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What we keep in the Shadows: Sex Work in Germany during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	II
List of Abbreviations.....	V
1. Introduction	1
2. Literature Review	5
2.1 Definition of Terms	5
2.2 History of Research on Prostitution and Sex Work.....	7
2.3 Conceptualising (In)securities in Offline and Online Sex Work.....	8
2.4 Stigmatisation as a Driver of Insecurities.....	11
2.5 Contributing to Future Research – Sex Work and the COVID-19 Pandemic	12
3. Legal Framework.....	15
3.1 The Regulation of Sex Work in Germany	16
4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology	19
4.1 Theoretical Framework	19
4.2 Methodology: Qualitative Data Collection	21
4.2.1 The Expert Interviews	22
4.2.2 Coding	24
4.2.3 Ethical Considerations.....	24
4.2.4 Research Challenges and Limitations	25
5. Analysis of Data	26
5.1 Economic Hardship.....	26
5.2 Food and Nutrition Security	29
5.3 Personal Security.....	30
5.4 Digital Sex Work and Security.....	34
5.5 Concluding Remarks	36
6. The COVID-19 Pandemic and its effects on (in)securities of sex workers.....	38
6.1 Looking Past the Lens of Covid	42
7. Concluding Remarks	46
Bibliography.....	50
Appendix 1: Interview Guidelines	59

Abstract:

This dissertation is an account of the struggle of sex workers' community in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted multiple sectors, one such being sex work. Often considered a taboo subject, sex work received little attention from researchers, especially in Germany. Gaps in research can be found due to limited interaction academics have with sex workers or the agencies that sex workers interact with. For this reason, the objective of the research is to explore the research question of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected multiple forms of (in)securities of sex workers in Germany. As such, the dissertation aims to fill two gaps: First, it seeks give a voice to those who understand the intricacies of the hardships that sex workers face. Second, the German perspective can offer a narrow understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 policies on sex workers. This dissertation prioritises the individual and explores the power relations between the state and a marginalised group such as sex workers. To answer the research question, the dissertation takes a qualitative research approach that uses semi-structured expert interviews to collect primary data. Offering a way to reveal the experiences of a marginalized community, online interviews were conducted with employees of specialist sex-work counselling centres and professional associations (N=6) in June and July 2022. The interviews covered a pre-generated topic list. The transcripts were coded using NVivo software and adhered to the Mayring (2015) format to allow for a qualitative content analysis.

The analysis and discussion revealed four main themes of how the pandemic impacted sex workers: *economic hardship*, *food security*, *personal security* and *digital sex work and security*. Due to the ban on sex work during the pandemic, sex workers faced *economic hardships* as a result of income loss. Even though recovery funds existed, there were considerable obstacles in receiving those funds. The second theme, *food security*, found that sex workers were increasingly reliant on food programmes from agencies, which confirms the problem of financial hardship. The risk of infection halted food programmes, increasing food insecurity. Moreover, there were major impacts on the sex workers' *personal security*. Sex workers who kept working to maintain an income were at an increased risk of contracting Covid-19. Furthermore, as they were pushed into illegality, less regulation and oversight existed, which increased vulnerability to exploitation. Additionally, clients became more violent and sex workers had less leverage in negotiating safe sex. The final theme explored the role of the internet in sex work during the pandemic. *Digital sex work and security* was a reoccurring theme as experts noted a migration of sex workers from the street towards the internet.

Nevertheless, they suggest that internet security had a minor role when compared to the other major insecurities that sex workers faced during the pandemic. While this work offers a more thorough understanding of the experiences of this marginalised community, more attention needs to be devoted to find solutions to the insecurities of sex workers, especially in the aftermath of a global pandemic.

Key Words: Sex Work, COVID-19, Everyday Security, Germany

List of Abbreviations

<i>Berufsverband Sexarbeit</i>	
BesD	31
<i>European Sex Workers Rights Alliance</i>	
ESWA.....	12
<i>Global Network of Sex Work Project</i>	
NSWP	13
<i>Human Immunodeficiency Viruses</i>	
HIV	9
<i>Human Papillomavirus</i>	
HPV	13
<i>Prostituiertenschutzgesetz</i>	
ProstSchG	15
<i>Prostitutionsgesetz</i>	
ProstG.....	15
<i>Sexually Transmitted Infections</i>	
STIs.....	9
<i>World Health Organization</i>	
WHO.....	1

1. Introduction

On March 11th, 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Shortly after, the German government launched the first attempts to control the virus in order to safeguard the public from infection and prevent the health system from being overrun. The Infection Protection Act, known as ‘Infektionsschutzgesetz’, was enacted to control potential methods to combat the pandemic, and it serves as the legal foundation for distancing regulations, obligatory masks, and restrictions on outdoor activities. The German Bundestag enacted the law, but each state government remained responsible for its implementation due to the country's federal structure. This enables state governments to respond quickly to local events, such as growing or dropping infection rates (Bundestag, 2020). One of the nationwide measures to prevent the spread of the virus was the prohibition of close contact services, including in-person sex work. As a result, brothels, erotic massage studios, and strip clubs had to close, and the sale of sex, in general, was prohibited for several months during the first lockdown, which began in March, and was reinstated in November 2020. To compensate for financial losses caused by these restrictions, the federal government established the COVID-19 emergency relief programme, under which official prostitution establishments and sex workers registered with a tax number in Germany were eligible for financial assistance (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

As the number of Covid-19 cases in Germany dropped during the summer months of 2020 and 2021, certain state governments decided to gradually open up facilities that provide close contact services, such as hairdressers, beauticians, tattoo studios, and chiropodists. Sex work was not included in the relaxations, with numerous states outlawing sexual services until the very end of the pandemic (Schmitz 2020). In some cases, higher administrative courts overturned the restriction because they were no longer proportional, as other professions were permitted to resume operation. As a result, non-profit organisations, sex work activists, and sex workers staged protests calling for opening sex work venues and the legalisation of sex work. During the protests, it was argued that the disproportionately long closure and ban of sex work would harm individuals in the sex industry in several ways and further stigmatise an already marginalised population (Deutsche Welle, 2020).

Within academia, there are many studies focused on the violent conditions and power dynamics that sex workers confront. These studies often assume that sex workers do not know what is best for them and must be rescued from the settings in which they operate (Barry 1995).

This form of investigation has not allowed the opinions of sex workers to be voiced and takes agency away from sex workers to influence and shape the context they work within. Critical academics have noticed this gap, emphasizing the need of using sex workers' ideas and experiences as a starting point for contextual understanding of the intricacies and challenges of sex work. Furthermore, they emphasize the significance of this first-hand contextual information in developing and enacting appropriate public policies linked to sex work. (Pitcher & Wijers 2014, Wahab 2003). Some scholars propose that sex work be completely decriminalised and legalised so that those persons in this profession have the same status as all other workers and may be protected from potentially hazardous conditions at work. There is empirical work that portrays sex workers as a heterogeneous group, while others focus on research that illustrates the great diversity in terms of the status, opinions, experiences and positions of sex workers (Weitzer, 2009), highlighting the complexity and diversity of this field. In the case of Germany, much of the recent research focuses on the legal status of sex work, often discussing the ways in which sex is regulated in the international debate (Pates, 2012) or in relation to anti-trafficking measures (Thieman, 2020), and a growing number of studies focus on individual groups within the sex work community as migrant sex worker (Castañeda, 2013), male sex workers (Vanwesenbeeck, 2013), or transsexual sex workers (Altay, 2021).

This dissertation seeks to fill the two gaps outlined above: first, the silencing of sex workers' voices; this is important because one cannot have a complete understanding of all the intricacies and hardships of the sex work trade without speaking to sex workers themselves and those who work with them; and second, by adding the German perspective to the burgeoning literature on the intersection of sex work and COVID-19. This work is both relevant and important to the field of security studies because it prioritises the individual in order to tease out the power relationalities between the state and marginalised groups whose voices are often ignored. It contributes to a broader understanding of security which allows us to interrogate existing structures in society through new lenses.

These observations led to the following research question: *How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected multiple forms of (in)securities of sex workers in Germany?* The research is founded on the notion that for those involved in the sex work trade, the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in exacerbated circumstances caused by the pandemic's political countermeasures, has become a security issue. As a result, it is assumed that these individuals have created alternative methods to sustain their livelihoods, particularly through internet-facilitated

services. This argument is based on the fact that internet sex work was legal in Germany during the pandemic. It should be highlighted that

this is not a study of modern slavery and trafficking inside the offline or online adult sex work industry, nor does it estimate the percentage of people who are victims of modern slavery or are coerced. The aims of this study are, therefore, to map trends and identify security problems for sex workers during the pandemic, what the repercussions of the sudden prohibition of in-person sexual services were, investigate how and which coping mechanisms were employed, and contribute to an important corpus of growing research on sex work and COVID-19 that has examined the livelihood of sex workers during the crisis. Because there is limited empirical data on the topic, the dissertation concentrates on Germany. Furthermore, the international community describes and perceives Germany as particularly progressive in terms of sex work, which contributes to Germany's sex work regulation not being critically evaluated, particularly in the mainstream media but also in academia, but this dissertation seeks to fill this gap.

To answer the question posed in this dissertation, guideline-based expert interviews were conducted with six individuals working for sex worker support centres¹. The qualitative strategy to data collecting was chosen because to the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the project's goal of diversifying knowledge on sex workers from an individual human perspective. Based on expert knowledge from those who work with sex workers, this will increase academic understanding of the settings and situations in which sex workers operate. It is important to note that the data collected would have been more illuminating if sex workers had directly provided their opinions; however, due to the ethical constraints of what can be done in a master's dissertation, the expert insight from those who work with sex workers provides a suitable alternative. The interviews took place online in accordance with the security procedures stated in the ethical approval due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to guarantee the safety of the participants and interviewers. The data was analysed using content analysis, according to Mayring (2015). For this purpose, the interviews were transcribed, translated and coded using a self-developed category system. The coding process was carried out with the help of the NVivo software programme. *Everyday Security* by Crawford and Hutchinson (2015), as well

¹ In this dissertation sex worker support or counseling centre is understood as a program that consults both sex workers and victims of human trafficking on a wide variety of topics, ranging from change of the profession, and the organisation of medical care to pastoral care. This is an essential proviso because there must be a difference established between sex employment and trafficking for sexual exploitation.

as the concept of stigmatisation by Erving Goffman (1963), serves as the theoretical scaffolding for this dissertation. These concepts offer critiques to the ideas of traditional security as well as human security for being too state-centric, which serves as a launchpad for this dissertation.

The following chapter (Chapter 2) introduces the current state of research on sex work, starting with a discussion and definition of the term's 'prostitution' and 'sex work' (Subchapter 2.1) and an overview of the history of sex work research (Subchapter 2.2). The subchapters that follow (2.3 and 2.4) present work from the sex work research that aids in conceptualising security within sex work and the impact and role stigmatisation plays in it. The final subchapter of the literature review (2.5) provides an initial perspective on the topic of this dissertation and highlights the research gap. Chapter Three is dedicated to the theoretical, methodological approach and research ethics. Subchapter 3.1 provides an overview of the 'Everyday Security' concept developed by Crawford and Hutchinson (2016) and Erving Goffman's (1963) critical assessment of stigma. Subchapter 3.2 investigates the data gathering strategy for this dissertation and addresses the ethical considerations, constraints, and research challenges associated with data collection. Chapter Four lays the groundwork for understanding the legal framework for sex work in Germany. The data obtained and analysed in the context of previous research and limitations are discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 5). Finally, Chapter Six forms the concluding remarks and provides an outlook on future research.

2. Literature Review

The following chapter provides a selective overview of literature and research on sex work. The objective is not only to analyse the present scholarly work on this topic but to identify gaps in the research and thus provide the basis for this dissertation. The chapter is divided into five main sections. The first section defines the relevant terms and challenges the reductive dichotomies that often frame sex work and sex workers - e.g., good or bad, forced or chosen (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013). Following that is an overview of the history of prostitution and sex work research. Subchapter 2.3 examines the concept of security and insecurity in the sex work industry by analysing contemporary literature. Because stigmatisation was a recurrent variable in the research, the next subchapter thoroughly explores the literature on stigma in the context of sex work. Lastly, literature on sex work during the COVID-19 pandemic and its relationship to the central research question of this thesis will be discussed.

2.1 Definition of Terms

Prostitution, which is referred to in public discourse as one of the oldest professions in the world, continues to play an important role as a source of income around the world. The United Nations estimates that about 40-42 million people are engaged in the occupation of 'prostitution' (Goldmann, 2011); however, due to the absence of censuses and accurate sampling strategies, the absolute number of adults who sell sexual services might be higher (McCarthy, et al., 2012; Shaver, 2005). In academia, politics, and society, the terms 'prostitution' and 'sex work' are frequently interchanged to refer to the exchange of sexual services for money or other commodities (Orchard, 2020). Due to these terms' socially and politically fraught nature, this review begins by examining their origins, meanings, and implications.

Epistemologically, the term prostitution comes from the latin verb 'prostituere' and means to expose publicly, abuse, prostitute oneself for a low purpose, engage in prostitution or do something for the sake of an advantage that damages one's reputation (Dudenredaktion, no year). Although prostitution was not always considered deviant behaviour (Bassermann, 1988), the term is often associated with notions of illegality, criminal activity, and immoral practices rather than a profession. When Christians began prohibiting prostitution in Roman temples around 350 AD, the deliberate denigration of female sexuality resulted in increasingly intolerant views against prostitutes (Sanders, et al., 2017). Those selling sex were stigmatised in ancient and mediaeval times, associated with venereal diseases common among soldiers, and considered anathema to modern society (Laite, 2011). Over the centuries, culturally created

identities of prostitutes have been influenced by historical constructions through the media, politics, and official discourses that have fixated on the image of the 'whore'. Pheterson summarises this phenomenon:

The prostitute is the prototype of the stigmatized woman defined by unchastity which casts her status as impure. The 'prostitute', or the 'whore', is contrasted to the female mirror image of the 'Madonna', which portrays the image of pure femininity: that is, sacred and holy. The 'Madonna/whore' binary projects the status of the prostitute woman as a failed example of womanhood, defined by her immoral sexual behaviours, and someone to be avoided. (1989, p. 231)

To this day, the term is marked by moral prejudice and is accompanied by a pathologisation of people who sell sex (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). On the contrary, it might be claimed that the term 'prostitution' should be avoided as an absolute taboo, as it risks making the societal stigmatization of sex workers invisible.

The use of 'sex work' as a synonym for prostitution stems from the international 'whore' movement of the 1980s and is an attempt by sex-positive feminists and academia to reframe the definition of sexual services without value-based judgment (Bracewell, 2020). The term itself was coined at a conference by Carol Leigh, an American sex worker, academic and activist, in 1978. Through the 1998 anthology edited by Priscilla Alexander and Frédérique Delacoste, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, in which sex workers themselves wrote about their experiences in the sex industry for the first time, the term sex work developed into a popular designation and is now also widely used among scholars. Sex work is used as a non-stigmatising term that legitimizes the aspect of labour (Ditmore, 2006). The term's use is widespread among proponents of sex work, who argue that it conveys a feeling of professionalisation and dignity similar to other professions, especially when opposed to 'prostitution' (McNeill, 2014). According to Bindman and Doezman (1997) the word redefines commercial sex, not as a sociological or psychological trait of a class of women, but as an income-generating activity or kind of work for women and men.

The question of the usage of terminology in relation to sexual services is closely related to the debate over whether the selling of sex may be considered labour or if the sale of sex in and of itself is exploitative (Miriam, 2005). With freedom of choice as a central theme, society, academia, and policymakers are confronted with the issue of describing sex work as a voluntary sexual transaction that is not forced and has nothing to do with human trafficking or conflating forced and/or involuntary sexual transactions such as child prostitution. Especially among those

who want to restrict or prohibit sex work, the concept of free choice and lack of control over another person's sexual behaviour is controversial and raises the question of where sex work ends and human trafficking begins (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012). Another point of discussion within academia is the question of which adult services fall under the heading of sex work and which do not. There is a call for a distinction between adult services involving physical contact and online interactions, such as pornographic movies or phone sex; at the same time, it is argued that sex work can involve different activities, and no distinction should be made between physical contact and technology-facilitated sexual services sex (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Sanders & Campbell, 2007). Ultimately, however, it is important to understand that commercial sex involves exchanging a range of sexual activities (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005).

As demonstrated, sex work, like the term "prostitution" is not a neutral term. Nevertheless, this author uses the terms sex work and sex service in this thesis when discussing the legal sale of sexual services to convey an accepting approach and avoid the stereotypes associated with prostitution. In this thesis, the terms sex work and prostitution are used to signify a distinction from the trafficking of any person for sexual exploitation; the former is a legal occupation and the latter a criminal offence. Using expressions like "forced prostitution" blurs the lines, eventually harming individuals impacted because both groups have different needs and require distinct support services.

2.2 History of Research on Prostitution and Sex Work

The focus on sex work in the academic world stems from various disciplines, spans several hundred years and is growing exponentially. Starting in the late 19th century, the sale of sex was researched in a sexological, socio-medical and pathological way, focusing on the profession as a social class problem. Nineteenth-century writers, often religious figures, social anthropologists, and medical doctors, tended to attach personal morals to their writings and portrayed prostitution as the "Great Social Evil" (Newman, 1869). The focus of research, especially in German literature, therefore, ranges from the individual selling sex to the effects of the profession on society and the health of the population. As the sale of sexual services during this time was considered immoral, such behaviour was deemed a form of sexual deviance (Guggenbrühl & Berger, 2001). Based on this concept, prostitution became the topic of scientific analysis in the 1960s and 1970s, known as deviance research. In an attempt to understand where prostitution came from and why women are offering sex for money, scholars attempted to link their behaviour to hysteria (Grenz & Lücke, 2015). Gilfoyle (1999), argues that the focus of research in the 1980s shifted to studying prostitutes themselves and their role

in society. This shift can partly be attributed to Walkowitz's work *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1982), which analysed women and prostitutes in connection with the Contagious Diseases Acts, but ultimately also examined their position in Victorian society in general. With the rise of feminist movements in the 1980s, the scholarly world started to focus more on women in prostitution as victims of social conditions, eclipsing the previous emphasis on deviancy research (Weitzer, 2006; Barry, 1995).

With the focus on sex workers as victims, two paradigms have been repeatedly discussed and contrasted in the literature. According to supporters of the 'oppression paradigm' (Weitzer, 2009), sex workers endure violence and exploitation for reasons unconnected to legal and social frameworks or unique working conditions. Thus, insecurity is unavoidable and harmful experiences are generalised (Weitzer, 2009). It assumes that legislative reforms or restrictions would not improve the situation in general since prostitution is inherently patriarchal, victimising women in particular, and founded in sexual hierarchies that stigmatise 'unethical' sexual behaviours (Butler, 2009). This point of view, as well as the underlying dominant concepts of gender and sexuality, are frequently represented in policy (Heumann, et al., 2016). Those who acknowledge voluntary entrance into the business of sex work are known as representatives of the 'empowerment paradigm' (Weitzer, 2009). While this paradigm celebrates the agency of those choosing sex work, it can also be problematic. It emphasises good experiences while ignoring the varying realities of sex workers and the influence of the many circumstances in which they do their profession. If the absence of labour rights and their consequences are not recognised, and/or sex workers are portrayed as uniformly happy and empowered, sex workers' insecurity will be exacerbated. (Cubides Kovacsics, et al., 2022).

2.3 Conceptualising (In)securities in Offline and Online Sex Work

Security is not only a core aim of politics and society, but a fundamental human need that plays a significant role in the lives of all people. In sociological theorising, security is primarily articulated as a construction that can never be considered independently of individuals. This constructivist concept of security allows for an interpretative view of insecurity, which includes the person and his or her sense of insecurity. One of the primary study concerns in the literature on sex work is the presence or lack of security (Slezak, 2017). Throughout history, medical practitioners to political scientists have addressed the extent to which people in sex work are exposed to certain dangers. Due to the vulnerability of this group, a large body of academic literature has emerged, showing that 50-100 per cent of street sex workers are exposed to physical, sexual and economic insecurities (Kurtz, et al., 2004; Miller & Schwartz, 1995). The

following paragraph briefly reviews the most often discussed safety risks in academic literature when discussing sex workers. It demonstrates where offline and online sex work differs and overlaps in perceived (in)securities.

According to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, no individual “shall be subject to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (Assembly, U.G., 1984). Although this law applies to individuals working in the sex industry, many are facing disproportionate abuse and insecurities. There are structural risks of violence at the macro level (laws, norms, stigma) and micro level (access to health information and support centres) (Gerassi, 2015). Recent comprehensive assessments revealed important structural variables determining sex workers’ vulnerability, including criminalisation of sex work, work conditions, gender, and economic inequality (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013; Deering, et al., 2014; Gruskin, et al., 2013). Scholars and sex industry activists particularly emphasise the intersection of criminalisation, police surveillance and stigmatisation, which negatively impact the safety and occupational health of sex workers. They go on to say that in many countries that criminalise sex work, police arrests and harassment often drive sex workers out of the industry, removing support networks, service providers and opportunities to reduce risk (Rhodes, et al., 2008; Shannon & Csete, 2010; Simić & Rhodes, 2009). A large body of research indicates that social and structural factors mainly cause insecurity in the sector.

A systematic review by Platt et al. (2018) stresses the relationship between policymaking and safety for sex workers. Criminalisation or repressive policing was generally associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing physical or sexual violence from clients, partners, police or other parties. Furthermore, it is commonly assumed that those offering sexual services are more likely to have unprotected sex and are more likely to be living with the human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) or sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Although the sexual health of sex workers is recognised as a critical issue, and numerous studies on HIV and STIs have been published in recent years (Platt, et al., 2018), it is not usually at the forefront of health concerns for those working in the sex industry. According to some studies, the wide-ranging public and academic conversations on the subject may lead to more significant health concerns for sex workers being missed (Jones, 2020; Heimer, 2014). Additionally, the widespread assumption that sex workers are “disease carriers” contributes to the stigma they face. According to recent study, certain sex workers are at a higher risk of contracting STIs owing to particular mitigating variables, whilst others are not. As a vulnerable group within society, sex workers can be prone to exposure to physical and mental issues (Rössler, et al., 2010).

Financial stability is closely tied to the issue of physical and psychological well-being among sex workers. The literature is replete with data linking a lack of monetary resources to more significant risks to sex workers. Although food security in the context of health and well-being is less discussed, it has crucial implications for economic vulnerability and susceptibility to disease. Literature on food insecurity and HIV prevalence found that food insecurity increases biological vulnerability to HIV due to nutritional, mental health, and behavioural pathways (Weiser, et al., 2011). A much larger body of scientific work addresses food insecurity as exacerbating the “sex for basic needs” pathway. In this case, insufficient food availability is a driving factor in why affected individuals offer sex in return for resources and food (Fielding-Miller, et al., 2014; Miller, et al., 2011; Whittle, et al., 2015).

With the advent of the Internet, adult services shifted towards the use of digital technologies. These, like offline adult services, can vary in their approach and execution, whether it is the sale of services via webcam, advertising, or pornographic movies (Sanders, 2005; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011). According to Brooks-Gordon et al. (2021), the shift to online platforms is primarily explained by the decline of traditional markets, such as the closure of brothels and a decrease in the use of housing and street markets. They claim that cyberlife’s characteristics have significantly impacted how the sex trade is organised. A substantial percentage of existing study on Internet-based sex work focuses on the beneficial influence of the digital age on sex workers’ market access and financial opportunities. Scholars extend the positive improvements in these workers’ labour situations by conceptualising sex work in the digital era in terms of affordances. Workers engaging in technology and Internet-facilitated sex work did not only have higher earnings than outdoor sex workers (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011) but were also more likely to work without the influence of “third parties” (Bernstein, 2007). Aside from the positive impact of digitalisation on the market value of sex workers, there is optimism regarding the Internet’s ability to lessen stigma and the danger of violence against sex workers. The positive outlook in this literature acknowledges the benefits of technology on the well-being of sex workers (Bernstein, 2007; Sanders, 2005). However, the literature on digital sexual services often fails to illuminate the new threats and challenges posed by the increased digitalisation of sex workers’ everyday life. Violations such as doxing², as well as the

² “The action of finding or publishing private information about someone on the internet without their permission, especially in a way that reveals their name, address, etc.” (Cambridge Dictionary, no year).

loss of control over digital identities, are among the concerns of new digital alternatives for sex workers (Jones, 2015).

2.4 Stigmatisation as a Driver of Insecurities

As the previous section outlined, sex industry scholars have drawn on a broad range of ideologies throughout the ages, including feminist, scientific, psychological, and public health viewpoints. Most of these scholarly studies discuss stigma as one of the variables contributing to insecurity. Based on this finding, the following section provides an overview of stigma in the context of sex work.

Stigma, according to Goffman (1963), is a social characteristic that separates people or groups in society based on socially created judgements and standards. In this context, identities are formed and imposed around individuals and groups, leading to social exclusion or violence (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986; Farley, 2004). Although stigmatisation's definitions and concepts differ, scholars generally agree that stigma arises from threats to social order and population survival (Benoit, et al., 2018). A study from Farley describes stigmatisation as one of the “primary harms of prostitution” (2004), particularly from the perspective of general society. Due to stigmatisation, people who provide sexual services are no longer considered “full” human beings and are pushed away from society into an invisible sphere. This is especially noticeable in countries where certain sexual services, such as street prostitution and brothels, are illegal. While it has been proposed that decriminalisation would help reduce the social injustice and stigma that prostitutes face (Farley, 2004), scholars point out that stigma exists at various levels, even in countries with a more liberal approach to sex work (Trautner & Collett, 2010; Royalle, 1993). The role of politics and the media is repeatedly mentioned in the literature linking stigmatization and sex work as they are responsible for spreading negative discourses about sex work among the population (Hayes-Smith & Shekarkhar, 2010; Phillips, et al., 2012; Gorry, et al., 2010). This is partly because the issue of sex work is presented in moralistic terms in the media, including the use of marginalizing discourse that equates sex work with trafficking, victimisation, and exploitation.

Patriarchal gender relations, power structures and violence are driving forces related to stigma and can lead to multiple physical and psychological risks for sex workers of all genders. Most scholarly work that addresses physical and sexual violence indicates that violence is a prominent feature of sex workers worldwide (Easterbrook, 2007). The specificity of the phenomenon is described by numerous studies (Sanders, 2001; Argento, et al., 2020; Platt, et

al., 2011). One of many is Bindel et al. (2012) who found that two-thirds of sex workers surveyed had experienced some form of physical violence. Although researchers agree that experiences of violence do occur among sex workers, opinions differ regarding assessing the extent and specificity of the violence. On the one hand, some studies share an abolitionist approach and view prostitution as ‘paid rape’ (Dworkin, 1993), which purports that selling sexual services violates international human rights laws and is a modern form of slavery. On the other hand, some scholars argue that stigmatisation and marginalisation lead to violent assaults and further see penalisation as the basis for violence against sex workers (Sanders & Campbell, 2007; Kesler, 2002).

The research on stigma and violence gives vital insights into the everyday experiences of sex workers, yet most of the literature mentioned above has historically focussed on women; only recently men have been discussed as providers of sexual services rather than only as purchasers, and the research on those describing male sex workers’ experiences involving stigma is growing (Koken, et al., 2004; Smith, et al., 2012). Even less is reported about the stigmatisation of transsexual and homosexual sex workers. The latter research emphasises the significance of recognising and comprehending the multi-layered component of stigma, particularly when it is combined with homophobic and/or transphobic attitudes (Bernstein, 2007). Vanwesenbeeck highlights that “male sex workers serving men, on the other hand, may experience double stigma³: stigma of homosexuality and the stigma of commercial sex” (2013, p. 14).

2.5 Contributing to Future Research – Sex Work and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The previous subsections provided an overview of the development of sexuality research and its current status, with a focus on safety-related issues. The literature review underlined the importance of recognizing that persons in the sex work sector operate in a complex environment impacted by multiple and intersecting forms of vulnerability, which is especially crucial for comprehending their everyday experiences with security. This section concludes by demonstrating a present lacuna in the literature in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and how this study addresses this important gap.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019, many people’s everyday lives were interrupted, and their notion of security changed. Activists and sex worker support

³ When individuals are facing two stereotypes or negative views attributed to a them when their characteristics or behaviors are viewed as different from or inferior to societal norms.

organisations have recently pointed out that sex workers are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Fedorkó, et al., 2021). The European Sex Workers Rights Alliance (ESWA) indicated in a report from 2020 that “since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and Central Asia, sex workers have reported extreme concerns with the dramatic impact on their living conditions, including the ability to earn a living and access to health” (ESWA, 2020). During that period, an increasing number of sex industry academics and activists focused on examining the influence of government policies and COVID-19-related measures on the socioeconomic security and well-being of sex workers (Pereira, 2021; Callander, et al., 2021) and called on policymakers to include the sex workers in their policies (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Sex work rights groups around the world criticised the inadequate access to health services (Shareck, et al., 2021), increased intimate partner violence (Zemlak, et al., 2021), as well as exclusion from financial assistance (Fedorkó, et al., 2021). According to the Global Network of Sex Work Project (NSWP), access to health services such as Human Papillomavirus (HPV) sub-type testing, cancer screening, pregnancy testing and more were not prohibited during the pandemic but were hindered primarily by structural barriers such as criminalisation and stigmatisation (NSWP 2022). This was fuelled by the increased portrayal of people engaged in sex work as “disease carriers” of STIs and COVID-19 (Gilges & Hofstetter, 2020; Bundesverband Sexuelle Dienstleistungen e.V. (BSD), 2020). These changes can be linked to the closing of brothels, as well as to the regulation of sex work and its relocation away from public scrutiny and into private locations, or the greater use of online platforms and technology (de Gallier, 2022). In Germany, the media first picked up the topic of sex work in relationship to COVID-19 in the second half of 2020. The discussion centered on the legal basis for sex work in Germany, but there was also an increased focus on how much female sex workers in brothels and on the street were affected by the pandemic. From the beginning of 2021, academic works on the topic appeared in German-speaking countries, which mostly reflected the reality of sex workers’ lives through interviews. In general, there is a dearth of academic studies on the pandemic’s influence on sex workers in Germany. In addition, the issue of (in)securities is often not in the foreground; rather, the focus is on mental and psychological health. In the COVID-19-related sex work research, women are the target research group, while men and transgender sex workers are largely ignored. Finally, this dissertation takes a step forward in defining and theorising sexual services as dynamic and changing experiences. Often, sex work research appears to deviate from the topics that are most important in the lives of persons who perform or engage in sex work. This is due to the fact that it is frequently confined

to research themes that are prominent in policy discussions and do not always address the immediate problems of people involved in the sex industry.

3. Legal Framework

This chapter provides a brief overview of the underlying legislation on the subject for a better understanding of the topic of sex work in Germany. The regulation of the sale and service of sex work is a challenging task that nations throughout the world are addressing in various ways. In its *Resolution of the 26 February 2014 on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality*, the European Parliament considers the selling of sexual services as well as forced prostitution as a “form of slavery incompatible with human dignity and fundamental human rights” and a “both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality”. However, due to a lack of a majority, the resolution was not enacted, and detractors of the resolution emphasised that regulation of prostitution is a method to defend the rights of individuals active in the sex market (2013/2103(INI)). Overall, the EU is a patchwork of nations that focus either on the abolition⁴ of prostitution, imposing some form of regulation, or recognise the sale of sex as a profession like any other (2013/2103(INI)). Thereby the discussion around the sale of sex is strongly influenced by moral ideas and values, whereby politics and legislation reflect these ideas.

Germany is one of the countries in Europe where prostitution is not entirely legal but regulated by law. Compared to countries where the prohibition or abolition of prostitution is mainly directed against those who sell sexual services, Germany reinforces legislation but further aims to protect those involved in the sale of sexual services. However, this has not always been the case. Since 1927 the sale of sexual services in Germany has not been prohibited but considered immoral and harmful to the community. The assessment was based on the Federal Administrative Court case law, which in 1965 equated prostitution with the activity of a criminal profession. The definition of “good morals” was based on a statement by the Imperial Court from 1901 stating that it is a sense of decency of all fair and just thinkers (Euchner, 2015). Due to this classification, sex workers had little to no legal or social security protections and were thus often pressured to lead a “risky double life” (Steffan, 2020, p. 216). In addition to the lack of laws protecting people who provided sexual services, the law to curb health hazards had a reinforcing influence on the stigmatisation and safety of sex workers. Health authorities in the 1980s were able to protect the population by requiring “sexually transmitted persons and persons who are strongly suspected of being sexually transmitted and of spreading sexually transmitted diseases” to undergo regular examinations for gonorrhoea and syphilis. The

⁴ Prostitution itself is legal, but third-party involvement is prohibited; also known as the Nordic Modell e.g. in Sweden

document issued after the examination had to be carried by sex workers at all times and be shown to health authorities or law enforcement upon request. Failure to comply with the examination dates resulted in fines for committing a misdemeanour (Euchner, 2015).

3.1 *The Regulation of Sex Work in Germany*

It was not until 2002 that the then-red-green federal government passed legislation making sex labour no longer considered “immoral”. The *Prostitutionsgesetz* (ProstG), or *Regulating the Legal Situation of Prostitutes*, was one of the first attempts to improve the living and working conditions of prostitutes in Germany. However, various official statements of the federal government emphasised that the act neither intends to “abolish prostitution” nor enhance “it’s status” (BMFSFJ, 2007, p.9). The removal of the immorality clause had two main consequences. First, sex workers were able to sue their clients for their wages if they did not receive the agreed payment for the sexual services they received (Evans 1976). Second, sex workers had the option of concluding an employment contract with the operator of a prostitution business and thus working as employees in an employment relationship subject to social security contributions (Evans 1976). Lastly, the ProstG provided individuals selling sex access to social insurance and thus social security.

In an evaluation of the Prostitution Act commissioned by the federal government, it was made clear that specific goals had not been achieved and that there was a need for reform. It was noted, for example, that the ProstG left out the area of unauthorised prostitution (e.g., human trafficking, forced prostitution) and omitted the regulations on the sex trafficking of foreigners (Renzikowski, 2007). Apart from this, the 2002 Act was criticised for having missies creating federal zones, leaving the states to keep “Sperrgebiete,” or prostitution-free zones, which effectively outlawed prostitution in large parts of the country.

The German government enacted a new law for sex workers and establishments like brothels on July 1, 2017. In addition to protecting sex workers from violence and exploitation, the *Prostituiertenschutzgesetz* (ProstSchG) or *Prostitution Protection Act* seeks to strengthen their right to self-determination and combat human trafficking and pimping (BMFSFJ 2015). The law aims to improve access to those engaged in sex work to pass on legal information as well as to provide offers of health and social support (Deutscher Bundestag 2019). To achieve these goals, the regulations contained in the Act address not only sex workers per se (§§3-11, §32 ProstSchG) but also the sex work trades (§§12-23 ProstSchG). Lastly, certain obligations of the operators of these trades are stipulated (§§24-28 ProstSchG), and regulations on fines are

established (§33 ProstSchG). The ProstSchG is one of numerous criminal and regulatory laws regulating sex work. To better understand the general legal framework regarding sex work in Germany before the pandemic, the following sections outline the individual sections of the law.

Registration is required under the ProstSchG law when selling any sexual service, whereby no specific distinction of the type of sex work is made. The registration is accompanied by a mandatory informational interview (§7 para.2 ProstSchG) and a health consultation by the health office (§10 para.3 ProstSchG). Prerequisites for registration are the provision of personal data, such as first and last name, date and place of birth, citizenship, an address for service, as well as information on the regions in which the work is planned (§4 para.1 ProstSchG). The personal data of sex workers provided in the registration procedure are collected and may be used to monitor the practice of the activity (Büttner, 2017). In this context, disclosing this data to other authorities, such as tax offices, youth welfare offices or police authorities, is permissible (Flügge, 2019). Thus, the registration of sex workers occurs with not just one but many authorities in the Federal Republic. Persons who do not hold German citizenship and are not entitled to freedom of movement “must prove at the time of registration that they are entitled to engage in employment or self-employment” (§4 para.2 ProstSchG), which can be a valid residence and work permit. After completing the registration process, sex workers receive a registration certificate for two years for those over 21 years of age and one year for persons over 18. Registration certificates must be renewed annually in the context of a health consultation (§4 para.4 ProstSchG).

In addition to requiring sex workers to register, prostitution establishments such as brothels, “love-mobiles,” and nudist clubs must obtain a permit from the authorities. Before issuing the permit, authorities inspect establishments according to legal requirements, including sanitary facilities, emergency buttons and more. According to the permit ordinance, operators of these establishments are not allowed to dictate “how and to what extent prostitutes provide sexual services.” Ultimately, a condom requirement applies to any sexual act, whether oral, anal or vaginal (§32 para.1 ProstSchG). Prostitution establishments must provide information about this law, and prostitutes have the right to refuse sexual services without condoms. If the condom obligation is not complied with, the customers face a corresponding fine. Sex workers, on the other hand, are exempt from penalties. When advertising sexual intercourse without a condom, the situation is different. If sex workers violate the advertising ban (§32 para.3 ProstSchG), they face a fine of 10,000 euros. The Prostitution Protection Act is currently Germany’s most binding sex work law. However, the living and working conditions of sex workers in Germany are also

heavily influenced by the labour market, migration, housing policies, and family and social policies. The authors will refrain from going into further detail on these legal foundations due to its relevance being outside the scope of the work

4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The following chapter presents the theoretical framework and methodology, which serve as the dissertation's analytical foundation. In the first step, the reader is introduced to Crawford & Hutchinsons' concept of *Everyday Security* (2016) and Erving Goffman's critical reflections on stigmatization (1963). The empirical approach to answering the research question posed in Chapter One will be presented beginning in Chapter 3.2. The subchapters present the method selection, expert interviews, interview planning and execution, as well as the evaluation method based on Mayring's (2015) qualitative content analysis and the kiding procedure.

4.1 Theoretical Framework

For decades, security scholars have associated security concepts and processes with nation states, sovereign identity and military threats. This state-centric approach to governance and the activities of state and non-state actors that produce both security and insecurity have misled many critical analyses. A key critique of traditional security studies comes in relation to their inability to acknowledge the experiences and perspectives of groups that exist on the periphery of society (Hansen 2000). It is themes such as health, migration and climate change that don't necessarily reference a specific group that security studies has grown to revolve around. The elitist viewpoint that has come to embody much of security studies research and literature continues to garner much dissatisfaction and scholars are under criticism as a result. The concept of 'human security' is seen as a useful tool for incorporating a greater emphasis on both gender inequalities (Nussbaum 2005) and the uneven distribution of vulnerability and insecurity among minority groups. Nevertheless, scholars such as Marhia (2013) argue that it remains a somewhat vague and analytically weak concept and is built on a top-down policy-making approach by elites.

As indicated in Chapter One, the central aim of this research is to determine how political or security measures affect individuals and certain groups. As a result, it is critical to comprehend not just why or where these security measures emerge but also how individuals and communities see, feel, and comprehend them. When discussing population security variations and inequities, viewing security policy through the lens of lived experience adds a useful perspective. This suggests that more mundane features of security may conflict with collectively built security ideas based on implicit and reciprocal informal social control procedures (Jacobs 1961). Detailed empirical research of security practises via the lens of the 'everyday' enables a fresh understanding of security concerns from this vantage point. The emphasis on the 'everyday' brings attention to how security programmes influence people's lives

and how they comprehend and deal with security practices that affect their lives. It emphasises the importance of civil society organisations and ordinary persons in security procedures.

The term 'everyday' evokes thoughts of patterns, discourses, and behaviours people engage in to preserve their security. While attempting to live with instability, ordinary people cultivate security for themselves and others through everyday security practices. Because of this the focus on speech acts that can be seen as discursive or political is reduced and replaced with the lived experiences and acts that happen with certain contexts (Weaver 1995). With this emphasis on acts comes also attention given to values, beliefs, and viewpoints (Crawford 2014). Finally, dealing with every day focuses on people's interactions and relationships. It emphasises the situational and contextual components of security procedures and the role of individuals and groups in person-to-person interactions. In this way, it helps to emphasise the ordinary rather than the extraordinary, the routine rather than the exceptional. Until recently, critical academics saw security systems as overly predictable, "unilinear, and totalizing" in their effects, with little attention to unforeseen consequences, resistance, and conflict (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016). Less regard has been given to how security is produced, managed and fashioned by individuals and groups in enabling and productive ways rather than simply constraining (Crawford 2014). To sum up, security issues and goals cannot be defined as identical for all people but as part of a distinct experience influenced by social power dynamics and connections.

The more we study everyday security, the more we expose the material inequalities, injustices, abuses of power and differential social experiences of security projects, all of which might provide the foundations of emancipation. (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016, p. 1199)

This concept may be used to sex workers in Germany during the pandemic to get insight into how individuals in the industry saw and experienced security methods and restrictions and what human behaviour was formed to deal with them. However, more crucially, it sheds light on how people view and perceive their own security (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016). Regarding security, Chapter Two of the literature research indicates that stigma has repeatedly been recognised as one of the primary drivers of insecurity in sex work research. In light of this, it is hypothesised that stigma had a role in sex workers' perceptions of (in)security during the pandemic. According to Goffman, the term stigma was used by the ancient Greeks to refer to a physical brand that indicated the unusual or poor moral condition of the person being referred to (1963). Stigma made it simple for society to shun stigmatised individuals, particularly in public areas. Nowadays term stigma refers to a person's "dishonour" rather than their physical

appearance. According to Goffman, stigma might result from a mismatch between the virtual and actual social identities, which describes it as the gap between what a person should be – their virtual social identity – and what they really are – their real social identity. The virtual identity reflects character qualities that are given to the individual in the form of (sometimes unconscious) normative expectations. On the other hand, the genuine social identity is made up of categories and characteristics that may be demonstrated to the individual. Suppose an individual exhibits qualities that differ from what is expected of him or her. In that case, he or she may be stigmatised as contaminated and degraded, especially if the discrediting impact is significant (Goffman, 1963). Stigma develops only when the environment imposes certain expectations on a person. Furthermore, the social defining process is adversely appraised rather than the person's characteristics or behaviour. These processes are influenced by intra- and intercultural factors, as well as historical factors.

In his stigma theory, Goffman distinguishes two groups: the "discredited" and the "discreditable" (Goffman, 1963). The first type consists of stigmatised persons whose "otherness" is visible in their surroundings, such as skin colour, obesity, or physical infirmities. In the case of the discreditable, on the other hand, the stigma might be hidden from society since it is not apparent. According to Goffman, individuals engaged in the sex work sector are stigmatised; in their private everyday lives, they are not recognised as 'prostitutes,' but they are aware that knowledge of their activity is quite likely to discredit them in social relations. Discredited individuals have to cope with the pressures that develop in social contact due to their otherness. Discredited people primarily control information to avoid being identified as a stigmatised person and therefore avoid the stigmatisation process (Goffman, 1963).

4.2 Methodology: Qualitative Data Collection

The research topic proposed in Chapter One, the Literature Review (Chapter 2) and the theoretical underpinnings explored in the previous subchapter serves as the starting point for the qualitative data collection. Thereby, the parameters of the material analysed in this thesis are narrowed down by the research questions posed in Chapter One; the period and location of the object of study are delineated as sex work during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany.

As this study's aim is to investigate the realities of people engaged in sex work during the COVID-19 pandemic, the emphasis is on a thorough examination of the data material in order to develop a basic understanding of the topic and detect certain patterns. Due to this and the fact that the topic has received less scholarly attention, it was decided to use a qualitative

approach of semi-structured expert interviews to collect primary data. By utilising this method, it is possible to use expert interviews to give the researcher a social science approach to the particular knowledge of the people involved in the situations and processes (Liebold & Trinczek, 2009). The expert interview is a method of qualitative guided interview. In this case, the term expert is understood as relational, which depends on the individual research project and which persons are considered experts. Included are the people who are part of the field of action that constitutes the research object. In doing so, attention was paid to pursuing a genealogical approach. Accordingly, formation rules of past discourses are reconstructed not only based on texts from the respective time but also through “post-narratives” (Meuser & Nagel, 1991). While, distortions can occur, triggered, for example, by memory gaps or by the re-evaluation of past events against the current background. This must be considered when evaluating the results. Likewise, the different speaker positions of the interviewees and the possible contradictions resulting from these must be considered in the analysis (Liebold & Trinczek, 2009).

4.2.1 The Expert Interviews

The qualitative interviews were conducted with the current staff of so-called ‘Beratungsstellen’, support and counselling centres for sex work in Germany. A total of 46 support centres in Germany were contacted by e-mail for the data collection. Of those contacted, 29 declined to be interviewed mainly due to staffing and capacity reasons, six accepted, and ten did not respond. Information on the existing organisations in Germany that work in counselling and educational work on sex work can be found on <https://www.prostituiertenschutzgesetz.info/beratungsstellen/>. Because sex workers are a vulnerable group that has been difficult to reach, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, relevant actors in the field of sex work were chosen and designated as experts based on their roles and experiences. To acquire the most thorough understanding of the realities of sex workers' life in Germany during the pandemic, diversity was a significant component in the selection process. The sample of professionals who agreed to participate in a survey was considered sufficient for a first approach to the topic.

A previously formulated guide was used in all six interviews, which at least partially structured the interview process. The guide was developed based on the research question posed in Chapter One. The themes of the topics posed during the interview were chosen to encapsulate the research question

- General background information about the institution
- Sex work during the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications on security
- Technology-facilitated sex work during the pandemic

The guidelines were slightly adapted due to the position and organisation of the experts interviewed, resulting in minor differences in the guidelines. An exemplary guideline for the expert interviews can be found in Appendix One. In the interviews, the guide did not serve as a questionnaire that had to strictly be followed but acts as a framework to ensure that the planned questions were addressed. While specific questions were formulated in a possible order during the preparation of the questionnaires, during the interview, it was refrained from imposing exactly this structure on the interview. Instead, an attempt was made to create an open interview environment in which the interviewee had the agency to explore different topics the researcher did not anticipate. The potential of co-designing the interview allows for the discovery of structures and themes significant to the interviewees in connection to the research object. Due to possible language barriers, the interviews were conducted in German and subsequently translated into English by the interviewer. The researcher is a native and tried to preserve the validity of the sentiments expressed by the interview in her translation. Throughout the process, respondents were treated with respect, honesty, and comfort.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the associated health risk for the study participants, the interviews were conducted online. The end-to-end encrypted platform Zoom was used to collect data, ensuring that participants do not have to sign in or give any person-related information. An information and consent form was developed and shared with the participants to explain the organisation and procedure of the project and the design of the interview. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were verbally informed about the interview procedure and the data-related aspects of the work. They were asked for their consent to the interview recording for later analysis. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated, and coded using NVivo software. A codebook was created using the first two transcripts; the codebook was updated as needed throughout the research process. The transcription rules used were based on the system of Kuckartz (2010). This means that transcriptions were made verbatim, and dialects were not transcribed. In addition, language and punctuation were slightly smoothed, i.e., approximated to written German (Kuckartz, 2010). The transcripts were anonymised and provided with an ID to prevent conclusions about the person and the respective organisation. To protect the identity of the interviewee, the interview transcripts are not included in the appendix.

4.2.2 Coding

With regard to the research interest of this dissertation, the basis for the coding procedure is qualitative content analysis, following the format outlined by Mayring (2015). The use of a guideline (Appendix One) and the adherence to Mayring's process are intended to ensure that the analysis is intersubjective and thus reliable (Mayring, 2015). Compared to other evaluation methods, such as the grounded theory method, qualitative content analysis proves particularly promising due to the predefined analysis steps in the process model. Thus, the method is considered intersubjectively verifiable, comprehensible, and transferable to other subjects (Reiter & Töller, 2014). This has the advantage of revealing structures in the material that were not anticipated when the guideline was considered, which is favourable given the low level of research (Kuckartz, 2010). Mayring (2015) distinguishes here between "three basic forms of interpreting", a) reducing, which serves to depict the raw material in a reduced and abstracted way b) explicating, which expands the material with additional information c) structuring, which is used to filter out specific parts of a material, to lay out a cross-section of the content according to previously set order criteria, or to evaluate the material according to particular criteria. Since the content aspect of the interviews is the main focus, the content-structured approach lends itself to this dissertation. A central role of structuring content analysis is developing a categorisation system, which is developed on the concrete material, defined by construction and assignment rules, and revised and back-tested during the analysis (Mayring, 2015). As Mayring (2015) suggested, such a category system was created in advance based on the thematic blocks defined in the interview guide and tested on parts of the material in the first run. During the trial run, the categories were revised, including the respective definitions. Furthermore, recurring themes that seemed relevant were defined as additional categories and added to the category system. The coding process was carried out with the NVivo software. Because a single individual did the coding, the intercoder reliability could not be determined. However, calculating the intercoder reliability could determine the instrument's stability for analysis. For this purpose, approx. 10% of the interviews were coded one week after the first coding process, and the 'Cohen's Kappa coefficient' was calculated using the Coding Comparison query of NVivo.

4.2.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues in research, mainly when dealing with human subjects, entail applying a set of moral principles to prevent harm or misconduct to others and respect research participants (Israel & Hay, 2006). The first action taken to ensure compliance with ethical research

principles was to obtain ethical approval from the School of Social and Political Science Research Ethics Board of the University of Glasgow. Secondly, before the interview, all participants were informed about the study and asked to provide written and later verbal consent during the interview. The privacy statement that was sent to the interviewees included information about the principles of voluntary participation in the study so that interviewees were made aware that they could withdraw their participation at any time (Menih, 2013). To ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the data throughout the course of the study, personally identifiable information such as the individual's name and the name of the organisation was excluded (Kelley, et al., 2003). Due to the length and method of the interviews, respondents were asked for consent to record the interview digitally. Transcription of recorded data excluded names or information that could identify participants, and the recordings were deleted immediately after transcription was completed (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Because the pandemic was still in effect at the time of the study, all interviews were performed online to provide the maximum level of security for all parties involved. The authors' university Zoom access was used, and participants did not have to use any credentials to sign in.

4.2.4 Research Challenges and Limitations

Methodological challenges encountered in conducting this research with sex work support centres included difficulties obtaining access to interviews and information through secondary data. Subchapter 3.2 provided an overview of organisations relevant to this work. Following the initial e-mail request for participation in the study, it became clear that a large number of organisations would be unavailable. This was due to a shortage of specialists, increased workload as a result of the pandemic, and requests from the German press, which can be traced back to the debate over a sex purchase ban in Germany. Second, due to ethical concerns and the scope of this work, sex workers were not directly interviewed about their experiences during the pandemic. As a result, the work is based on primary data gathered through a secondary actor, which might lead to a distortion of truth and a very one-sided distorted picture of the events.

5. Analysis of Data

With the emergence of the COVID-19 virus in Germany, regulatory steps were adopted in early 2020 to restrict virus transmission and thus protect the public from infection. These regulations considerably impacted marginalised communities' social and economic living conditions (Pieper, 2020). Sex workers in Germany are a marginalized community, yet little media or academic attention has thus far been paid to the effects of COVID-19 regulations on this vulnerable population. This thesis poses the following question: *How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected multiple forms of (in)securities of sex workers in Germany?* To find an answer to this question, six interviews with employees of sex worker support centres were conducted in June and July 2022 to provide an on-the-ground perspective on the subject. The resulting expert interviews were analysed using NVivo data analysis software. The thematic analysis of the interviews based on the theoretical framework described in Chapter Two yielded the following four themes: 1) economic hardship, 2) food security, 3) personal security, and 4) digital sex work and security.

5.1 Economic Hardship

Overall, the interview participants agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the basic financial security of sex workers in Germany. In this dissertation, economic security is defined as having enough money to live comfortably, make monthly payments, and set financial objectives for the future. To extract this information from the interviews, comments that referred to financial hardship, financial help and coping techniques for basic financial security were coded as 'economic hardship'.

With the first lockdown imposed in March 2020 and the succeeding prohibition on the sale of sexual services, sex workers found themselves in "financial hardship" (Expert no. 3). Consequently, despite the fact that "state(s) provided financial aid for sex workers" (Expert no. 1), the beneficiaries had either difficulties with payment, delayed payments, or had no claim to payments due to a lack of documentation or non-registration under the Prostitutes Protection Act. The experts' answers generally centred on the differences between individuals with and without legal work permission, with two experts emphasising the rising discrepancy between the two "groups" (Expert no. 2; Expert no. 6).

The problematic and sometimes unintelligible registration procedure for sex workers as 'prostitutes' under the ProstSchG was addressed repeatedly in the interviews. Two of the six interview participants stressed that the registration procedure as a 'prostitute' in Germany and

the registration for the Covid-19 emergency aid is viewed as ‘forced outings’ imposed by the state (Expert no. 3). For sex workers to legally work in Germany, they must register and carry a registration certificate, colloquially called ‘whore pass’ with them. During the pandemic, the ‘whore pass’ served as proof of previous employment and allowed sex workers to apply for financial aid, the Covid-19 Emergency Aid for Self-Employed or Hartz 4⁵. On the one hand, this was an attempt to get financial help for sex workers (Expert no. 2), but organisations and sex workers criticised the procedure, which on the other hand, is very lengthy and complex and requires sex workers to divulge their employment in many official settings. The reopening and legalisation of sex work in various states were followed by its closure and ban due to the second wave of the Covid-19 virus, and the registration and completion procedures had to be repeated.

The difficulty accessing COVID relief financial aid was raised in connection to sex workers who are registered in Germany. As one expert noted, however, “the state has offered emergency aid for sex workers, but this has not really influenced the people who come to us because some of them are not registered” (Expert no. 1). To understand how the pandemic might have influenced individuals without a ‘whore pass’ compared to those with one, it was necessary first to explore why some individuals working in the sex industry did not register as such in Germany. Among the issues raised were forced prostitution (victims of sex trafficking), linguistic and cultural barriers, lack of internet access, the lack of an official address and the unwillingness to reveal the work. The topic of official residency came up somewhat regularly. One participant reported that sex workers who are passing through or, in the more extreme cases, do not have a permanent place to stay cannot apply (Expert no. 5). Other barriers identified during consultations include the level of education and the lack of tools such as a computer to apply or fill out the taxes (Expert no. 1). Although the interviews show that it was primarily sex workers without legal status in Germany who were excluded from official financial assistance programmes, experts agree that even those with a registration suffered significant financial losses during the pandemic, putting their economic security at risk.

Due to the aforementioned financial difficulties, interview participants were asked to indicate which other sources of income sex workers in Germany had turned to during the pandemic. This was done primarily to establish whether sex workers had alternative options for obtaining their basic income other than applying for government financial aid. As both

⁵ Is a type of unemployment benefit in Germany, which requires recipients to fulfil specific conditions, including having lived in Germany for a least 5 years.

counselling centres and the Federal Association of Sex Workers in Germany were aware of the financial plight of sex workers in Germany early on, short-term financial support programmes were established in various locations through donations, which were able to support some sex workers who faced financial difficulties (Expert no. 3; Expert no. 1).

Despite the COVID-inspired prohibition, experts said that the vast majority of sex workers continued to participate in sex work to prevent financial losses (Expert no. 5). Individuals were mostly aware of the risk of developing Covid-19 pandemic or “getting in trouble with the law since it was illegal” (Expert no. 3). However, loss of income presented far more difficult or hazardous situations, which is why they took this risk. The link between financial hardship and personal security will be addressed further in the subsection on personal security.

The data analysis highlighted the impact of economic hardship on the financial status of sex workers’ families and the issue of fundamental financial security for sex workers during the pandemic. According to the interviews, young women from the EU’s eastern nations, in particular, work in the sex trade in Germany and thereby financially support their families back home. However, one of the interview participants also emphasised that “many are more or less ‘forced’ to work in this field because their families send them . . . ; due to the loss of income, a common concern of young female sex workers is to continue to be able to send money for their children . . . they may have small children.” (Expert no. 5).

The staff of sex worker organisations specialising in supporting male and trans sex workers explained that male and trans sex workers are not as reliant on street or brothel sex work as their female colleagues. At the same time, one interviewee mentioned that some male sex workers who come to the counselling centre are involved in activities other than sex work, such as part-time employment. These have provided them with some financial security during the outbreak, as long as their part-time job is not affected by the pandemic-related restrictions. The fact that some sex workers may only work in this profession as a backup to a full-time, ‘middle-class’ job is frequently emphasised. Most of them do not have permission from their employers to work on the side since they are afraid of openly disclosing this activity due to the stigma. Nonetheless, a staff member emphasised that in male sex work, too, “some individuals lived off sex work; they relied on it” (Expert no. 5). Furthermore, before the pandemic, male sex workers were urged to rely more heavily on online platforms for sexual services than female sex workers because they often did not work on the street or in brothels but instead had to advertise themselves on the internet. Overall, interviewees felt that more sex workers moved to

the internet or technology-facilitated sex work; however, they felt that it was not always sustainable due to the lack of access to the internet, technological knowledge or lack of customers.

According to the experts, the impacts of the pandemic and corresponding actions in Germany severely influenced sex workers' fundamental financial stability (Expert no. 1; Expert no. 2; Expert no. 5). Sex workers who were legally registered under the Prostitution Protection Act were eligible for governmental financial assistance, though the cumbersome process of claiming compensation presented a barrier to some. Individuals who operate in the sex business, primarily in brothels and on the streets, but are not legally recognised as sex workers, have been severely affected. Sex workers' organisations attempted to support people who were not eligible for this assistance with donations.

5.2 Food and Nutrition Security

Given the theoretical foundation of this dissertation, one recurring subject in the interviews was insufficient or safe access to food, which was summarised as 'food security.' During the first interviews, it became apparent that economic instability had a far greater impact on food security than previously thought by the author. Staff from five of the six sex worker organisations emphasised that the agencies had sponsored programmes where sex workers could dine on-site or get food parcels since before the pandemic. During the pandemic, however, the demand for food assistance and the issue of accessing food, in general, became an even more pressing topic. Describing food shortages, one participant stressed that "after a short time, it got very serious for some of those affected" (Expert no. 2). According to the interview participants, this can be attributed to various causes. The main context is the lack of income from sex work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who were not registered under the Prostitution Protection Act and thus had no financial support were particularly affected, negatively impacting their access to food (Expert no. 4). It was also stressed that, at the beginning of the pandemic, the supply and offering of food by charity organisations was no longer possible due to the restrictions and hygiene measures. Expert no. 1 explained, "I think it was the first six weeks that we were no longer supplied by the (organisation)".

To offset this, interviewees report on individually coordinated measures to offer meals to sex workers. The counselling centres were partly supported by local institutions such as the "Tafel," other non-profit organisations or the city council. Staff members reported that food was not served in the counselling centres for the protection of staff and sex workers, which is

why “food packages” (Expert no. 1) were offered. In addition, opening hours were extended in order to have fewer people on-premises. “We are supplied by the [name of organisation], which means that before COVID-19 pandemic, we were open on Tuesdays and Thursdays; now, we are also open on Wednesdays so that there are fewer people on the premises” (Expert no. 1). One of the interviewees stated, “We sometimes prepared packed lunches or vouchers from time to time so that sex workers could pick up food from the supermarkets” (Expert no. 6) where the vouchers were distributed by the official body of the city council. In addition, programmes established by sex workers’ organisations to provide support in terms of sharing food were interrupted during the pandemic. The data show that after the resumption of food-sharing programmes, requests from sex workers increased.

5.3 Personal Security

We noticed how the pandemic isolated sex workers. (Expert no. 5)

The following subsection summarises all experts’ statements that refer to the topic of personal security. The emphasis here was on recognising data concerning physical or mental health. This may overlap with the preceding subsection’s consideration of economic and food security, as in some instances, one insecurity exacerbates the other. Sex workers have attempted to adapt to these changing conditions but have encountered various difficulties.

Data from the interviews suggest that a majority of sex workers continue to work despite the pandemic. One participant emphasised that many sex workers “did not know what Covid-19 pandemic meant and feared they would fall ill” (Expert no. 4). At the same time, support centres observed that sex workers got into trouble with authorities because it was illegal. Which of course led to penalties” (Expert no. 3). Ultimately, providing sexual services during the pandemic appeared to leave sex workers in limbo between breaking the law and risking contracting a contagious disease or facing the severe consequences of financial hardship. Experts also observed that sex workers grew increasingly reliant on clients throughout the pandemic. Due to the low number of requests, sex workers depended on serving as many customers as possible, which meant that clients who would have been turned away before the pandemic were served (Expert no. 2). As a result, some sex workers were put in perilous circumstances since clients were sometimes under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Two interviews suggested that the “power imbalance between sex workers and customers increased” throughout the pandemic (Expert no. 2; Expert no. 6), and some clients took advantage of the sex workers’ precarious situation; an example of this is the lack of bargaining

power in negotiating the use of condoms. The obligation to use condoms is regulated by the Prostitutes Protection Act. This Act can be enforced and reported by brothel owners or sex workers. According to sex workers' organisations, this was not possible during the pandemic since sex work was prohibited, making the sale of sexual services a criminal offence. Due to financial constraints during the pandemic and a restricted client base, sex workers relented to customers who refused to use condoms under duress to make money and for fear of losing clients. The following example of an interview with one expert exemplifies the predicament:

This led to a shift in the power imbalance, and there was more demand for sex without condoms. Or that the customers became verbally or physically abusive. We were also told that only those customers came who were already very unpleasant and who could have been refused under normal circumstances (Expert no. 2).

Two other participants emphasised the changes in the clientele, with sex workers reporting clients who threatened not to pay for services provided or threatened to expose sex workers to their family or friends or to report them to the police if they did not perform the requested sexual activities. Expert no. 2 explained that sex workers were in danger of “being threatened or outed if the person knows where and who you are” (Expert no. 5). It was further stated that sex work had to take place “in secret” during the pandemic, preventing sex workers from working in the “safe environment of brothels, with security alarms or without the possibility of reporting assaults to the police” (Expert no. 1). This meant that sex workers had to see customers in unknown settings (Expert no. 6).

The closing of prostitution sites has significantly influenced the safety of sex workers in terms of safe working conditions and housing insecurity. In some circumstances, sex workers in prostitution sites live in separate buildings and are compelled to leave when these facilities close (Expert no. 5). According to the staff of organisations that assist with female sex workers, the majority of those impacted are women, as women are often employed in brothels in Germany.

At the same time, there were not many places that were open instead because of the pandemic. It was difficult for us to arrange housing because all the women's and emergency shelters were overcrowded, especially during the winter (Expert no. 5).

Other groups were afflicted by housing instability because of a lack of money or because they lived in brothels that closed during the pandemic. According to the interviews, alternate lodging for sex workers had to be sought in the counselling consultations. In some cases, sex workers

exchanged sex for accommodation. One of the participants stated that “sex workers are disappearing from the streets” and are sometimes found in housing brothels that continued to operate illegally during the pandemic. Support centre workers reported that with predominantly females selling sexual services, some of them “are not on the street voluntarily, but have pimps, [and they] were still under pressure to collect money and were not allowed to work” (Expert no. 6). In the context of various programmes, interviewees stressed that the organisations had often been present online and saw this as a way to reach sex workers during the pandemic. Some respondents, for example, indicated that employees enrolled under an alias on specific sex services websites in order to reach sex workers (Expert no. 5).

While some of the participants stressed the insecurities created by the lack of safe housing for sex workers during the pandemics, an alternative case was mentioned in which “operators of prostitution cities in [name of city] quickly said that they could let the people live with them free of charge” (Expert no. 2). Overnight stays in brothels are really prohibited in Germany, according to a specific rule of the ProstSchG. During the COVID-19 pandemic, non-governmental organisations, such as the Berufsverband Sexarbeit (BesD), pleaded for the lifting of the ban on overnight stays in brothels. Their claims stressed that migrant sex workers, in particular, those who could no longer travel home due to the Covid-19 crisis but were also no longer allowed to work in Germany, would lose their homes and would end up on the streets. In the end, the demand was met, and the restriction on overnight stays was lifted (Expert no. 3).

Since many clients were working ‘undercover’ during this time, accessing the target group became more difficult for the sex worker organisations. The needs of sex workers have adapted to the precarious work situation. In order to further publicise their offerings, the organisations carried out outreach during the ban. Counselling took place under the necessary precautions in the counselling centre, outside and online. Although the number of initial contacts did not change significantly, clients visited the drop-in centre more frequently and used services; one expert stressed that the total number of contacts increased by almost 20% compared to the previous year (Expert no. 6).

According to the participants, even before the start of the pandemic, people working in the sex industry in particular, were dependent on health services from nongovernmental organisations due to their lack of health insurance in Germany. Both non-German nationals and those with formal residency lack proper insurance. “We have a doctor who is paid by the health department; s/he offers anonymous consultations once a week. This is of enormous importance

for people who have no health insurance” (Expert no 1). The lack of health insurance was caused by several different circumstances, including the termination of statutory health insurance coverage due to non-payment. Another participant verified the problem, adding that “institutional barriers” within the healthcare system pose barriers for sex workers to seek critical assistance.

Medical consultations focused mainly on HIV medication, STI education and treatment, gynaecological examinations for women and people with a uterus, general counselling, and occasional surgery. One participant emphasised that diseases such as HIV and diabetes had been “most affected” due to the deterioration in access to care. Two interviewees indicated that during the pandemic, sex worker organisations in Germany addressed general immunisation education programmes with the help of local health offices, issued certificates of Covid-19 pandemic vaccinations and provided free rapid tests. A staff member of an organisation working mainly with male and trans men stressed the importance of testing and vaccination certification efforts, as male sex workers are often active in the bar scene, and those who are not tested are denied access to bars. Testing opportunities outside the framework of the organisations were not always accessible, as they sometimes had to be paid for or required an ID card. A lack of resources in terms of financial means and documentation thus resulted in the inability to test whether individuals had contracted COVID-19. In addition, workers reported the possibility of COVID-19 vaccination, which was mainly targeted at sex workers without health insurance. Beyond COVID-specific care, the issue of STIs and HIV and especially the access to e-medicines for these was a persistent topic during the pandemic.

According to the interview analysis, the personal security of sex workers was most impacted by the fact that people were still dependent on customers due to a lack of or insufficient financial assistance. Because of their reliance, some sex workers could no longer turn away customers, which resulted in verbal or physical violence in certain cases. Furthermore, the customers took advantage of the sex workers’ precarity, resulting in non-payment for services, sex in return for shelter, or demand for intercourse without using a condom, among other things. In addition to safe access to medical counselling and care, the interview participants mentioned the topics of showers, hygiene products and washing machines in connection with health safety. Due to the loss of housing and the closure of prostitution sites, sex workers who were not registered in Germany no longer had safe access to hygiene products. However, some experts also emphasised that the organisations in their facilities mostly offered sex workers the opportunity to wash, shower, rest and do laundry

before the pandemic. Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, however, this was no longer possible and was only partially made possible again after the first lockdown.

5.4 Digital Sex Work and Security

Brothels were closed, and sexual services were forbidden at the start of the first shutdown in March of 2020. During the summer, there was a relaxation, but the lockdown requirements were resumed in November 2020, leading to a repeat occupational prohibition for sex workers. This is why, according to the interview partners, many sex service providers have shifted their operations to the digital world since the beginning of the pandemic. Interview passages describing this shift and the answers to the question about digital security mechanisms were summarised in the analysis under the term “digital security.”

In one interview, the participant mentions how, prior to the pandemic, male and trans sex workers were already heavily reliant on technology or internet-facilitated sex work, particularly posting advertising and offers online. Another staff member of a sex worker organisation for working men and trans guys verified this finding. “Digitisation has become much more important for the people who were on the street. Most of them made sure that even if they didn’t have a profile beforehand because they were sitting in front of a pub, they created one during Covid-19 pandemic” (Expert no. 1). Men “do not work in brothels or flats like female sectors,” they utilise “online profiles, a little like dating platforms” (Expert no. 4) to attract their clients. In this way, online sex work was frequently coupled with web placement and offer placement. Furthermore, one of the specialists emphasised that male and transgender sex workers frequently face a ‘double stigma’. It would be feasible to manage and assure to some extent that the clients would desire to engage the services of male or transgender sex workers by advertising online.

However, staff of organisations that primarily work with female sex workers discuss the relevance of the internet in the trade. One of the respondents mentioned that during consultation sessions, people frequently inquire about alternate means of performing sex work on the internet (Expert no. 2). According to the counselling centres surveyed, the demand for online sex work grew to avoid financial losses from the prohibition on selling physical and sexual services during the outbreak. Participants emphasised the positive impact of online sex work, as sex workers stated in counselling sessions that selling pornographic photos or video material might replace at least some financial losses. Even before the pandemic, some sex workers in counselling centres advocated the sale of sexual services without physical contact as an

alternative to commercial physical sex work, which was deemed a “safer option” by the sex workers. One of the participants describes her observation as follows: “We have noticed a major milieu shift to the internet” (Expert no 2). Another participant supported this remark, stating in the interviews that “many individuals portrayed it [the internet] as the only alternative” (Expert no. 1).

Because of the pandemic, it became more difficult for counselling centres to gain or maintain access to sex workers on the street or in brothels as sex workers actually “disappeared” from the public during the pandemic, according to some experts (Expert no. 3; Expert no. 6). To continue reaching and supporting sex workers, the organisation’s employees said that “once a week, we digitally searched for women and contacted the women online” (ID 5), doing so “not under the name [name of organisation] but under an alias to promote the women” (Expert no. 5). One participant mentioned that she discovered several web adverts for women whose service can be booked under one telephone number. When they called or texted these numbers, they were asked, "Which lady would like to hire?" It was evident that a great percentage of the replies appeared to be provided by someone other than the women themselves, such as another person or a pimp (Expert no. 5).

Furthermore, sex workers frequently utilise smaller, informal or dating applications rather than the standard websites for selling sex, such as “kaufmich.com,” “ladies.de,” or “poppen.de” in order to avoid catching the attention of the authorities (Expert no. 2). One participant expressed “surprise” at the number of sex workers offering their services online and criticised the organisation for finding a disproportionate number of persons who “were also clearly young” (Expert no. 5) online in meeting the need for sexual services. Female sex workers who were facing economic hardship during the pandemic were thought to be more likely to have resorted to technology to help in selling or delivering sexual services.

Following the interviews’ assessment that sex work had partially transferred to the internet, participants were invited to relate their experiences from interviews in which concerns such as data loss of personal information, online stalking, and stealing of images or video material were discussed. Half of the experts did not name protecting online identity as an important issue. One interviewee, however, did express concern, emphasising that those who are in difficult circumstances are aware of the dangers but are willing to take the risk for a higher payment. Those who have had profiles online for a longer period and are established in sex work already know to take certain precautions.

We frequently find individuals who come to us unaware of these difficulties. We keep bringing it up and attempt to sensitise them. However, because no one is aware of it at the time, it is less meaningful to the people. It is more vital to obtain money or a client (Expert no. 1).

According to one of the experts, even before the pandemic, the employees at the counselling centre provided support on online sex work and advertising, as well as assisting sex workers in the process to “write text and set up a profile”. Providing this support was difficult due to limited internet access and/or language barriers. It was also noted that adult service apps have been responsive to language difficulties in recent years, offering translation options or the ability to send voice messages (Expert no. 1). The problem of online sex work is discussed in professional reorientation, particularly when sex workers choose to remain in the industry. During counselling consultations, sex workers are advised not to post personal data or identifying photographs on the Internet. One of the experts reported that further training is offered for employees in cooperation with the responsible data protection officer. Another interviewee mentioned how the counselling centre collaborated with a sex worker and an activist to train workers about internet abuse. In this context, she highlighted how many women migrate to traditional social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, feeling obligated to use them even if they do not feel comfortable there (Expert no. 5).

During the pandemic, the interviewed personnel from sex workers’ organisations noted how the sale and offer of sexual services transferred progressively to the internet. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, male and transgender workers relied on these services to do their jobs as securely and effectively as possible. In the context of counselling services, Internet-facilitated sex work had already been addressed as a possible career transition option, and some of the interviewees reported that they were informed about the dangers online. However, after enquiring, it also emerged that topics such as data protection and online safety had played a rather subordinate role alongside the other safety aspects mentioned.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

Before summarising the findings in this final part of the research, a final theme that arose from the interviews should be mentioned. A thematization of media narratives about sex work arises from the data material, which appears to be important for the following discussion.

According to the experts, media coverage before the pandemic was dominated by a narrative focused on brothels and owners, portraying sex work as a "grubby child" and something reprehensible. Even during the pandemic, some of the respondents observed and

criticised a very one-sided media coverage focusing on the precarious situation of brothel owners without paying much attention to the people working in these venues. This is contrasted with statements by an expert who has observed a change in the media discourse. The participant emphasises that "the discourse has become closer to reality because counselling centres were interviews and experts appeared in interviews" (Expert no. 4), which portrayed the situation of sex work more realistically. According to expert no. 4, comprehensive reporting may be seen positively since it not only gives insights into the realities of sex workers' existence and calls attention to the plight of those impacted, but it also removes stereotypes and educates society about the industry. During the epidemic, however, the majority of experts interviewed noticed increased media coverage of opinion articles and interviews with opponents of sex work and supporters of the Nordic model. There was significant discussion, particularly on internet portals and online publications, regarding whether the time during the Covid-19 pandemic may serve as a model for Germany to embrace the Nordic model or to outright outlaw sex work in order to aggressively combat exploitation and human trafficking (Expert no. 1; Expert no. 6). One expert states that the discourse has shifted to the notion that prostitution is a crime. And emphasises that if people sell sexual services and are criminalised, they have access to fewer rights and are subject to more risks. (Expert no. 1)

The analysis of the expert interviews revealed four core security issues that ran through all the data. First and foremost, financial losses due to the sex purchase ban on the one hand and the inaccessibility of statutory support due to the work status on the other. In particular, the different effects on sex workers who are officially registered and those who work without a registration certificate were highlighted, with the latter being particularly affected financially. In connection with this, a deterioration in access to sufficient and nutritious food was observed. In addition, it was observed that sex workers had to continue to offer their services due to the work ban. The ban increased their bargaining power. The sex workers reported being subjected to more coercion and fraud than before the pandemic. This included, in particular, price gouging or refusing to pay after receiving service. Aggression and violence have also increased, according to the interviewees. Furthermore, due to a lack of alternatives, clients had to be served who would have been refused before the pandemic. In addition, many sex workers migrated to the internet during the lockdown and worked in secret.

6. The COVID-19 Pandemic and its effects on (in)securities of sex workers

Beginning in mid-March 2020, Germany adopted rigorous health precautions to minimise the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost all non-medical close contact services, including sex work, were banned as part of the virus-restriction measures. Because of Germany's federal structure, state governments were primarily responsible for deciding how to regulate sex work. Overall, Germany faced two full lockdowns, and the government and media explored the far-reaching implications for several industries, with the self-employed and artists receiving special attention. After the ban on sex work and the closure of prostitution venues, sex workers' organisations were the first to speak out and raise attention to the challenging situation for sex workers (Deutsche Welle, 2020). Against this backdrop, the dissertation aimed to determine *how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the multiple forms of (in)securities that sex workers face in Germany*. Using semi-structured interviews with professionals from sex workers' counselling centres, the dissertation aimed to discover more about the interaction that COVID-19 specifically had on sex workers. From the analysis of the interviews four major themes were discovered between sex working community and the insecurities that they face. The four themes that were discovered were *economic hardship, food security, personal security and digital sex work and security*. Chapter Five further discusses the four themes and identifies limitations in the research.

One of the primary themes that came out through the analysis is that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significant employment and income insecurity for sex workers, which is not surprising given that many professions have been severely impacted by the lockdown, staff cuts and the prohibition of close contact services. While COVID-19 has had a social and economic impact on many marginalised communities, the pandemic has aggravated the already fragile financial circumstances of people working in the sex industry, both in the formal and informal sectors. Experts found that people providing in-person sexual services were eventually unable to make a living. Standing (2011) emphasises in this regard that a lack of protective measures such as minimum wages or social security is viewed as a source of economic instability. Especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was observed there was confusion among sex workers due to a lack of knowledge regarding the impact of the measures on their living circumstances, job, and travel options. The current economic landscape that our world faces forces individuals to have a minimum financial standard that is much too large. That standard is not only above most individuals status quo, but also above basic human needs. The implications that come from financial insecurity go much farther than the security of the

individual as sex workers may not only be taking care of themselves, but also families that they may need to support financially. Furthermore, it also became clear that the federal government's hardship fund, which in theory is accessible to registered sex workers as a crisis-related protective shield for self-employed individuals in Germany, was ineffective for many sex workers. The application procedure was bureaucratically cumbersome, the wait periods were considerable, and the money granted was not always enough to ensure a living. Aside from that, other people lacked the necessary papers, such as a tax identification number or a residency permit. Through the interviews, it was discovered that the greatest source of insecurity for sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic was financial difficulties. The experts emphasised that all types of sex work were impacted by the need to adopt financial security precautions. More results that came from the interview show that individuals who are not formally registered as sex workers in Germany faced further financial hardship. Their activities moved from registered, legal activities and transitioned to other means to continue to survive.

Around 41,000 persons in Germany were registered under the ProstSchG by the end of 2019, with estimates suggesting that there are over 400,000 sex workers in total in Germany; as such, around 359,000 persons in Germany are involved in the sex trade without being officially registered. Those who were not registered as 'prostitutes' could not seek governmental financial aid, which was available to registered sex workers in Germany. It is pertinent to wonder why such a large number of people are not registered for doing sex work, especially since Germany is considered to be the "poster child" for legal sex work. As the community of sex workers is so diverse, it is impossible to provide all the explanations, but several recurring patterns emerge from the interview analysis. The interviewees mentioned several reasons why persons in sex work are not registered and, hence, are at risk of being penalised by the authorities and having no legal or financial claims. In this context, the disclosure of their employment to official authorities and the concomitant 'forced outing' and forced prostitution played a unique role. However, institutional hurdles were also identified; in this case, the lack of language skills was frequently cited, and the complexity of applications made it impossible for non-German sex workers to seek financial assistance. The loss of the ability to work under legal conditions, as well as the obstacles in obtaining official assistance, exacerbated the already precarious situation of sex workers, especially in the informal sector.

The findings of the interviews, as well as similar studies from around the world, such as those by Azam et al. (2021), (Callander, et al., 2021), (Fedorkó, et al., 2021), and (Cubides Kovacsics, et al., 2022), indicate that some sex workers were forced to continue working,

whether to achieve basic financial security, support their families, or due to coercive relationships with partners or pimps. Due to a pressure to continue working, many sex workers were caught in a web of exploitative and power relationships that placed them at an economic disadvantage and at risk for their physical and mental well-being. Sex workers who experience greater economic marginalisation are less able to negotiate safe sex or find committed clients. In terms of worsening customer behaviour during the pandemic, the findings of this dissertation are compatible with those of Singer et al. (2020). However, in the study, only specific types of behaviours worsened, such as pressure to cut costs and having unprotected sex. Since all the brothels and running houses closed in the wake of the COVID-19 regulations, prostitution inevitably shifted to risky areas where sex workers are more likely to be unprotected. Clients are said to feel superior, become assaultive, and compel sexual services that were not previously agreed upon, resulting in dangerous circumstances occurring on a regular basis. However, because this dissertation lacks information on sex worker victimization before to the pandemic and is beyond the scope of the specified topic, it cannot statistically verify whether this increased or reduced during the pandemic. Nonetheless, it should be noted that there were fewer complaints filed by sex workers against customers, notably during the lockdowns. This is because sex workers provided these services under unlawful conditions, as offering sexual services was outlawed at certain hours, and sex workers were subject to prosecution while doing so. Despite being in the same field as other close contact facilities, they were closed for extended periods of time, exposing sex workers to greater danger and signalling a lack of priority or regard for the security of sex workers and the sex work industry in general.

While the measures were necessary and successful in preventing the spread of the virus, the financial hardship and increased social isolation had a negative impact on sex workers' mental and physical health; for example, in a study from the Netherlands, migrant sex workers who attended therapy were denied appointments due to their residency status. Furthermore, therapists provided unsolicited advice to sex workers in general to alter their line of work as a remedy to the concerns they expressed; this is a clear illustration of how sex work stigma impacts sex workers in very intimate aspects of their life. Although mental health was not addressed explicitly in the interviews, the findings reveal that sex workers were increasingly dependent on customers, driving them further into isolation from society throughout the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Furthermore, sex workers from non-EU countries, in particular, are often alienated from any social connections and have no family or friends in Germany to turn to in the event of a crisis.

Overall, the market responded to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as predicted, with fewer sexual transactions and a significant shift towards less visible types of sex work, for example, working in personal flat brothels and sex work facilitated through the internet. This shows that prohibition has had the unintended consequence of driving the sector toward less visible and perhaps riskier types of commercial sex labour. As illustrated in Chapter Two, since the emergence of the internet, sex work researchers have devoted themselves to technology-facilitated sex work. Active accounts on pornographic websites and websites offering sexual services, such as Pornhub, YouPorn, kaufmich.com, ladies.de, poppen.de, and OnlyFans, appear to have grown throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the specialists interviewed, they have witnessed a movement of sex workers towards the internet, particularly those who used to operate in brothels or on the street. It is also reported that male and transgender sex workers rely heavily on the internet to deliver their services, exposing further stigmatization of an already disadvantaged community. In this context, agencies have shifted to technology-based services and increased their social media use for outreach and communication with clients. Despite the option to migrate online, which not all lines of employment have, the sex workers who made this transition were still encountering financial issues since they were not making as much as they used to and because of the proliferation of individuals online performing sex work. Overall, the discussions demonstrated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, internet security, privacy, and data protection rights were not prioritized due to the importance of ensuring health and personal human security, which had a variety of consequences. First, sex workers were frequently misinformed about how to safeguard themselves and their data online, which is critical to their livelihood; second, sex workers were exposed to new threats online that they would not have encountered in face-to-face sex work.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on sex workers in general, the findings emphasize certain categories of sex workers, males, transsexual sex workers, and those without official registration as sex workers in Germany, have been disproportionately harmed. The majority of the interviews were performed with members of the sex industry support centres that specialise in providing counselling services to female sex workers. As a result, very little can be said about the experienced reality of male and transgender sex workers in this dissertation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the interviewees expressed a common theme on the inequalities experienced by male and transsexual workers, namely their access to medical care, particularly difficulties in obtaining multi-month dispensing of antiretroviral medicine, facilitating treatment continuity, and reducing the viral load for persons

living with HIV. Overall, it was found that people in the informal sex industry or forced prostitution, as well as male and transgender sex workers, are associated with poorer working conditions, which is consistent with the evidence on how males and transgender people experience stigma in a variety of settings and life situations. Previous research studies have linked sex workers' legal status and sexual orientation to a higher risk of income loss and increased food and housing poverty compared to being a cisgender female sex worker. This statement is corroborated by the expert interview's conclusion that sex workers experience double stigma because of their legal status, sexual orientation, or gender. Intersectionality provides an analytical perspective for demonstrating how several interlocking identities, such as being a sex worker and transgender, reflect larger interrelated systemic injustices. Previous research connects the legal status of sex workers and their sexual orientation with a potential greater loss of income and risk of increased food and housing insecurity compared to being a cisgender female sex worker. This corroborated the insight generated from the expert interview, which suggested. The findings of this dissertation demonstrate how such identities are influenced by one another rather than operating independently of one another.

6.1 Looking Past the Lens of Covid

The analysis and discussion have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the lives of sex workers in Germany, pushing them into an area of illegality and violation of social space. However, it is also clear that the pandemic was a magnifying glass for insecurities that sex workers have been facing for a long time, and it brought to light the sexual and gender norms that informally govern sex workers' working conditions and how they intersect with citizenship. Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis highlighted deeper issues facing the industry.

As a rather incidental piece of information, the analysis of the interviews revealed that moral prejudices and aversions as well as the discussion about banning sex work during the COVID-19 pandemic were given a boost. In Germany, the public media framed sex work as a moral concern, thus further stigmatising sex workers in society. Similar to the AIDS crisis at the end of the 1980s (Steffan 2016), sex workers in the COVID-19 pandemic are now morally condemned per se without further knowledge or even epidemiological evidence (DSTIG 2020). A legalized approach, which is the one that Germany uses, frames sex work as labor and provides sex workers with civil law protection. However, under the umbrella of COVID-19 sex workers are still denied autonomy and self-determined action today, more than at the turn of the millennium. Hence, the pandemic pushed the evolution of sex workers back in time.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, it again became clear that German politicians still consider sex work as a trade that needs to be controlled. Due to the restriction imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the penalty for running prostitution enterprises was substantially greater than for other close contact businesses (such as beauty parlours and restaurants), which were also forced to close as a measure of public health security. While businesses such as beauticians were permitted to reopen after the amendment, sex work remained outlawed. The municipality-legitimised surveillance and control of sex workers is an example of Foucauldian bio power, as it facilitates the oppression of bodies through the operation of power on life itself. This is a governmentality and normalisation practice, legitimised by the narrative of protection and security. The truth is that the bodies and sexualities of sex workers are considered the object of public health programs, whilst other bodies are not, despite the fact that they all have an impact on public health. The biological characteristics of the human species are now the aim and objective of political strategy and control, which is a distinguishing element of modern political technology and bio power. And through the establishment and entrenchment of disciplinary institutions, this power may be utilized to control entire populations but specifically can be seen in how the state treats those already hidden in the shadows (Foucault, 1978).

Aside from ignoring many aspects of sex workers' actual working circumstances, local sex industry legislation exacerbates sex worker stigma. According to some, sex is separate from all other services because it is connected with emotional concepts about morality, pleasure, and power. It is linked to a variety of different things, but it may also be transactional and unemotional—a service. Despite the legalisation of many aspects of the sex work industry, sex workers are still depicted in popular media as either high-earning hustlers or trauma and manipulation victims. Political and cultural stigmas impede acknowledgment of their fundamental worker rights as well as their individual agency and motivations for entering the field.

As mentioned earlier, the pandemic has had a global impact on the sex work industry. In-person sex work has become almost impossible, forcing many street sex workers to choose between putting their health at risk and paying their expenses. According to global research, the majority of the sex work industry has shifted to an online approach. This move, however, has not been without challenges; sex workers with prior face-to-face experience, as well as those who are new to the sector, have found it difficult to navigate an oversaturated market. In addition, the illegality of sex work in virtually all countries, as well as the conflation of sex

work and trafficking by policy makers and multilateral organisations such as the United Nations, have acted as further barriers for sex workers who rely on the internet to find a job. From most of the interviews, it appears that online safety is still a secondary issue to issues such as personal and financial safety, but it can also be seen that counsellors are gradually becoming more involved with the issue as the demand for it has increased. It can also be seen that trans and male sex workers have been particularly dependent on technology-based services and advertisements. For this reason, it is important to emphasise the importance of online safety and data protection for sex workers and that there is still room for improvement in many areas.

Websites like Craigslist and Backpage became popular venues for sex workers all over the world to post classified advertising for their services in the early 2000s. These websites provided opportunities for enhancing the safety of sex workers by allowing them to screen customers before engaging with them in person. Despite the benefits experienced by sex workers from these websites, escalating pressures from government agencies in response to growing worries about human trafficking rendered these platforms less feasible.

This analysis brings to the forefront that sex workers' everyday insecurities revolve around different concerns regarding financial hardship, work insecurity and personal safety, highlighting that the occupation is much more than the discussion around STIs. Sex workers continue to face taboos, which restricts their access to financial, legal and health services in their personal lives. Outside of Germany, sex work is often banned, which means that sex workers have no access to legal redress when they are violated in their personal security. The stigma that exists around the job prevents safe discussions about STIs such as HIV. In addition, illegal prostitution takes place in a space that is neither perceived on the internet nor in public, and the pandemic increasingly pushed sex workers into the shadows. All prostitution became criminalized in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic, this has had a severe negative impact on sex workers' personal security. This highlights how the criminalisation of sex work makes those engaged in it highly vulnerable.

There are several limitations to this study which are addressed in the following subsection. The sample of expert interviews may not reflect the realities of sex workers in Germany because the information obtained is based on professionals who work with sex workers rather than sex workers themselves. This data gives little insights into how individual sex workers directly managed and coped with the COVID-19 pandemic, but it does provide a decent overview of the structure in which they operate and the overall issues the sector confronts today.

Furthermore, triangulation was performed to guarantee that the emerging data was as useful as possible by interviewing members of sex worker organizations that provide support and information to a range of sex workers who differ in sex, age, sexual orientation, origin, and kind of employment. Another significant limitation in the data was the scope of interviews conducted, which limits data generalizability; six qualitative interviews were conducted due to a lack of availability in potential interviewees and the overall limited spatial-temporal scope and resources of a master's dissertation. However, due to the limited attention in this research field, it is still relevant to explore the voices of those working in the field; it provides an insight for future research to be built upon.

7. Concluding Remarks

The following concluding remarks summarise the main findings of the dissertation. This serves, on the one hand, to draw a conclusion for the thesis and, on the other hand, to present an outlook and answer in the context of the research question. The initial research objective, as described in the introduction, was to provide insight into a subject area that has limited exploration so far. With the help of expert interviews, the aim was to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the multiple (in)securities of sex workers in Germany. By analysing the expert interviews with staff of sex work counselling centers, this dissertation has shown how the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a magnifying glass for insecurities that sex workers have faced for a long time. In doing so, the pandemic has made visible that stigmatisation informally governs sex workers' working conditions and intersect with concepts of citizenship, gender and sexual orientation. The interviews about the perceptions of the changed security situation of sex workers in Germany were divided into four indicators and came to the following result:

Financial security was threatened for all sex workers by the abrupt stop in income. For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic threatened their existence. The effects differed according to several factors: the origin of the sex workers, the employment model, existing care obligations and the possibility of a career change to a crisis-proof trade to bridge the gap. The experts agreed on the devastating financial effects of the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic and the insufficient access to state benefits. The situation of sex workers was made particularly precarious by the many dependencies that arose from financial hardship. Unlike other sectors of the economy, the predominantly female sex workers are not only at risk of poverty but also have to worry about the integrity of their children, relatives and themselves. The state safety net has left a gaping hole in the protection of sex workers.

The access to food from sex workers was highly impacted by the effects of the pandemic and required those within the industry to adapt to this shortage. Although sex workers existed within a large subsection of marginalised groups without access to food and they were excluded from governmental schemes that allowed people to access certain food provisions due to the stigmatisation that surrounds their work. These schemes were cut off from sex workers with more focus due to the perceived hygiene risk they posed in the minds of food issuers. This is a problem that had heightened effects on those who were not registered under the Prostitution Protection Act and were afforded very few forms of security on behalf of the government. This problem was alleviated in part through less conventional avenues of food sharing. The interviews carried out revealed that sex workers relied on food packages given out by the

“Tafel”, which were disseminated through the counselling centres. Food sharing became vital for sex workers who readily interacted with food sharing programmes; this was evidenced by the fact that calls for food packages markedly decreased once measures were put in place to support them.

Personal Security was jeopardised in a number of different ways for sex workers through the course of the pandemic. While their work was made illegal, they were given few opportunities to change their line of work during the pandemic and were caught between the threat of catching a life-threatening virus or being arrested for continuing their work. Matters were made worse with regard to the decision making of sex workers early in the pandemic as there remained ambiguity over what Covid-19 was and how it was transmitted. This led to either increased infections or a lack of work for sex workers depending on what sources of information they had been able to access regarding the pandemic. A key way in which expert interviews revealed a threat to personal security was through the client reliance that was created during the pandemic. Sex workers were given very few options when it came to which clients they accepted or denied as they were so low on any form of work that desperation was informing their decision making on an unparalleled level. This meant that clients who had been rejected in the past or those who did not pass certain screening procedures were more likely to be admitted by sex workers, thereby endangering themselves greatly. This translated into many situations where sex workers were taken advantage of due to their overwhelming vulnerability. It also reduced their bargaining power, most notably in relation to the use of condoms which clients found they could quickly coerce sex workers into not using. The dangers of not using condoms were exacerbated by the fact that sex workers could not access government healthcare due to the lack of insurance, and many private clinics that could test for sexual health were closed or overwhelmed during the pandemic. Due to the fact that sex work was illegal during the pandemic and had to take place in increasingly covert ways, it also allowed clients to exploit sex workers due to their proximity and hiddenness. A final note on personal security comes in relation to housing threats; sex workers were forced underground and into brothels where their personal choice and security were limited. This was affirmed by support centres who noted the lack of sex workers on the streets. The conditions in which sex workers operate saw glaring new avenues of personal insecurity be opened during the course of the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the interviewed personnel from sex workers’ organisations noted how the sale and offer of sexual services transferred progressively to the internet. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, male and transgender workers relied on these services to do their jobs

as securely and effectively as possible. In the context of counselling services, Internet-facilitated sex work had already been addressed as a possible career transition option, and some of the interviewees reported that they were informed about the dangers online. However, after enquiring, it also emerged that topics such as data protection and online safety had played a rather subordinate role alongside the other safety aspects mentioned.

With the above analysis having summed up the key elements of this investigation, it begets one to emphasise that the pandemic has indeed had a negative effect on sex workers in the region. Their livelihoods were changed rapidly and irreparably, and while this was the case for many, it was sex workers who were given very little support from the government. This lack of support compounded the dangers associated with their job as the work was made illegal, and therefore, regulation was limited. Control was shifted away from the sex worker and into the hands of the client, who were given more leverage to coerce sex workers into areas of the work they were uncomfortable with. The lack of regulation extended from the physical into the online sphere as sex workers tried to adapt to changing environments but encountered data protection issues across the new landscape of work. The investigation delves into the work of support and counselling centres but acknowledges the limitations of these institutions at times. This investigation speaks to a general lack of care for the safety of sex workers throughout the pandemic and offers this analysis against the worldwide held assumptions that Germany is a home of progressive sex worker rights. By focusing the study on Germany, it leaves one with both policy recommendations for the country while also opening the door for future studies regarding sex workers through the pandemic across other regions.

It is important to note that it is not the opinion of the investigator that prior to the onset of the pandemic, the above-noted security risks were not present within the German sex worker legal framework. Rather, that throughout the pandemic, these vulnerabilities have been highlighted and turned into increasingly existential threats. The existing insecurities were already embedded in society; for example, sex workers had not been able to access German healthcare systems for a long time due to their lack of health insurance. Much has also been made of how the stigmatisation of sex work meant that throughout the pandemic, it was not given the requisite care by the German government, but this stigmatisation was always present in German society. This investigation then offers an analysis of how these present factors were highlighted and exacerbated throughout the pandemic, subsequently causing the increased insecurity of sex workers throughout the country.

The analysis carried out has not reached its endpoint, and the arguments presented still leave much to explore. Data protection and information security still have a deferred place within the remit of studies into sex work, but this is becoming a larger and more present issue. Counselling centres have had to deal with this issue more presently in recent years. More research will be needed to add to the complex understanding of sex work and the *everyday security* implications on the lives of sex workers as our society becomes more technologically advanced and the threats facing sex workers continue to evolve. Furthermore, as we enter a new phase of understanding the long term societal impacts of COVID-19, sex workers ought to be considered in the research and discussions.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guidelines

Introduction

- 1) Please tell me a little about the counselling centre you work in and your role.
 - a. How long have you been working for the counselling centre?
 - b. In which federal state is the counselling centre represented?
 - c. How many staff members are there?
 - d. How many sex workers (per month) visit the counselling centre?
- 2) Did the counselling centre receive financial support from the federal and/or state governments?
 - a. Alternatively, how is the counselling centre financed?

COVID-19

- 1) Was the counselling centre open for sex workers during the pandemic?
 - a. If not, were alternative counselling services offered?
- 2) Do you remember the beginning of the pandemic? When were the first restrictions imposed on sex workers?
- 3) To what extent was there support from the government (state and federal) for sex workers?
- 4) How did the justice system enforce the Covid-19 pandemic measures?
- 5) Which Covid-19 pandemic-related policy changes have particularly affected sex workers?
- 6) How has Covid-19 pandemic changed the lives of sex workers?
- 7) What are the main structural problems of sex workers, and how were they exacerbated by the pandemic (finances, health, security, law, etc.)

COVID-19 and Security

- 1) If we now look a bit more at the issue of safety. In what areas was the safety of sex workers affected by the measures?
- 2) Were there other factors that had an impact on sex worker safety during the pandemic?
- 3) How would you characterise the public discourse in the media and politics on sex work and Covid-19 pandemic since the pandemic outbreak in two sentences?
- 4) Which groups are most vulnerable in sex work?

Online-Security

- 1) Did you see a migration of sex workers to the online world during the pandemic?
- 2) What were the challenges for sex workers in moving online?
- 3) Do you have experience with sex workers protecting their content from unwanted resale and doxing?
 - a. Doxing is the disclosure of identifying information about a person on the Internet. This can be, for example, a person's real name, home address, workplace, phone number, financial information or personal data.
- 4) Does your counselling centre offer support on the topic of online safety?
- 5) How would you rate the issue of online safety for sex workers? Ten extremely relevant; 1 not relevant