectional because it's like, in England, class is massive, and a lot of white people

are working class... I mean, race adds... like that onion layer, um, so it's like they have a unique experience to being poor and a person of colour. Um, but it also doesn't disregard that there are a lot of white working class.

Laura: ... Okay, I fully understand and sympathise with lower income white people... but this... is an argument that I hear a lot from lower income white people, where they're like, "well, you know, like, I'm white, I'm poor. Like, I don't have any privilege" ... I really do sympathise because I understand why it seems from their perspective. But here's the thing right. Onion example again. Layers. Okay, so you have white, right, which is not underprivilege at all, right? That's what's your base is, right? And then you have one layer, right, where it's your low income, and you're discriminated against. You are. You're discriminated against for being low income.

Bubbles: It doesn't matter what race if you're low income.

Laura: Yeah, I agree. That's one layer of discrimination, right? But then again... if you are a person of colour, right? So... you've got that layer of discrimination because you're low income. You've got that layer of discrimination because you're a person of colour. And then, if you're a woman...or, you know... gender-diverse, or... queer, you've got another layer of discrimination...

Bubbles: Like me, I got a layer because I'm large.

Bonnie: Yeah, sizeism and ageism as well.

Laura: Yeah... I have conversations with [people] like... "but I'm white", I'm just like, yeah... however, you don't have those extra layers of discrimination that people of colour have, that Indigenous people have. That Queer people have, that makes it even harder for them than you. (GCS).

"No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe"

Participants critiqued systemic misogyny, political neglect, and institutional stigma, highlighting the limitations of decriminalisation in the absence of broader societal

destigmatisation. These critiques underscored the structural risks sex workers continue to face and the urgent need for systemic change. The title of this theme emerged from a conversation with Laura, who powerfully critiqued both systemic and cultural misogyny, arguing that such misogyny would begin to dissolve only when “whores” are safe. Her comments reflect a form of resistance that connects the treatment of sex workers to broader societal patterns of gender-based oppression, particularly the marginalisation of women.

The systemic issues Laura addresses speak to ongoing governmental failures and a persistent reluctance to recognise all sex workers’ right to safety. While she affirms that decriminalisation is a necessary step, she stresses that it should serve as a foundation upon which safer and more equitable working conditions can be built. Laura expresses these concerns through her artwork, advocating for safer working conditions and to articulate the urgent need for continued reform:

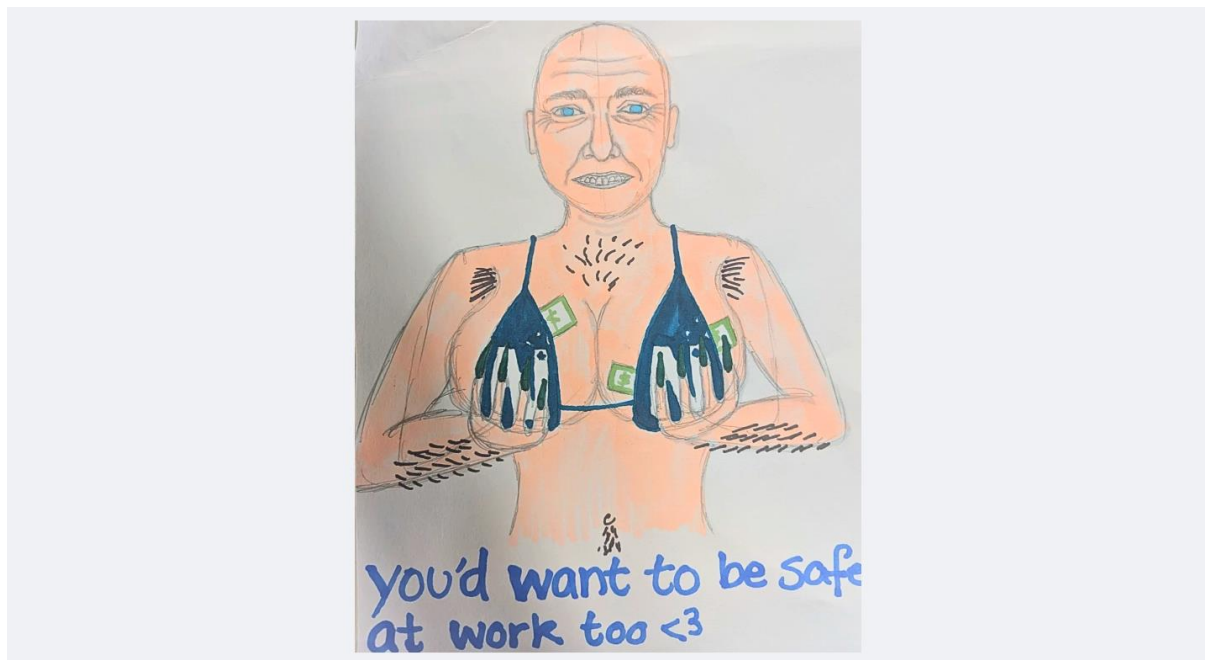


Figure 14: 'Christopher Luxon, you'd want to be safe too <3' by Laura, created in the Group Craft Session.

Laura: So, my crafted piece is a sexy Christopher Luxon, with giant titties wearing a National Party print bikini. He's grabbed his titties, and he's got money in his bikini, and the caption says, "you'd want to be safe at work, too", with the old heart emoji, right?... In this job, it is hard, we are not afforded nearly the amount of protections by the government that we need... We do not have nearly the amount of access to public health, like NZPC, in places that need it... we are not really that safe at work and that's a sad reality. Um, no matter how hard we try, the government

needs to step in the same way it does in all industries... DO YOU THINK MCDONALDS WOULD PAY MINIMUM WAGE IF THERE WAS NO MANDATORY? No, they'd pay them bitches 10 cents an hour, right? The government needs to step into ALL industries to make sure there is at least SOME oversight.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Laura: And there NEEDS to be oversight. This is no exception because this is an industry of work.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Laura: And the government needs to have oversight into industries of work, right? Because we need to be safe. So, I'm sure if someone went into Christopher Luxon's office, touched his dick and balls without his consent, you know, grabbed him without his consent, started making, uh, demeaning remarks about his race and his gender, you know, stalked him, like, made him work unsafe hours in unsafe conditions doing services he didn't want to do, I'm sure he'd feel some type of way about that as well, so if he thinks he deserves to be safe at work, I think we also do. So, you would want to be safe at work too... Put on a bikini, put yourselves in our shoes, like, think about what we have to go through and put some more money into public health. Put some more money into oversight. Put some more money into making sure them bitches are safe. (INT).

This also extends to the role of the police, as a key sector, in ensuring the safety of sex workers. In a discussion with JoJo, she reflects on how some of her experiences with law enforcement remain highly stigmatising. She explains that police sometimes fail to take her reports of serious violence seriously. Moreover, their responses frequently reflect patterns of victim blaming:

JoJo: The guy who raped me and like he stole my phone, and the phone he stole was my working phone so, I remember going to the police station, and I told them he stole my other phone and the police woman, she, was like, "why do you need two phones?" I said, "one for work and one personal", and she was like, "but why two?" Like, no one do that. I know many companies, they get their workers, like, work phone, and

she was like, “why two?”. So, I said to her, “it’s my working phone”, and she was like, “what work?” [Bonnie laughs], so I had to tell her. Yeah, she didn't take me serious, and she was, like, “oh, you are a call girl”, I said “yes”, but the way she was looking at me, from, like, top to bottom like that, checking me and like the way she treated me, I didn't like it, and it felt like there is a lot of judgement. (INT).

In contrast, JoJo also shared some positive experiences of reporting to the police, highlighting how decriminalisation can enable the freedom to report incidents without fear. Her account points to some progressive shifts within law enforcement and underscores the importance of legal reform in fostering safer conditions for sex workers.

JoJo: Like when I had one aggressive client, the policewoman on the phone, she was very nice and she said, “I'm not gonna finish the call until I make sure you are safe”. And... one time in the past, I called, and it was a policeman and I told him “I have a client here, and he refused to pay me my money”, and he asked me to put him on the speaker and said to the client, “give her, her money” [laughs]. (INT).

It is the responsibility of all sectors (agents and their agencies) to support making sex work safe, and this can be done in different ways. If all sectors of society shared a responsibility to ensure the safety of sex workers, this would, in turn, contribute to the safety of all women. Laura discussed the wide range of transferable skills involved in sex work as an example of how different sectors could support sex workers and keep them safe. This directly challenges the common assumption that sex work is merely “easy money.” However, she noted that these skills are often not recognised or transferable due to pervasive societal stigma. Laura asserted that if sex work was recognised as legitimate labour, with legitimate, transferable skills, and not dismissed as unskilled or morally suspect, it would allow those who wish to transition into other industries to do so more easily. Such recognition and support would represent a crucial step toward ensuring the broader safety, autonomy, and dignity of sex workers.

Laura: Another huge thing is being able to leave the industry because, you know, like... everyone says, “oh, you know... we should make it safe”. A big part of making sex work safe is making a safe path forward to leave. You know, because a lot of girls, they get stuck in a cycle where they can't leave because they can't find other jobs. The way that our

work experience in the industry is not recognised by any other industry, so we have so many leadership skills, so many sales skills, we do marketing skills, self-management, time management, accounting. Um, you know, uh, physical training.

Bonnie: Yeah.

Laura: I guess you could say like counselling, you know? Like all of these skills, you build up working in sex work, and they're just not transferable to another professional setting. That's really unsafe because it keeps people in cycles, in a situation where they don't want to be in. Making sex work safe, means making it safe to be in sex work and also making it safe to leave sex work. (INT).

A ground-level perspective was provided by Jack, who walked me through his typical working day. His experience introduces a nuanced challenge to the subsection's focus on women, reminding us that all sex workers, regardless of gender, deserve safety and protection. Jack's unique position in this study as the only male, gay sex worker highlights that he too faces unsafe working conditions and that his transferable skills are equally deserving of recognition. His account reinforces the idea that protecting all sex workers not only benefits individuals but also contributes to the broader protection and respect of all workers within the industry.

Jack: A snapshot of my job is more like this: Let's say this week is quiet. I'll put my advertisements, and I'll pay for others, and then I put it on [sic] tax return later on, and then I'll get a new client. I just gonna [sic] see the clients and then check them first, their numbers... you know, there's like, a blacklist?

Bonnie: Yeah.

Jack: So, I checked this too first before I engage, "how can I help you?"... "what kind of service you want?" ... [We] agree the time, the service, and the money... when he arrived, text me... I will text him my details... He come in. I just ask him "[any] recent injuries? ... Allergic reaction to any skin products?"... [I] ask him to take a shower... and then we have the session... Afterwards I will use my computer and put them in my worker's diary, like, add their numbers... name... I put the worker notes,

which is, like, what he likes, what kind of happy ending that he wants or like someone likes prostate massage, some don't. And then, if [he] share a little bit of his life, I just kind of put another note, "oh, he is worried about his job, if he book again, ask him about his job". And that is all for today, for that one client. (INT).

This section has explored the macro-level themes: *It is Exhausting Being Other* and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe*. These themes revealed how racism, law, institutional stigma, and public perception intersect to constrain sex workers' lives. Participants described the harms of systemic racism, xenophobia, and the criminalisation of migrant sex workers under Section 19 of the PRA. Alongside this, they called for greater structural recognition of sex work as legitimate labour. Laura emphasised the need for government action to improve working conditions, while JoJo's mixed experiences with police highlighted both the ongoing stigma and the benefits of decriminalisation. Recognition also extended to economic and professional legitimacy, with Laura urging broader acknowledgement of the transferrable skills sex workers possess. Jack illustrated this through an everyday moment that revealed the depth of skill involved in his work. Collectively, these accounts point to an urgent need for structural change and a broader societal shift in how sex work is valued and understood.

Conclusion: A Right to Exist

This chapter has explored the lived experiences of sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand through the lens of "Right to Exist", an overarching and unifying theme that emerged across all theme clusters. This concept captures the constant, often exhausting, negotiation of the right to exist despite it being a fundamental and elemental need (Vergès, 2024; Weinhold, 2023). Moreover, the concept captures an ongoing negotiation and navigation of risk, safety, identity, and resistance that characterises the everyday and intersectional realities of sex work, particularly for those who are migrant, gender-expansive, racialised, or otherwise marginalised.

In response to Research Question I, "To what extent are risk and safety intersectional in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand?", the themes of *Managing Self*, *Managing Others*, *Managing Space*, *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support*, and *It is Exhausting Being Other*, reveal that risk and safety are not static or universal experiences. Rather, they are deeply shaped by intersecting identities and structural conditions. Safety is often provisional, negotiated through mental, emotional, and physical regulation, spatial awareness, and strategic interactions. Risk, meanwhile, is not only

physical but also emotional, systemic, and societal, embedded in the very cultures and structures that claim to protect and be protective.

In response to Research Question II, “How do migrant and gender-expansive sex workers actively resist discrimination?”, the themes of *Managing Self*, *Managing Others*, *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support*, *It is Exhausting Being Other*, and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores Are Safe*, illustrate that resistance is not always loud or visible; it is often embedded in everyday acts of existence, assertion, challenge, boundary-setting, and community care. Simultaneously, the collective and creative forms of resistance shown by the community and especially the NZPC, actively challenges dominant narratives and demands structural change.

There is a live interplay channelling between the three levels of micro, meso, and macro; or individual, community, and structural levels. Whilst participants discussed their own lived experiences of navigating risk, safety, discrimination, and resistance, they were also profoundly aware of how these experiences were symptoms of wider structural, legal, and cultural constructed conditions. Both macro or structural-level themes, *It is Exhausting Being Other* and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores Are Safe* encapsulate the political urgency of this work. The themes call for a reframing of safety and justice that centres those most marginalised, not as an afterthought, but as a foundation for broader social transformation. In all, these themes offer a nuanced, intersectional understanding of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand, one that honours the complexity, resilience, and resistance of those who live it.

These findings will be critically examined in the following *Discussion* chapter through the lens of relevant theoretical frameworks. Particular attention will be given to themes such as entitlement to sex and the critique of desire, exploring how desire is socially constructed, racialised, and gendered. The chapter will also consider how resistance can take the form of dominance, challenging conventional understandings of power and agency. Additionally, the dichotomies of empowerment versus trauma and clean versus dirty will be contested, revealing how these binaries are both imposed and resisted within participants’ narratives. Throughout, theory will be used to contextualise these findings and deepen the analysis, offering a more nuanced understanding of the lived realities within the sex industry.

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter critically engages with the findings presented in the previous chapter, exploring how the live interplay between the micro, meso, and macro themes (*Managing Self, Managing Others, Managing Space, Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support, It is Exhausting Being Other, and No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe*) respond to the two central research questions:

RQI: To what extent are risk and safety intersectional in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand?

RQII. How do migrant and gender-expansive sex workers actively resist discrimination?

Drawing on the participants' narratives, the findings revealed complex, evocative, and at times contradictory experiences shaped by misogyny at the "cellular level" (Laura) and beyond, racialisation, and the shifting politics of desire, labour, and agency. While many findings echoed existing literature in sex work and broader social science research, participants' narratives also deepened understandings of the emotional toll of racialised and gendered labour, the strategic forms of resistance enacted through embodied performances, and the evolving dynamics within queer sex work economies.

The purpose of this chapter is to interpret these findings through a range of intersecting theoretical frameworks (feminist, queer, decolonial, and Foucauldian) while remaining grounded in the lived experiences of sex workers. These frameworks help illuminate how individual narratives are shaped by, and in turn resist, dominant discourses around morality, productivity, intimacy, and legitimacy. In doing so, this chapter aims to move beyond reductive framings of sex work as either exploitative or empowering, and toward a more layered, intersectional understanding of its everyday realities.

To guide this analysis, four central discussion points are developed, each emerging from and directly mapped onto the thematic findings: 1) *Entitlement, Desire, and the Politics of Access*; 2) *Domination, Agency, and Strategic Power*; 3) *The Empowerment/Trauma Binary: Rethinking Resistance*; and 4) *Dirty/Clean and (Il)Legitimate Labour*. Each point weaves together multiple levels of analysis (micro, meso, macro) and demonstrates how participants' experiences speak to both the intersectional nature of risk and safety (RQI), and the everyday strategies of resistance enacted by migrant and gender-expansive sex workers (RQII).

The first discussion draws on Srinivasan (2018) to interrogate how desire is constructed through social hierarchies of race, gender, and power. Participants' experiences with

client entitlement and the devaluation of sex work as “easy money” are explored alongside broader reflections on intimacy, emotional labour, and the meaning of sex. This discussion draws primarily on the micro-level themes of *Managing Others* and *Managing Space*, which reveal how sex workers navigate client interactions and physical environments to assert control and manage risk. These dynamics speak directly to RQI, demonstrating how race, gender expression, and migrancy intersect to shape safety, and to RQII, as boundary-setting and space-curation emerge as forms of resistance to commodified access.

The second discussion challenges the assumption that sex workers are always in a passive or disempowered role. Using Butler (1999, 2004) and Foucault (1978, 1982), this section explores how participants performed power through domming, revealing agency as strategic, embodied, and deeply contextual. This discussion draws on the theme of *Managing Self* and is also situated within the meso-level theme *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support*, where peer communities and professional environments support expressions of power. It expands on RQII, by theorising agency not as an inherent trait but as a relational and situated practice of resistance within and against structural constraints.

The third discussion contests the binary of *empowerment versus trauma*, critically reflecting on how this discursive divide flattens lived experience. Butler (2016) and Foucault (1978, 1982) are used to reconceptualise sex work as ordinary labour that enables liveability, rather than a site of either emancipation or victimhood. This discussion draws on the macro-level theme *It is Exhausting Being Other*, showing how workers resist dominant narratives that demand coherence or moral legibility. It also revisits *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support* as a meso space that allows for nuanced, non-binary storytelling. Here, RQII is central, as rejecting binary framings becomes a resistance strategy in and of itself. This also addresses RQI by showing how binary framings obscure the intersectional dimensions of risk and safety.

Finally, the fourth discussion extends this critique to the *clean/dirty dichotomy*, as theorised by Vergès (2024), to examine how sex work is rendered illegitimate through moral, racialised, and gendered discourses. This section argues that the real divide lies not in morality but in the politics of labour legitimacy, who is allowed to work and under what conditions. Drawing on participants’ reflections on the exclusion of non-resident migrant sex workers under Section 19, this discussion critiques the construction of a two-tiered system in which migrant labour is selectively welcomed into industries deemed appropriate (such as cleaning), while sex work remains criminalised under the guise of anti-trafficking. These legal exclusions operate through a protectionist, racialised, and xenophobic logic of body and border control. This discussion builds on

the macro-level theme *It is Exhausting Being Other*, illustrating how legal exclusion compounds the social burden of being ‘doubly marginalised’. Moreover, the theme *No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe* is also highlighted here, underscoring how selective state protection fractures worker solidarity and limits the reach of the current decriminalisation model in Aotearoa New Zealand. Finally, it engages the meso-level theme *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support*, outlining how community organisations, such as the NZPC, offer essential wrap-around support to those excluded from legal recognition, actively resisting the structural violence of immigration law through care, advocacy, and mutual aid.

Collectively, these four discussion points map directly onto the six thematic findings across micro, meso, and macro levels. They provide a critical and layered interpretation of the findings, addressing both research questions. While the inclusion of some theorists continues threads introduced in the *Literature Review* chapter, others emerged inductively through the analytic process, allowing theoretical insights to remain grounded in the lived and narrated experiences of participants.

Entitlement, Desire, and the Politics of Access

Desire is often assumed to be a natural, internal, and apolitical force; however, as Srinivasan (2018) argues, desire is never innocent. Who ‘we’ find attractive, desirable, or worthy of intimacy is moulded by racial hierarchies, gendered norms, colonial histories, capitalist commodification, and prejudices; for example, the hypersexualisation of Black women (hooks, 1992, 2000; Wright, 2025), ableism and the desexualisation (and infantilisation) of disabled people (Santos & Santos, 2018), fatphobia, transphobia, and classism (Butler, 1999, 2004, 2016; Hagen, 2019). Indeed, these structures determine who is seen as desirable and who is seen as disposable (hooks, 1992, 2000). Within sex work, these power-laden desires frequently intersect with entitlement. Participants described clients challenging prices (“*Discount?*” - Jack), refusing payment (“*I just stand by the door... until they give me some money.*” - JoJo), or engaging in deceit (“*I realised he’s lying. It’s all lies.*” - JoJo). These interactions are embedded in misogynistic, racialised, gendered, and ableist logics that dictate who is deemed deserving of intimacy, and who is not (Srinivasan, 2018).

Srinivasan (2018) critiques the idea that who and what we desire should not be questioned; for example, why some bodies are consistently excluded from desirability, why others are fetishised or hypersexualised, and the perceived normalisation of sexual preferences; for example, “*No femme. No Asian.*” (Jack). These patterns reflect structural inequalities, such as, the fetishisation of Asian women (as evidenced by Laura),

of large women (as evidenced by Bubbles), of gay men (as evidenced by Jack), and the erasure of transwomen as legitimate romantic or sexual partners (as evidenced by JoJo), unless they meet fetishised criteria (for example, “*pre-op trans*”). These preferences are not neutral; they are socially produced and reveal how desire reflects and reinforces structural inequality.

The resentment some clients expressed at having to pay for sex reveals the persistence of gendered and racialised scripts that construct certain men, often white, cis, and economically privileged, as inherently entitled to access feminised bodies (Butler, 1999, 2004; hooks, 1984, 1992). Within this logic, transactional sex is not viewed as labour, but as a service owed to them by virtue of their identity and status. This entitlement was evident in the micro-level themes, particularly in *Managing Others* and *Managing Space*, where participants described frequent boundary infringements, negotiation breakdowns, and the need to assert their rights as workers. These dynamics reinforce the moralistic narrative that sex work is not ‘real’ or legitimate labour but instead exists outside the bounds of economic respectability (Abel & Ludeke, 2021b; Gira Grant, 2014; Sanders, 2005, 2008; Weinhold, 2023). Behaviours such as haggling over prices, withholding payment, or assuming sexual access without consent are not simply individual acts of disrespect, they are by-products of a broader cultural narrative that renders sex work as illegitimate. Participants noted that clients often framed sex as recreational (‘just for fun’), rather than a negotiated, professional service. This was reflected in recurring micro-level experiences such as scams, coercive bargaining, and drugs being offered in place of payment. These examples show how the stigma surrounding sex work reshapes the economic and emotional terms of the exchange, distorting both its value and its boundaries.

However, participants were not passive. They described setting boundaries, confronting fetishisation, and refusing to perform submissive scripts. Laura, for instance, challenged a client who assumed her Asian identity equated to submissiveness, while JoJo described how clients’ fantasies around femininity created impossible and often contradictory standards. These acts of resistance disrupted expected power dynamics, often triggering volatile reactions, “*you look ugly, you look fat, you don’t look like your pictures*” (JoJo), though not always, “*It was nice because I feel like I was the first one to... talk sense into him*” (Laura). Such responses reveal how entitlement is unsettled when the sex worker asserts control, particularly when they are racialised, migrant, or gender-expansive, directly engaging with RQ II. These micro-level negotiations, as captured in the themes of *Managing Self* and *Managing Others*, demonstrate the strategic agency required to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics shaped by structural inequalities. Crucially, however, I do not wish to dismiss the value and capitalisation for sex workers

in doing ‘body work’, which includes aesthetic, physical, and emotional labour performed through gender and sexuality (Bernstein, 2007; Brents, 2013; Butler, 1999, 2004; Sanders, 2005). These performances are not reducible to submission or objectification, rather, they are often carefully curated acts of labour and control.

Some participants expressed distrust or dislike of men in response to this, but this should not be equated with the systemic nature of misogyny (Hedges, 2024). Unlike misogyny, rooted in patriarchal norms and institutional power, expressions of misandry among participants reflected lived experiences of harm. They were not driven by a social system that objectifies or devalues men, but rather by repeated encounters with male violence, disrespect, or entitlement (Hedges, 2024). As Bubbles described her positive relationship with her father, we both remarked on its rarity, an emotional reaction that underscores how misandry, in this context, emerges from personal survival, not structural ideology.

In some cases, clients sought not just sex, but emotional intimacy, blurring boundaries between transactional labour and affective connection. This shift was noted by Jack, who linked the rise of sex-positive discourse and hookup culture with a new demand for emotional labour. Bernstein (2007) discusses how sex work increasingly involves the commodification of attention, care, and time. In this, there is a reconfiguration of what sex work is, what it means, and challenging preconceptions that authenticity and intimacy lay outside of these transactions. Emotional labour and boundary-setting in this context remain undervalued and misunderstood. Artistic representation increasingly reflects the shifting terrain of sex, labour, and intimacy. Films like *Sebastian* (2024) and *Anora* (2024) are recent depictions of sex work as evolving, relational, and emotionally complex. Moreover, the reality television show *Virgin Island* (2025) introduces viewers to therapeutic surrogate partners, who engage with participants on intimacy work. It questions whether sex work and intimacy work are separate. Indeed, Emelianchik-Key and Stickney (2019) discuss the clear separation of surrogate partners from sex work; however, the changing realm of sex work, in light of sex-positive discourse and cultural shifts, whereby sex work may be seeing an increase in more emotional, companionship, and intimate labour, brings a challenge to preconceptions of the sex work remit. According to Vergès (2021, 2022, 2024), only certain forms of labour are framed as legitimate, raising the question of whether sex work can be considered intimate labour and what this implies about its perceived legitimacy.

Desire within sex work is also a question of who is imagined to hold power. The phallus, as a symbol of social power, is destabilised when workers set the terms of engagement. From what participants described, client expectations were suggestive of broader sexual cultures shaped by entitlement and normative gender roles, but these were also

challenged by sex workers' performances of control, detachment, or selective intimacy. Drawing on Butler (1999, 2004), these performances can be understood as disruptions of the gendered and racialised scripts that usually govern desire. When sex workers perform domination or disinterest, they subvert the assumption that clients inherently hold phallic power, instead recasting the terms of desire and interaction. These acts of performance and refusal, often emerging from within the micro-level themes of *Managing Self* and *Managing Others*, reveal how power is strategically negotiated in everyday encounters. This, in turn, complicates the moralistic narrative surrounding sex work and the dichotomy of empowerment/trauma (Gira Grant, 2014), addressing intersectional risk and safety (RQI) and how migrant and gender-expansive workers resist discrimination (RQII). What's more, we see the continuous, live interplay between the themes presented, how micro-interactions between workers and clients, including the negotiation of boundaries, power dynamics, transactional service, and the assertion of agency, contribute to broader cultural discourses around misogyny, entitlement, desire, and power. Sex work emerges as a site where systemic prejudices are not only enacted through these everyday interactions, but also actively challenged and undone. The following section expands on this discussion, focusing more closely on acts of domination, agency, and strategic power.

Domination, Agency, and Strategic Power

Sex workers are often framed within binaries of dominance and submission, typically imagined as passive recipients of clients' desires (Maccaro, 2020; Weitzer, 2006). However, participants in this study challenged that script by asserting dominance themselves, physically, emotionally, and symbolically, in ways that disrupt dominant narratives about power and sex work. Rather than embodying disempowerment, participants described moments of control, performance, and authority when domming clients. These dynamics offer a crucial intervention into discourses that frame sex work as inherently degrading, revealing instead the complex, often subversive ways that agency is enacted.

This is not to suggest that all participants saw domination as purely empowering or pleasurable. Some reflected ambivalence, such as Jack, "*I have that side of me that I can put boundaries there, you know? That side of me that... people wanting, you know?*". Such expressions reflect a nuanced sense of agency, not rooted in grand narratives of liberation, but in everyday strategies of existence and boundary-setting. Such performances of domination can be read as acts of resistance against carceral feminist narratives that construct sex workers, particularly racialised and migrant workers, as

victims in need of saving (Gallant & Lam, 2024). In these performances, agency is not only about choice, but about the embodied negotiation of power.

Following Butler's (1999, 2004) discussion of gender performativity, domination in sex work can be understood as a strategic performance. These acts are not necessarily expressions of innate dominance or fixed identity, but reiterative gestures that destabilise the norms of gender, sexuality, and labour. Within these interactions, workers are not 'empowered' in the neoliberal sense of self-improvement, success, or what Schuller (2021) outlines as 'optimising feminism', but through carefully curated performances in which they are paid to perform authority and control. This destabilises dominant cultural narratives that position the client as inherently dominant and the worker as inherently subordinate. Instead, it foregrounds sex work as a site of consensual negotiation ("*obviously with consent, you know.*" - Laura), outlining micro-level themes of *Managing Self*, *Managing Others*, and *Managing Space*, revealing how sex workers exert agency by shaping the emotional, spatial, and psychological contours of each encounter. These moments of embodied control are central to how migrant and gender-expansive workers resist imposed hierarchies (RQII), while also unsettling dominant logics of risk, desire, and power (RQI).

Foucauldian theory on power (1978, 1982) can also be applied here. Power is not simply repressive, but relational and productive. The exchange between client and worker is a site where power is made, unmade, and contested. When sex workers dominate clients at their request, they reveal how power is not held but enacted. Even in contexts of economic need or structural marginalisation, participants claimed space to shape the terms of the exchange. Maccaro (2020) argues that empowerment in sex work can emerge from the performance of historically disempowered sexuality. When workers reclaim and re-perform these identities on their own terms, such as the 'dominatrix', they subvert rather than replicate patriarchal scripts. Domming can be playful and a source of emotional release or control in a world where control is otherwise denied; for example, "*I was, like, 'thank you! I need this!' [starts acting out whipping the client]*" (Laura). Furthermore, this performance "promotes change in the way that men view women and women view themselves" (2020, p. 23). Is it possible, reflecting on the discussions so far, that the cultural and systemic prejudices expressed in micro-interactions between worker and client are also being reshaped through the very challenges that occur within those interactions?

This resonates with Chisholm's (2019) exploration of seduction as a form of empowerment among sex workers in Brazil. In this context, agency is asserted even as individuals navigate the intersecting constraints of racism, classism, and coloniality. Chisholm draws a clear distinction between empowerment and emancipation, while

seduction may be contextually empowering, it does not necessarily equate to political emancipation in a broader structural sense. This distinction connects directly with the macro-level themes *It is Exhausting Being Other* and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe*. Participants articulated frustration and anger at the limits of individualised empowerment, calling instead for emancipatory working conditions and genuine labour protections. This included calls for the emancipatory potential of decriminalisation for non-resident migrants. Participants voiced exhaustion, within which domination could, paradoxically, offer moments of release, yet the central concern remained the pursuit of labour rights. This reframes sex work from a carceral feminist narrative of reinforcing patriarchal violence to a labour issue, wherein sex workers, like all workers, articulate a fundamental and elemental need for safe conditions in which to work, live, and exist (Vergès, 2022, 2024). These narratives speak directly to how risk and safety are shaped by intersecting systems of exclusion (RQI), and in how resistance takes the form of collective demands for structural change (RQII).

Participants' narratives of domination further complicate binaries such as victimhood versus agency and submission versus power. Through domming clients, they actively reconfigure who holds authority, who sets boundaries, and who becomes the object of desire. These acts, while not always empowering in a systemic sense, nonetheless function as forms of resistance against societal structures that render sex workers disposable. Ultimately, resistance in this context is embodied: it is emotional, strategic, and rooted in labour. Participants were not merely pushing back against clients, but against the systems that deny them power, authority, and worth. These practices align with the micro-level themes of *Managing Self*, *Managing Others*, and *Managing Space*, while also reflecting the macro-level themes of *It is Exhausting Being Other* and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe*. Their stories illuminate how sex work, even when shaped by exhaustion or ambivalence, can constitute a site of existence and agency. These findings show how resistance is enacted through the body and within the work itself (RQII), while also highlighting how intersectional experiences of risk and safety are navigated in lived realities (RQI). The following section elaborates on how these complexities intersect with the dominant empowerment/trauma binary that continues to pervade sex work discourse.

The Empowerment/Trauma Binary: Rethinking Resistance

There is a discursive binary that dominates how sex work is talked about (Abel, 2018b; Gira-Grant, 2014). Discourse is either proliferated with trauma, exploitation, or trafficking, with the sex industry seen as a site of inherent exploitation, or the discourse takes an empowerment arch, full of liberation, freedom, and feminist choice. This binary

is limiting because it flattens the complexity of lived experiences. It forces sex workers into ideological categories that may not reflect their realities, and it serves external agendas; for example, carceral feminism and neoliberal feminism, rather than centring the voices of people who sex work.

I began this research, kind of clinging to this idea that sex work could be something empowering for people, that it wasn't always traumatic, but could be fun, satisfying, flexible, and "ordinary". I wonder now at whether "empowered" is a term too charged and that it needs to be reframed as a "*sense of control*" as JoJo says. I am also inspired by a post I saw on social media: "Sex work doesn't have to be empowering... it can just be a job" (NZPC, 2025). This reminder speaks directly to the meso-level theme of *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support*, where community organisations act not only as sites of care and advocacy but also as spaces that challenge dominant discourses around victimhood, morality, and exceptionalism. Within a reality of sex work 'just being a job' is a sense of empowering ordinariness; simply living, making life liveable, and the 'life one wants to lead' (Armstrong, 2021; Butler, 2004). This reframes risk and safety not as extremes of harm or empowerment, but as part of the everyday negotiations of existence (RQI), and illustrates how migrant and gender-expansive sex workers resist by normalising, rather than sensationalising, their labour (RQII).

While I initially approached this research seeking to explore 'moments of empowerment' in sex work, I came to question the usefulness of this term. 'Empowerment' is not a neutral descriptor; it is embedded within a discourse on power. As Foucault (1978) conceptualises through the notion of the confessional, discourse is not merely repressive but also productive; it shapes what can be said, known, and felt. Within this framework, sex workers are often forced to speak within a regime of truth and a pre-approved narrative that governs how sex work is understood. Discourse is restricted to a binary that frames sex work as either inherently traumatic or inherently liberating. Participants' reflections in the current study often resisted this binary. For many, sex work was neither a site of trauma nor empowerment, but something more nuanced and complex; it was a job, a strategy, a space of negotiation. In recognising this, I shifted my focus from empowerment to resistance. Moments of resistance were not grand gestures, but everyday acts that challenged the regime of truth and in which sex workers asserted agency on their own terms.

Butler (2004) asks what makes a life liveable, what conditions allow someone not just to survive, but to be recognised as fully human. In this research, participants described sex work not as inherently traumatic or empowering, but as a means of living, a way to access income, affirm gender, support family, or maintain autonomy. Framing sex work in this way, resists the empowerment/trauma binary and sustains life on one's own terms.

Furthermore, Butler (2016) also questions what lives are (un)grievable. Precarity, in this sense, is not only economic but also existential and whether certain ways of living are allowed to exist. The pressure to frame sex work as empowering is reflective of an optimising feminist discourse that has evolved from a civilising feminism under neoliberalism (Schuller, 2021; Vergès, 2021). Few professions are expected to provide daily empowerment, yet sex workers are frequently called upon to justify their work in such terms (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Weinhold, 2023).

A discursive shift is needed, one that centres structural conditions and labour rights. As Armstrong (2021) and others argue, decriminalisation allows people to live on their own terms, whether sex work is short-term or a career. In this context, Butler's (2004) concept of liveability becomes useful, it speaks not only to identity and recognition but to the material and social conditions that enable people, especially gender-expansive, migrant, and racialised workers, to sustain their lives with dignity. Moreover, language is essential here too. Referring to someone as a "person who does sex work" resists the totalising stigma that turns an occupation into an identity. Unlike other forms of labour, sex work carries a 'sticky label', an identity that overshadows other aspects to a person's life. The focus must remain on ensuring access to safe, intersectional, and decriminalised working conditions for all, regardless of how individuals, communities, organisations, or institutions feel about sex work itself. This speaks directly to the macro-level themes of *It is Exhausting Being Other* and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe*, where the struggle for legitimacy, safety, and belonging is collective and structural. It also reinforces RQI, by demonstrating how intersectional risk is embedded in law and discourse, and RQII, by showing how sex workers resist not only through performance or community care, but also through reframing labour itself. This leads to the final discussion for this chapter which is the (il)legitimacy of certain labour.

Dirty/Clean and (Il)Legitimate Labour

Within a decolonial feminist theoretical framework, Vergès (2024) presents the clean/dirty dichotomy. Rooted in colonial histories and the racialised division of labour, the binary divides those who are clean and those who are dirty. 'Dirty work' consists of service work and the invisible workforce who 'open the city' for the capitalist elite (Vergès, 2021). The stigmatisation of sex work as 'dirty', joins other 'dirty' industries, such as, cleaning and caregiving. Indeed, Walkowitz (1980) highlights the pervading history of sex workers as vectors of disease whose bodies needed to be surveilled and controlled. The clean/dirty dichotomy is reproduced through the 'whorearchy', with certain forms of sex work, such as dancing and escorting seen as more respectable or legitimate than other forms, such as full-service, or street-based sex work. These hierarchies are shaped by

class, race, gender expression, and immigration status, which is conflated by the two-tier system created by Section 19.

This was demonstrated in interviews with the participants; for instance, Bubbles recognising that certain visas make migrant sex workers especially vulnerable, Jack reflecting on experiences of having his migrant status questioned, and JoJo expressing that issues with visas endanger all sex workers. Vergès' clean/dirty binary within the discourse of civilising feminism can be applied to the apparent selective legitimisation of migrant labour in industries other than sex work. The clean/dirty binary intersects here with another: legitimate/illegitimate labour. As Weinhold (2023) argues, the legitimacy of any form of work is not measured by its contribution to existence or wellbeing, but by its fit within capitalist narratives of productivity. The labour that the state legitimises for migrants speaks to a deeper cultural logic in which intimacy and erotic labour are marked as illegitimate, threatening, and in need of control. Whereas, industries, like horticulture and cleaning, though often exploitative and underpaid, are considered by the state to be legitimate and productive (Davies, 2023). Migrants are welcomed only under conditions that maintain their precarity, invisibility, and productivity. The state's refusal to recognise sex work as legitimate labour for migrants is not about protection, or 'anti-trafficking', but about disciplining bodies and controlling borders (Gallant & Lam, 2024).

This is not simply a matter of individual prejudice, but of systemic exclusion, encoded in law, policy, and culture, and it directly speaks to the macro-level themes of *It is Exhausting Being Other* and *No Woman is Safe Until Whores are Safe*. While some workers are able to distance themselves from the 'dirty work' through whiteness, citizenship, or professional branding, others are marked by it and funnelled into restricted yet legitimised and tolerated forms of it. The clean/dirty dichotomy, when examined through participant narratives and Vergès' theoretical lens, reveals the racialised, gendered, and legal frameworks through which sex work is both stigmatised and hierarchised. It also exposes how particular bodies, especially migrant, gender-expansive, and racialised bodies, are targeted, restricted, and controlled. Section 19 of the PRA is a legal crystallisation of this divide, denying non-resident migrants access to legal protections, while rhetorically justifying their exclusion through the language of anti-trafficking.

To truly support the safety and dignity of all sex workers, this binary must be dismantled, not only discursively but legally. Section 19's two-tier system cannot be repaired through assimilation into respectability or selective liberation. Rather, what is needed is a politics of labour that affirms all sex workers' humanity, regardless of citizenship, gender expression, or racialisation. As participants made clear, sex work is not inherently empowering or degrading, it is labour. And like all forms of labour, it deserves safe

working conditions, protection, respect, and visibility, not contingent on who performs it, but grounded in the fact that it is work. This position reflects the meso-level theme of *Sanctuary: An Organised Hub of Wrap-Around Support*, where community organising and hubs (like the NZPC) not only provide care but challenge the legitimacy of exclusionary systems, advocating for a world in which all workers are protected. These calls expose how structural exclusions shape sex workers' safety and work precarity (RQI), and foreground resistance through collective, rights-based demands rather than through moral narratives of empowerment or rescue (RQII).

Conclusion

This chapter has presented four key discussions: 1) *Entitlement, Desire, and the Politics of Access*; 2) *Domination, Agency, and Strategic Power*; 3) *The Empowerment/Trauma Binary: Rethinking Resistance*; and 4) *Dirty/Clean and (Il)Legitimate Labour*. Each section explored how intersections of race, gender, migrant status, and sexuality shape sex workers' experiences of power, risk, and safety. These discussions respond directly to the central research questions and are grounded in the key themes identified across the micro, meso, and macro levels. Firstly, risk and safety in sex work are deeply intersectional, shaped not only by working conditions, but by how workers are treated based on their social position and legal status. Secondly, resistance to discrimination is not always visible or spectacular, but often takes the form of everyday acts of boundary-setting, negotiation, and self-definition. For migrant and gender-expansive workers, these acts may be exhausting or ambivalent, yet they remain politically significant. Across these discussions, what becomes clear is that sex work is not a singular experience, nor can it be understood through reductive binaries such as victim/agent or legitimate/illegitimate. Rather, it is a dynamic site of negotiation, where workers navigate stigma, power, and precarity in ways that are strategic, creative, and deeply relational. This underscores the live interplay between the micro, meso, and macro-level themes, illustrating how participants' narratives are entangled with broader sociopolitical structures of exclusion and resistance.

By centring the voices of migrant and gender-expansive sex workers, voices often marginalised in dominant narratives, this research challenges normative assumptions and contributes to a more grounded, intersectional understanding of sex work. It also points to the urgent need for legal reform, particularly regarding the exclusion of non-resident migrant workers under Section 19 of the PRA. Moving beyond carceral, moralistic, or protectionist frameworks, any meaningful reform must centre the lived realities, rights, and demands of sex workers themselves.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the intersectional nature of risk and safety in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the ways in which migrant and gender-expansive sex workers actively resist discrimination. Through a reflective thematic analysis of in-depth interviews and a group craft session, the study has illuminated how sex workers navigate complex layers of marginalisation while asserting agency, building community, and challenging structural barriers. Six themes were identified through the thematic analysis and structured across the micro, meso, and macro levels. The micro-level themes highlighted the participants' continuous navigation of risk and safety, in which they were required to manage themselves, manage others, and manage the spaces in which they worked. At the meso level, the role of support, most poignantly offered by the NZPC, emerged as a powerful example of grassroots, peer-based care and community organising. Finally, issues raised by participants, both as individuals and as a group, pointed to macro-level cultural and legal structures of racialisation, and migrant and gendered oppression. This was expressed through a collective sense of exhaustion: of being 'othered,' discriminated against, made invisible, and subjected to unfair treatment, conditions compounded by the two-tier system created by Section 19. What's more, the participants' urgent call for instrumental change signalled a need to make sex work that is safe, intersectional, and fully decriminalised, which in turn, would be of benefit to all workers.

The findings demonstrate that while decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand provides a foundational legal framework for sex workers' rights, it is not sufficient in practice. The persistence of stigma, institutional discrimination, and the exclusion of non-resident migrants under Section 19 reveal the limitations of a legal model that is often celebrated internationally. These exclusions not only undermine the safety and wellbeing of migrant sex workers, but the entire sex work community who misdirect blame to the migrants themselves through internalised whorephobia, instead of the flawed legislation. This fractures the broader sex work community by the creation of a two-tier system and 'whorearchy' of legality and legitimacy.

Furthermore, migrant and gender-expansive sex workers face unique forms of erasure, fetishisation, and misrecognition within both the sex industry and wider society. Their experiences are shaped by misogyny, racism, xenophobia, transphobia, and cisnormativity and are compounded by the intersection of these identities and other factors such as economic status. The findings show that these layered identities intensify vulnerability while also shaping distinct forms of resistance and resilience.

At every level - individual, community, and structural - participants demonstrated strategies of existence and resistance. From personal boundary-setting and spatial control to collective support through organisations like the NZPC, to broader critiques of systemic injustice, sex workers are not passive recipients of harm but active agents of change. These acts of resistance, especially among those at the margins, are central to the ongoing struggle for recognition, safety, and justice. As hooks (1984) argues, it is precisely these issues and voices that must move from the margin to centre.

The thesis argues that full decriminalisation must include all sex workers, regardless of immigration status. The removal of Section 19 is a necessary step toward ensuring that the legal framework aligns with the principles of equity and human rights that underpin the original intent of the legislation; however, legal reform alone is not enough. Cultural and institutional change is also required to dismantle the deep-rooted misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and transphobia that continue to shape sex workers' experiences.

This research contributes to broader conversations in feminist, queer, and migration studies by centring the voices of those most often excluded from policy and academic discourse. It also offers a model for intersectional, community-engaged research that honours the knowledge and expertise of sex workers themselves. While the study is limited by its sample size and geographic scope, it opens important avenues for future research. These include comparative studies across legal models; deeper exploration of the experiences of queer, gender-expansive (including nonbinary) sex workers; and investigations into Indigenous perspectives and conceptualisations of gender fluidity and sexuality, to build a more comprehensive understanding of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

While not all findings fit neatly into the narrative thread I was weaving, they nonetheless offer valuable insights and point to areas for further inquiry. In particular, the unique experiences of Jack, the only male sex worker in the study, who brought a distinct perspective as a gay man navigating risks and safety concerns specific to the LGBTQIA+ community. Jack discussed the complexities of chemsex, acknowledging it as both a concern and an understandable aspect of sex work in certain contexts. He also shared insights into the vulnerabilities of closeted gay clients and workers, for whom sex work can serve as a rare space of release and expression. Additionally, Jack reflected on the tension he feels with the rise of sex-positive culture. While this cultural shift has been liberating for many in the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly through the normalisation of hookup culture, it has also introduced complex boundary negotiations. For Jack, this shift has led to a decline in traditional clientele and a growing demand for companionship-based services.

Many of the findings aligned with existing literature, both within sex work research and broader social science studies that address intersectional experiences, racialisation, and gendered labour. The misogyny embedded at every level of society - what Laura aptly described as existing at the “*cellular level*,” and beyond - permeates every structure and interaction. It presented in all the dialogues I had with participants: in JoJo’s reflections on transmisogyny, Laura’s experiences with racialised fetishisation, and Bubbles and Jack’s encounters with restrictive labels and imposed preferences.

The exhaustion and resistance to discrimination expressed by participants weighed heavily on me. This experience impacted me mentally, emotionally, and physically. Although I had been critically aware of these issues before, being so deeply immersed, and feeling as though a blindfold had been removed, revealed them in a way I had not previously seen or interoceptively felt. What had once been intellectually detected became viscerally real. This has changed me profoundly. I know I will never be the same again, and I would rather live with this awareness than return to walking blindly.

In short, this thesis affirms the fundamental and elemental right of all sex workers to exist safely, visibly, and with dignity. Recognising and supporting their diverse strategies of resistance is not only a matter of policy but also a matter of justice. To deny this would be ineffective. As Bohrer (in Vergès, 2021, p. xvii) puts it,

“Denial has never worked as a revolutionary strategy.”

We are perfect because of our imperfections.

We must stay hopeful;

We must stay patient -

because when they excavate the modern day

they'll find us: the Brand New Ancients.

(Tempest, 2013, p. 3).

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Appendices

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Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

16/12/2024

Project Title

Diversity and discrimination in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand

An Invitation

Kia Ora!

I'm "Bonnie the volunteer" (Hannah Jane Thompson), I'm a Masters student at AUT funded by the Leverhulme Trust (<https://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/>). I would like to invite you to take part in my thesis research project. Your contribution to this project is voluntary. There is no advantage nor disadvantage for you taking part.

What is the purpose of this research?

I'm trying to find out whether risk and safety in sex work are different for gender-expansive and migrant workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. I also want to hear stories about how you have overcome any barriers whilst working. I hope this research will be of benefit to the community by improving support and services. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Thank you for getting in touch with me after seeing the flyer. The study is only involving sex workers who are 18+ and based in Auckland. I would like to involve you if you identify as gender-expansive, meaning your gender identity differs from the sex assigned to you at birth, you identify as trans (Polkinghorne, 2020), or mähū (Tahiti and Hawai'i), vakasalewalewa (Fiji), palopa (Papua New Guinea), fa'afafine (Samoa and American Samoa), akava'ine (Cook Islands), fakaleiti or leiti (Kingdom of Tonga), and fakafafine (Niue), (MVPFAFF), (Brown-Acton, 2011). I am also looking to involve migrant sex workers who have New Zealand residency. I have sent you this information sheet because following our chat, you meet one or more of these criteria. If you are under 18, are not based in Auckland, do not identify as gender-expansive, or you do not have New Zealand residency, then you do not meet these criteria to take part in the project and I would like to warmly thank you for getting in touch but I cannot involve you in this particular study.

What will happen in this research?

There are two sessions that I would like you to take part in. Both sessions will take place at the Auckland NZPC office. An expression of thanks will be given in the form of a Prezzy card following your attendance at the second session. It is important that you attend both sessions to accurately capture your voice and experiences in the data. If, for whatever reason, you decide to not participate in the individual interview, your wishes will be respected, and you will be given

half of the expression of thanks for your participation in the group craft session.

3 February 2025

page 1 of 5

The first session is a group craft session where you will meet the other participants in this study. I will also be there as well as the Auckland NZPC Manager, Annah Pickering. We will be crafting a piece of art that fits to the project's title: *Diversity and discrimination in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand*. It is up to you what to create. There will be art supplies provided as well as kai (food) and refreshments. As we are crafting our art works, we will be sharing stories that speak to topics on 'risk', 'safety', 'discrimination', and 'moments of empowerment' (see the schedule attached). I have attached the craft session schedule for you to see before attending the session so you know what topics I will raise. Before the craft session you will have the opportunity to inform me of any topics that you do not want to contribute to. This session will last up to 120 minutes (about two hours) and will be recorded and transcribed by myself. As this craft session is a group activity, I will put in place a rule known as the Chatham House Rule. This rule means that all participants are free to use the information offered by the other participants, but they do not share any identifying information of any participant. This rule helps to protect you and the other participants. Transport will be available via the NZPC. You can take your crafted artwork home with you, or I can keep it safe and covered from view in the manager's office at NZPC. With your permission, I will take photographs of the finished pieces exclusively for any outputs related to this research. The photographs will be used for academic purposes only and will not be published in any form outside of this project without your written permission.

Your crafted artwork will be used to guide the interview we have which we will arrange after the craft session. Once the craft session is finished, I will offer you the option to review the themes that develop from the session's transcript. You can choose whether to make any comments on these themes. You will have four weeks to get in touch with me to feedback on the themes and how you would prefer to give feedback.

The second session is an individual interview which will take place in a private meeting room at the Auckland NZPC office. If you would prefer to meet elsewhere, there is an option to meet in a private room on campus at AUT. The interview will last between 60 - 120 minutes and will be guided by eight questions (see the schedule attached). I have attached the interview schedule for you to see before attending the interview so you know what questions I will be asking. Before the interview you will have the opportunity to inform me of any questions that you do not want me to ask. These questions are open because you are free to guide this interview and share as much as you want to. You can choose to not answer a question throughout the interview. I may ask questions to clarify what you have said, but I will not ask any other type of question than what you see on the schedule. Once this interview is complete, I will offer you an opportunity to review your transcript and your preference for making any amendments. You will have four weeks to get in touch with me to feedback on the transcript and how you would prefer to give feedback.

Following the project's conclusion, I plan to organise a feedback event with the NZPC where I would like to exhibit or display your created piece or artwork. The artworks would help to guide the feedback event as well as be celebrated and admired by the NZPC staff, volunteers, and any members of the community who access the office whilst the artworks are on display. This means that your artwork would be on display during normal business hours. Your artwork will only be on display for 24 hours unless you permit the NZPC to display it for longer. I will only display your artwork with your permission. To protect your identity, I ask that any names or signatures displayed on your artwork be under a chosen pseudonym (a name different from your real or working name).

How do I agree to participate in this research?

I have sent you two consent forms to take part in the group craft session and individual interview. Please read these carefully before agreeing to take part in the study. I will also go through these forms with you in person when we meet at the craft session and again in the interview.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You can withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What are the discomforts and risks?

You may experience some emotional discomfort during the craft session and interview as there may be some topics that come up that affect you. The craft session and interview focus on strengths rather than weaknesses and this minimises the risk of emotional discomfort; however, the experiences shared may be positive and negative. Any disclosures of illegal activity within the craft session or interview will not be transcribed and included in the study. While these experiences are important, the purpose of not including this type of information is to ensure the participant is not put at risk.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

I will provide you with a support pack during the craft session which contains useful information relevant to sex work and support services.

In addition, AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health can offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly because of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- drop into our centre at WB203 City Campus, email counselling@aut.ac.nz or call 921 9292.
- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health>

What are the benefits?

This research goes towards me gaining a qualification at AUT. It also may improve the advocacy, support and services for the sex work community. This includes benefitting the NZPC in their work to supporting and meeting the needs of sex workers in the community. I hope it will be a valuable and fulfilling experience for you and the other participants.

How will my privacy be protected?

You will be able to choose a different name unrelatable to you to protect your identity (a pseudonym). A name that represents the group at the craft session will also be decided by you and the other participants. We will go through this in the craft session and the importance of protecting each other's identities. This includes the use of the Chatham House Rule, which means that you are free to use information offered by other participants, but you cannot share the identity or identifying information of any participants. This ensures everyone involved in the study is respectful of each other's privacy.

There is a limit to your privacy during the craft session and interview as these sessions will take place at the Auckland NZPC office. The office will be closed to the public during the craft session, but this does not guarantee full privacy to all the participants. Moreover, the interview will take place during normal business hours but in a private room at the office.

All data will be electronically stored in AUT's OneDrive on an AUT passcode protected device. Consent Forms will be stored electronically in AUT's OneDrive on an AUT passcode protected device, but in a separate folder to the data. The project's supervisor, Dr Grace Gordon and the project's researcher, Bonnie (Hannah Thompson) will be the only people able to access the data.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The craft session will last up to 120 minutes (about two hours), the interview will last up to 60 minutes (about an hour). Transport is available via the NZPC unless you can make your own way to the sessions. Additional travel time is on top of the estimated session run-times. Kai (food) and refreshments will be available at the craft session and the interview.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Up to four weeks.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes. All participants will be provided with a written report of the research findings to thank you for your time and participation. In addition, the full thesis will be available on the NZPC website for you to access.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Grace Gordon, grace.gordon@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999 ext 30185

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of both Consent Forms for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

"Bonnie the volunteer" (Hannah Thompson), hannah.thompson@aut.ac.nz, 0226037390.

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Grace Gordon, grace.gordon@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999 ext 30185 .

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *the 16th of December 2024 (16/12/2024)*, ATEC Reference number *24/272*.



Consent and Release Form: Craft Session

Project title: Diversity and discrimination in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Project Supervisor: Dr Grace Gordon

Researcher: Bonnie (Hannah Thompson)

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated _____.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the craft session and that the craft session will be audio-taped and transcribed by Bonnie.
- I understand that the identities of my fellow participants and our discussions in the craft session is confidential to the group, and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I understand I have four weeks to feedback on the themes developed from the transcript of the group craft session.
- I permit the researcher to use the photographs taken of the artwork exclusively for any outputs related to this research.
- I understand that the photographs will be used for academic purposes only and will not be published in any form outside of this project without my written permission.
- I understand that any copyright material created by the photographic sessions is deemed to be owned by the researcher and that I do not own copyright of any of the photographs.
- I permit my artwork to be exhibited or displayed in the NZPC office, during normal business hours, at an organised event following the project’s conclusion as part of a feedback activity organised between Bonnie and the NZPC.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant’s signature:

Participant’s name:

Participant’s Contact Details (if appropriate):
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 16th December 2024 (16/12/2024)
AUTEC Reference number 24/272

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.



Consent and Release Form: Interview

Project title: Diversity and discrimination in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Project Supervisor: Dr Grace Gordon

Researcher: Bonnie (Hannah Thompson)

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated _____.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interview and that the interview will be audio-taped and transcribed by Bonnie.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I understand I have four weeks to feedback on the themes developed from the transcript of my interview.
- I permit the researcher to use the photographs taken of the artwork exclusively for any outputs related to this research.
- I understand that the photographs will be used for academic purposes only and will not be published in any form outside of this project without my written permission.
- I understand that any copyright material created by the photographic sessions is deemed to be owned by the researcher and that I do not own copyright of any of the photographs.
- I permit my artwork to be exhibited or displayed in the NZPC office, during normal business hours, at an organised event following the project's conclusion as part of a feedback activity organised between Bonnie and the NZPC.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 16th December 2024 (16/12/2024)
AUTEC Reference number 24/272

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.



Data Collection: Interview

Location: Auckland NZPC office

Duration: 60-120 minutes

Diversity and discrimination in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Karakia to open

Question 1: What is the story behind your crafted piece? When I say the word 'story' I mean a narrative from your life experience.

Question 2: What does risk mean to you in the context of your sex work?

Question 3: What does safety mean to you in the context of your sex work?

Question 4: What does discrimination mean to you in the context of your sex work?

Question 5: Does your identity or who you are impact these meanings for you?

Question 6: I'm really interested in understanding how decriminalisation has impacted on sex work and whether this affects your daily life in terms of risk, safety, and discrimination. Could you please give me an 'everyday' or 'ordinary' snapshot narrative from your most recent encounter with a client and whether it encompassed something to do with the level of risk and safety you felt and whether there was any discrimination you experienced?

Question 7: Have you experienced and can share experiences of discrimination whilst sex working? Can you share any positive strategies or experiences you've used to overcome challenges related to discrimination in sex work?

Question 8: Can you think of a story that captures these unique experiences for you as a sex worker when considering these elements of risk, safety, and discrimination? When I say the word 'story' I mean a narrative from your life experience.



Karakia to close

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 16th December 2024 (16/12/2024)

AUTEC Reference number 24/272



Data Collection: Group Craft Session

Location: Auckland NZPC office

Duration: Up to 120 minutes (about 2 hours)

Diversity and discrimination in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Karakia to open

Activity: Craft a piece or pieces of art that speaks to the topic(s) of identity (who you are), safety, risk, discrimination, or moments of empowerment.

Topics of discussion:

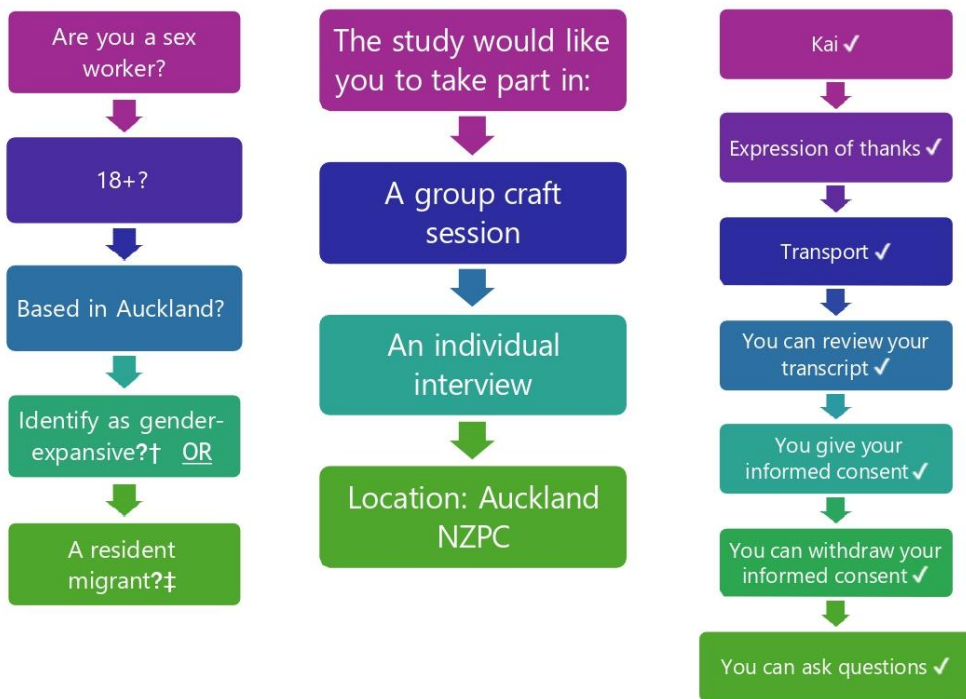
- Safety when sex working and what 'safety' means for you
- Risk when sex working and what 'risk' means for you
- Identities, who you are, and whether these impact on experiences of sex work
- Experiences of discrimination in sex work and positive strategies or experiences you've used to overcome discrimination-related challenges
- Moments of empowerment in sex work
- Impact of decriminalisation on these experiences and meanings

Karakia to close

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 16th December 2024 (16/12/2024)
AUTEK Reference number 24/272*

Diversity and discrimination in sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand

This is an AUT Master's Level student research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The study is exploring whether risk and safety differ for gender-expansive and migrant sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study hopes to be of benefit to the community by improving support and services.



Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on the 16th December 2024 (16/12/2024), AUTEK Reference number: 24/272.

To find out more please contact "Bonnie the volunteer" (Hannah Thompson)
Tel: 022 603 7390
Email: hannah.thompson@aut.ac.nz
NZPC volunteering hours:
Tuesdays & Thursdays

† your gender differs to the sex assigned to you at birth, you identify as trans (Polkinghorne, 2020), or māhū (Tahiti and Hawai'i), vakasalewalewa (Fiji), palopa (Papua New Guinea), fa'afafine (Samoa and American Samoa), akava'ine (Cook Islands), fakaleiti or leiti (Kingdom of Tonga), and fakafafine (Niue), (MVPFAFF), (Brown- Acton, 2011)

‡ you have New Zealand residency