

Sex Work Realities Versus Government Policies: Meanings of Anti-trafficking Initiatives for Sex Workers in the Netherlands

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Abstract Representations of the sex industry as a nest for involuntary sex work and exploitation shape the answers governments formulate to regulate the industry. In the legalized sex industry of the Netherlands, additional regulations and measures have been implemented recently to expand control and to prevent human trafficking. Increasing criticisms however claim that stricter control of the sex industry is not always in favor of the people concerned. This article uses symbolic interactionism to explore the meanings sex workers ascribe to their situation, to their work, and to the government's interventions. The article addresses an example of a recently introduced anti-trafficking measure: the mandatory intake of people who want to work in the sex industry, meaning a face-to-face conversation with the authorities. This intake should inform sex workers and provide the local authorities with the possibility of identifying signs of trafficking, which can lead to work restrictions. However, interviews with sex workers show that the government's intentions to offer help and protection for sex workers can mean control, discrimination, and work restrictions. Whereas the government wants to preclude possible victims of human trafficking from working in the sex industry, sex workers perceive their situation as a possibility to improve their lives. As a consequence, they withhold information about pimps and boyfriends from the authorities, or move to work in other cities, and sparingly use the assistance offered by the authorities.

Keywords Sex work · Human trafficking · Anti-trafficking · Prostitution · Netherlands · Symbolic interactionism

In a public meeting in November 2013, the mayor of Amsterdam presented the city's new prostitution and anti-trafficking policy. According to the mayor, new measures were needed because human trafficking takes place within the capital's regulated Red Light district, meaning that "every night 400 women are raped against their will" (presentation by the mayor of Amsterdam, 2013). This assertion was, of course, reported in the newspapers the next day (Hermanides 2013; Van Soest 2013). While human trafficking remains an abstract and confusing term, rape is not, and therefore the mayor used a discourse of rape which the new policy instrument would help prevent. This image is an example of how human trafficking in the sex industry is represented by, in this case, a politician and the media. Human trafficking is framed as rape, as forced and involuntary sex work, and as a brutal crime. It is these meanings and representations that shape formulated policies and solutions, as well as how possible victims are treated. These representations of urgent societal problems seem to legitimize immediate governmental intervention in the regulation of the sex industry.

Both nationally and internationally however, there are also concerns about the impact of anti-trafficking initiatives on sex workers. In a study concerning anti-trafficking measures in eight countries, Dottridge (2007) found several negative aspects concerning the impact of these initiatives on the people they were intended to help. How is this possible for policies that are meant to help and protect people? To gain insight into the impact of the Netherlands' anti-trafficking policy on sex workers, this paper focuses on the following question: What is the meaning of the government's anti-trafficking policy for sex workers in the Netherlands? To answer this question, the

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case of the recently introduced mandatory intakes for sex workers in the Netherlands is used.

Sex Work and Anti-trafficking Policy in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, sex work is legal provided it involves consenting sex between adults (i.e., over the age of 18), and as long as sex workers possess the legal residence permit required for employment (Daalder 2007). Operating a sex business is legal when the operator meets the requirements as formulated in municipal systems of licensing, and sex workers in principle have to pay taxes (Vanwesenbeeck 2011). The underlying assumption of this policy is that the normalization of sex work makes it more manageable, which could reduce harmful aspects such as exploitation and human trafficking (TK 1996-1997, 25 437, 3).

In 1999, the Netherlands was one of the first countries to legalize sex work (Outshoorn 2012). In 2000, this new legalization took effect and the ban on brothels was lifted; sex work was recognized as work and the regulation of the sex industry was delegated to local authorities (Outshoorn 2012). Forced sex work, including human trafficking, remained a criminal offense. People working in the sex industry were to become entitled to the social rights usually accruing to other workers. Only EU citizens could work legally as sex workers; those from outside were not to receive work permits (Outshoorn 2012).

The current policy on sex work in the Netherlands however is subject to ongoing debate (Outshoorn 2012; Weitzer 2012). Evaluations of the policy on sex work have shown that, despite the regulation of the industry, abuses in sex work still occur (TK 2009-2010, 32 211). The conviction of six men in a 2008 extensive trafficking case in Amsterdam, as well as books and movies about so-called loverboys (pimps who seduce girls to do sex work in order to exploit them) and the media attention for both generated a lot of attention on exploitation and human trafficking in the sex industry.

The Dutch government uses the UN definition of human trafficking, which means that people who exploit others by means of coercion, deception, or fraud can be prosecuted for human trafficking. Trafficking in persons is defined in the UN Palermo Protocol as:

“The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms

of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation shall be irrelevant.” (15 November 2000, (Trafficking Protocol), Article 3).

From a legal point of view, the UN definition “is interpreted widely in the Netherlands and declares all recruitment of women for sex work in another country as illegal” (Wagenaar et al. 2013, p. 82). In practice, however, the Dutch law makes a distinction between acts of trafficking that are “punishable” and “non-punishable” (Wagenaar et al. 2013). “Punishable” acts require the elements of exploitation, deception, or force, “meaning a cross-border ride to a befriended sex worker would be considered ‘non-punishable’ and would not lead to prosecution” (Wagenaar et al. 2013, p. 82). The wide interpretation of the definition of human trafficking in Dutch law, or in other words the criminalization of the international recruitment for sex work (without force or exploitation), stems from the Geneva Convention of 1935 (Staatsblad [Statute book]. 1935, no. 598). By not renouncing this treaty it is, consequently, left in Dutch law, even though it is in fact in opposition to the Dutch prostitution policy. For this reason, several people argue this treaty should be removed from the statutory provision. Recent court decisions show that in practice exploitation or force are seen as necessary conditions for human trafficking. (See an example of such a court decision ECLI:NL:HR:2016:857, at <http://deemlink.rechtspraak.nl/uitspraak?id=ECLI:NL:HR:2016:857>).

To fight abuses in the sex industry in the Netherlands, a criminal and an administrative (law) approach are combined. Human trafficking and punishable exploitation of sex work are approached via the Penal Code, while the legalization of the sex work industry via an administrative law approach should, it is believed, lead to better control and regulation. This administrative approach takes shape at the municipal level by means of a licensing system (BNRM, 2002, p. 16).

Several municipalities have used this approach to withdraw licenses, sometimes with the consequence of closing down whole sex work areas. In 2007, the municipality of Amsterdam withdrew the licenses of four brothel owners, who owned 30 different sex businesses with a total of 100 windows, due to the suspicion of crimes (Siegel 2009; Weitzer 2012). In 2013, the city of Utrecht withdrew the licenses of operators of 143 workplaces on boats (NRMSGK 2013). The licenses were withdrawn on the basis of, inter alia, indications of human trafficking. The same happened in a street with Window prostitution in Utrecht’s city center (Verhoeven & van Straalen 2015). Also, streetwalking zones in the main cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Eindhoven) were closed in the years after the official legalization of sex work. They had become more crowded with sex workers from Eastern Europe, which led to concerns about

human trafficking and hence their closure by the municipalities (Siegel 2009; Weitzer 2012).

Furthermore, there is a current debate about the necessity to introduce more anti-trafficking measures such as the “prohibition of pimps,” raising the minimum age for sex work, and the penalization of clients of trafficking victims. Since 2009, the government has proposed to introduce new legislation to address the problems in the sex work industry. This bill, the “Act to Regulate Prostitution and Combat Abuses in the Sex Industry” (Wrp), has a primary objective of addressing the causes of the persistence of abuses. The bill focuses on reducing local differences in sex work policies, gaining more visibility and control over the industry, and facilitating monitoring and enforcement (TK 2009-2010, 32 211, no. 3). The Wrp consists of a nationwide uniform licensing system for all sex businesses and national mandatory registration of all sex workers in the Netherlands that includes a direct meeting between authorities and sex workers. This meeting should empower sex workers and facilitate the detection of abuse by the authorities. The assumption is that “compulsory registration increases the visibility and the grip on the sex sector and retrieves prostitutes from anonymity” (Outshoorn 2012, p. 241).

Anti-trafficking Initiatives at the Municipal Level

Three Dutch cities with sex work areas (Utrecht, The Hague, and Amsterdam) anticipated this national bill and introduced mandatory intakes for sex workers in their municipalities. This means that people wanting to work in the sex industry in these cities must first speak to the local authorities so that government representatives can identify and prevent human trafficking. The assumption behind this policy is that, during this face-to-face contact moment, information about sex work in the Netherlands can be provided to the sex worker and possible signs of abuse may be detected by the local authorities at an early stage. Because the introduction of such intakes were local initiatives, the intakes differ somewhat by city. In each city, different people, such as social workers, police, or brothel managers (assisted by social workers), carry out the intakes. Some municipalities gave this role to brothel managers because they wanted to increase their responsibility in countering abuses (in their business). Managers may refer a second intake to municipal social workers when they have doubts about the self-reliance of the sex worker. To make sure sex workers undergo the intake, one city provides registration numbers which they can check in the brothel manager’s administration. Another city obliged brothel managers to make a report of the intake, so they can check if an intake has in fact taken place. Utrecht has a zone for street sex work; it uses a license system for sex workers who want to work there; the intake there is linked to the issuing of licenses.

Based on the idea that especially vulnerable sex workers are possible victims of human trafficking, the intakes are implemented to filter out vulnerable sex workers. During the intakes, sex workers are asked about the existence of boy-friends or pimps, and language and cognitive skills are checked. When signs of trafficking are identified (for example dependency), the social workers send the information to the police. In two other cities, Amsterdam and The Hague, they go a step further. When there are signs of trafficking, or women are not found to be self-reliant (e.g., when they do not speak sufficient English), working in the sex industry of the particular city can be denied. The city representatives argue that a sex worker needs to speak some English (or Dutch, French, or German), to be able to negotiate and make herself clear to customers and to understand brothel managers. Based on the outcomes of the intake, a negative recommendation to the brothel operator, including work restrictions, can follow. In these cases, brothel owners are advised not to rent a workspace to the particular sex worker. If the operator still allows this sex worker to work, then their license may be revoked. Despite concerns about the violation of privacy and labor rights (Schilder and Brouwer 2014), these anti-trafficking intakes are implemented in three Dutch cities.

Literature

Governments primarily view trafficking as a crime. This is shown by representations that often are about crime, slavery, and degrading situations for victims (Andrijasevic 2007). As a consequence, governments’ anti-trafficking policies are about preventing and stopping human trafficking by identifying victims and vulnerable women (primarily), rescuing them and offering protection, and about arresting and prosecuting traffickers (Dottridge 2007). In the Netherlands, as mentioned before, sex work areas have been limited or closed down completely in order to (better) control human trafficking (Weitzer 2012).

However, some scholars are concerned that initiatives to stop trafficking can be counterproductive for the very people they were supposed to benefit. These concerns are about prevention campaigns, bans, and sex work and migration policies being overly protective and restrictive, rather than increasing sex workers’ choices (Andrijasevic 2007; Dottridge 2007; GAATW 2010; Vanwesenbeeck 2011; Kempadoo 2015; Vuolajärvi 2015). Dutch researcher Vanwesenbeeck (2011, p. 4), for example, states that “anti-trafficking policies mostly address the wrong phenomena.” Wagenaar et al. (2013, p. 90) argue that the original goal of the Dutch prostitution policy to improve labor relations is displaced by an “almost exclusive emphasis on fighting and preventing trafficking.” These researchers argue that, as a consequence, “the burden of the fight against exploitation is placed on the shoulders of the sex worker, who is prohibited from working after she has been

designated as a victim of trafficking” (Wagenaar et al. 2013, p. 90). In addition, other researchers have found that identified victims of trafficking often decline the assistance that is offered to them (Brunovskis and Surtees 2007).

Everyday Realities of (Migrant) Sex Workers: Hopes, Opportunities, and Risks

How is it possible that initiatives that aim to help victims do not always work out that way? Several authors point out that sex workers’ perceptions can differ from that of the government (Agustín 2003). By working in the sex industry, sex workers generally want to improve their lives or escape insufficient economic conditions (Agustín 2005; Vuolajärvi 2015). In the field of commercial sex, a variety of experiences of labor and exploitation occur, but the trafficking framework, according to Vuolajärvi (2015), does not always apply to the problems migrant sex workers encounter. Wagenaar et al. (2013, p. 90) describe how the notion of being a victim of trafficking does not correspond with the lived experience of many sex workers: “they see themselves as economic migrants who have fled from a situation without perspective to work in the sex industry in North-Western Europe.” Their problems are more often related to sex work policies that restrict possibilities for autonomous work and access to alternative spheres of labor than to individual traffickers (Agustín 2005; Vuolajärvi 2015). For sex workers, exploitative situations are sometimes (temporarily) accepted and can be even rational choices in a search for improvement, for migration, or for a solution to other, acute problems. Hoyle et al. (2011, p. 327) point out that women sometimes have rational reasons to agree to situations that can be labeled as trafficking. They say that “most trafficking victims make decisions within the oftentimes considerable constraints on their choices.” Like some women who choose to stay in violent relationships, their decisions need to be understood as “rationally chosen in the context of their current lives” (Hoyle et al. 2011, p. 322).

Plambech (2016) also found that migrant sex workers from Africa in conditions of indenture find it more profitable to stay in Europe than to return to Africa, despite their, at times, very difficult and exploitative circumstances. Indentured labor carries a temporal aspect and their strong aspirations for a better life make them focus on an imagined future where the debt is repaid and the money earned is their own. Plambech also stresses that it has to be taken into account that contemporary migrant labor is organized and that debt, for example, is a significant part of this organizing (2016, p. 15). This corresponds to cases that Jacobsen and Skilbrei (2010, p. 198) found: women who were identified as victims of trafficking by government agencies nevertheless presented themselves as “choosing, responsible and accountable” persons. Within their self-representations, they tend to view themselves

as “rational, able to choose and able to make the best of all sorts of experiences” (Jacobsen and Skilbrei 2010).

Several studies on sex work or sex workers in the Netherlands report on motivations and care needs of sex workers. Some of these studies are based on interviews with sex workers (Amsterdam 2010; Van Wijk et al. 2010; Bleeker et al. 2015; Nijkamp et al. 2014). Van Wijk et al. (2010, p. 58), for example, found from interviews with people working with sex workers that sex workers often have financial problems. Sex workers in Amsterdam who seek help mostly ask assistance with career paths and practical questions like filling in tax forms or about housing (Van Wijk et al. 2010, p. 59). Bleeker et al. (2014) conducted a survey among 364 sex workers. Nearly all of the sex workers in their study indicated that the treatment of sex workers by social institutions is a vital aspect that needs to be improved. Moreover, sex workers report that the acceptance of the profession of sex worker should be improved, next to improving working conditions and rights, lower taxes, and focus on safety and health in the sex industry (Bleeker et al. 2014).

Attitudes Towards Government Intervention

The meanings that are ascribed to sex work and even to exploitative situations can be used to explain sex workers’ attitudes towards government interventions to prevent or counter trafficking situations. Cases of sex trafficking are often comprised of autonomous choices by the trafficked individuals and help explain why “victims” might have good reasons to “hide from the rescuers” instead of looking for rescue (Meyers 2014). Dottridge (2007, p. 20) also writes about “the risks that people who have been trafficked will take to avoid being identified as victims of trafficking, suspecting that ‘rescue’ may not be in their own best interests.” Plambech (2016) also found that a government’s “rescue” meant in practice the deportation of women back to Africa (in her study), and therefore meant downward social mobility. The women concerned perceived “deportation to be more embarrassing and stigmatizing” than doing sex work (Plambech 2016, p. 17).

Despite the legalization of sex work in the Netherlands, recent discussions in parliament have focused on criminalizing certain aspects of sex work, with most initiatives intended to address human trafficking (Outshoorn 2012). Several sex workers, however, have raised a voice against these initiatives in their online blogs or in street demonstrations (Siegel 2015; Heus 2016). The *Prostitution Monitor*, a survey of 94 sex workers in Amsterdam, provides some indication of how they view new regulations, especially the closing of Windows (Amsterdam Sociaal 2010; Weitzer 2012). This *Monitor* found that 90 % thought the policy was not in their interest and 88 % did not feel represented by politics; 85 % did not agree with the plans for the Red Light district, and 94 % of the sex workers indicated that the approach was not good for sex workers and

they expected that their situation would only deteriorate. According to the sex workers, the municipal plans were therefore counterproductive (Amsterdam Sociaal 2010, p. 16).

An evaluation of another city's anti-trafficking measures also indicated that sex workers themselves were not in favor of the implemented measures. Interviews with sex workers that were held for the evaluation indicated that registration of sex workers especially endangered their privacy and, moreover, would not help against human trafficking (Gemeente Utrecht 2012).

Symbolic Interactionism

To better understand the effectiveness of anti-trafficking initiatives, one should study how those who are involved experience these initiatives and what meaning they assign to situations (Wigboldus 2002; Rijkeboer 1983; Agustin 2005). The methodology of symbolic interactionism can be used for this purpose. It refers to the perspective that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them, and these meanings are derived from social interaction (with others and society) and modified through interpretation (Mead 1970; Blumer 1962, 1969).

Blumer (1962), as with Mead (1970), claimed people interact with each other by interpreting or defining each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their "responses" are not made directly to the actions of one another but instead are based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols and signification, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions (Blumer 1962).

To find out the meaning actors assign to situations or to certain measures, one has to put the actor's point of view as central (Mead 1970). In this paper, we have to understand the everyday realities of sex workers facing the government's counter-trafficking interventions. In order to explore the meaning of this policy for sex workers, stories of their experiences with anti-trafficking initiatives in the Netherlands were garnered.

Methods

This study involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 21 sex workers. The interviews were held between April and July 2014. Sixteen of the interviewed sex workers worked in "window prostitution" in Amsterdam and The Hague. Window prostitution refers to sexual services that are provided in a room where the window fronts the street and serves as a "shop window" and "negotiation venue" for the services offered. Five of the interviewed sex workers worked in a pick-up area in Utrecht (a so-called tippelzone). They came from Hungary (8), the Netherlands (4), Romania (3), Eastern Europe (3), South America (2), and Belgium (1). All the interviews were conducted by me, the author, mostly in

cooperation with someone else. Street workers were interviewed by me alone, and in the Windows area we were two females (myself, with a colleague or interpreter); one interview was undertaken by me and a male interpreter. Both interpreters (Italian and Hungarian speaking) were experienced with the target group because they had been fieldworkers in several sex work areas for a number of years. All four of us had received interview training during our education and had broad interviewing experience. We also interviewed 20 government officials, police officers, and social workers, and 15 brothel managers in Window, club, and escort businesses. This article mainly focuses on the sex workers' experiences and therefore on their interviews.

When it comes to the selection of sex workers that cooperate in such studies, Sanders et al. (2009, p. 176) point to the probability in this type of research that, "the sample of interviewees often may be opportunistic rather than representative." For example, there is a possibility that, when access to sex workers is established via certain contacts, only sex workers are included in the sample who are in contact with aid agencies. In addition, a chance exists that researchers only speak with people who are willing or in a position to cooperate with the study and that the experiences of this group may differ from those who are not interviewed. The risk here is that the experiences of those who are less interested, or are not willing to speak, or who are not in a position to cooperate may not be reported. By using different ways to contact sex workers, we tried to prevent this as much as possible.

To contact sex workers, we looked for them at their work place. We went to Red Light districts and approached sex workers while they were standing in the Windows. Three sex workers were asked via a social worker to participate in the research. The interviews took place at the Windows or in their workrooms. Two interviews took place at an information center for sex workers. In the pick-up area, a coffee and medical room were used to conduct the interviews. A poster was hung in the coffee room to announce the research and hopefully encourage sex workers to participate. The interviewees received compensation for their time in the form of a gift certificate worth €10–25, depending on the length of the interview, which varied in length from 5 to 45 min. Sex workers were asked about their own experiences with the government intakes and about their ideas in general about the introduction of intakes. We asked about the content of the intake and how it was carried out.

During the interviews, we took notes which were directly elaborated after each interview. Subsequently, the interviews were analyzed by the author in several steps or "cycles" using open coding to get to the representations and meanings sex workers ascribed to their situations and to the government's policy (Saldana 2009). To check my interpretations and the way I "read" the data, a colleague, who had broad experience with coding qualitative data, also read three interviews and we

compared our labels. Doing and talking about this, more and more interpretative and reflexive labels arose (see also Mason 2007). I thought about what was said, but also about how it was said, why it was said, why it was said to *me*, and how the sex workers represented themselves as they did. This helped to interpret the interview data. By reading through the data, several times codes (labels) were developed for parts of data covering what was said or meant in the interviews (see also Boeije 2010). Different codes were formulated, such as “different problems,” “treatment by the government,” “appreciation,” “distrust,” “intentions of government,” “taken seriously,” “improvement of situation,” etc. This process of coding and recoding enabled me to find repetitive patterns and actions and enabled me to see which codes were especially useful. During this process, I gradually developed more abstract and analytical themes such as “self determination,” the “meaning of work,” and the “meanings of governments’ approximation” (see also Verhoeven and Van Gestel 2016).

Results

While the primary goal of the interviews with sex workers was to find out how they experienced the intakes, several other themes also emerged. In their stories, sex workers represented themselves and their situations. Different themes show what meaning they ascribed to their situations and to the government’s interventions. These meanings derive from interactions with and interpretations of government actions.

Choosing Entrepreneurs

One thing that emerged from the interviews was that women, when talking about their own situation, represented themselves as entrepreneurs, and they emphasized their self-determination and their ability to make choices. Talking about their work, they emphasized with several examples that they were free to make their own choices and decide about their own working conditions. Cindy (which is a fictitious name, just as all the other names), who previously worked in a club, explained that she had more freedom now since she had chosen to move from the club to the Windows:

But a club has several rules and you cannot go home when you want to. Here [in the windows] I can go home when I earned the rent, but there you have to stay, even if you don’t feel like it.

Diana, who also worked in the Windows, spoke about the freedom that comes with the work:

I work for myself, every day I can do what I want.

Eva emphasized that she picks her own customers: “it is my body, I don’t have to.” She declines customers from certain countries because she finds them “dirty” or because “they have no respect for women who do this job.”

There were also women who used others to help them. While men involved with the work of sex workers are often called pimps and are associated with exploitation, there are also sex workers who emphasize that “pimps aren’t always a bad thing,” but can offer help or support (see also Verhoeven and Van Gestel 2016). One of the women really wanted to leave her country and someone helped her with that. She gave that man money for years, but she did not have a problem with that, because she “was not beaten or anything” by him. She appeared to be proud that she managed to leave her country and was living and working in the Netherlands.

Like Cindy, who emphasized her choice of a different kind of work, others also told that the situation they were currently in was an improvement on earlier situations. A social worker also stated that it is very normal for sex workers to give money to someone “who takes care of them.” Bella showed pride and mentioned that she was happy that she had managed to leave a situation that was miserable:

Look where I am now, out of that misery and poverty.

These “representations of self” as choosing, self-determined, and self-reliant persons are in line with the findings of Jacobsen and Skilbrei (2010), who found these characteristics among sex workers who had been identified as victims of trafficking. This representation is constructed in interaction with the image they think the government has of sex workers, pimps, and of trafficking. Their representations are in fact a response to the government’s representations of sex workers as vulnerable victims, and of exploiters as brute criminals.

Emphasizing Sex Work as Difficult and Requiring Certain Qualities

When it comes to their work, several women mentioned that their work was not easy. While most sex industry policy focuses on abuses and trafficking, several women said that they faced other problems than trafficking. Some underlined that the work was “heavy” and required certain qualities or skills. The women we spoke to often underlined that they had these skills or found their way to deal with things. Jade, for example, said you need to be experienced and have to be somewhat older to deal with all the different people and their requests, while Fanny said the work can be lonely; “you are standing here, alone, staring in front of oneself.” Gail mentioned that “you can hardly trust anyone, because other people want your customers, or your money.” She added that it is mentally and physically very hard:

The work is tough, that's why I work only a couple of hours a day, but not the whole day. (...) You have to be strong in your head.

Eva worked a couple of weeks and then went to her home country for a while; she needed that break to recharge herself.

Support with Everyday Problems

When it comes to the meaning of the governments' initiatives, some of the sex workers supported the governments' actions against trafficking because "there are many shadows with this work," as Patricia described it. Most appreciation for government actions, however, were about other things rather than about the anti-trafficking measures. They appreciated friendliness and respect, and support with everyday problems, such as help with a sick dog or buying a car, for example. What was also appreciated was the availability of medical services, especially for sex workers (so that they do not have to explain their work to their general practitioner), or meeting places for sex workers where they can chat with colleagues. Another example of appreciated support is mediation with other government agencies. This can involve, for example, someone explaining their kind of work to a government official. Several times when sex workers talked about this support they also mentioned that government officials were respectful. Indeed, receiving adequate support was experienced as a kind of respect.

Intakes as a Form of Control

Sex workers were positive about the information function of the intakes and about the fact that they get to know someone to whom they can go in case of questions or problems. While there were positive experiences of sex workers with government officials regarding the intakes, it was also mentioned that the intakes can be experienced as a form of control. Because of all the questions during an intake, some sex workers got the feeling that they were not trusted. Helen, for example, felt sex workers "are seen as criminals." The story of Julia shows that she did not want the attention of government agencies. The agencies were worried about her limited English and offered her free language lessons to improve this (and thus her self-reliance). Her reality, however, was that of one goal: earning money to solve her problems back home, and all the government's good intentions seemed to distract her from that. Julia was from Eastern Europe and had come with a friend to Amsterdam to do sex work. While working in the Windows, she was checked by police regulators. She said she was checked because of her worried face and she was not smiling. She explained that she had troubles and worries because of problems at home and that it was difficult to get rid of these

thoughts. Because she was referred for a second intake, she felt that she was not believed and had been singled out and discriminated against.

Ignoring Real Problems

Several sex workers did not feel that the governments' initiatives matched their problems. While they did experience a lot of attention from government agencies, they actually needed other things. Because of this some women assumed the government had another agenda vis-à-vis supporting them. As Jody said:

There is enough attention, but wrong attention.

Several sex workers mentioned that there should be more attention for the well-being of the women instead of the current focus on pimps. As Gail said:

There is no attention to our wellbeing. They shouldn't be that focused on pimps, but on the problems of the women... They are so busy with girls giving money to pimps, and it's the government itself who takes half of your money.

Problems they faced were expensive workrooms, the closing of prostitution areas, and colleagues who worked below the going rate or who offered unsafe sex. Another thing that was mentioned was difficulty for migrants to get a place to live in the Netherlands in a regular, formal way. They also mentioned workrooms that can only be rented for a day and a night, and the lack of a labor union.¹

Fanny did not trust the government's intentions. She wondered if several measures were actually set up to improve the position of sex workers or to limit sex work and to improve "the city's look." To tackle human trafficking, according to the interviewees, the government could give more attention to housing, to checking addresses, and even house searches were mentioned.

Sex Workers' (Re)actions

Sex workers responded to government initiatives based on the meaning these initiatives had for them. We have seen that *initiatives* meant several things to sex workers, varying from support, misguided attention, false intentions, and control or discrimination. Meanings they ascribed to their own *situations*

¹ The Red Thread ("De Rode Draad" in Dutch) was an advocacy-support group for sex workers in the Netherlands, but it went bankrupt in 2012 after the government grant was stopped. A new Dutch union for sex workers, PROUD, was set up in 2015 (see also Heemskerk 2016). Since the interviews took place in 2014, at that time there was no labor union for sex workers.

varied from chosen, entrepreneurial, freedom, an improvement over earlier situations, a step forward, something they do not want to change, and hard work. When we look at the way they acted, we see several ways of responding: withholding information, declining assistance, mobility, and retaining anonymity.

Withholding Information

Sex workers tend to withhold information from the government about their relationships or about people who helped them. The independence of sex workers is a central point in the Dutch prostitution policy; this is especially so in Window sex work, where women are supposed to work, at least fiscally, as independent entrepreneurs. This focus of the government on independence is closely tied to the government's goal to combat human trafficking. From this perspective, partners of sex workers are often seen as pimps, who do not want to offer love, protection, and safety, but who are seen more as a threat to that safety because they exploit their "girlfriends."

Several sex workers said that they never tell a government official that they are in a relationship, because they fear to be treated with suspicion. As a consequence, information that can be of use in the identification of possible exploitation and violence can, in practice and purposely, be held outside the government's knowledge. This is shown by the conversation with Ilona, a sex worker who said she would never tell a government official that she has a boyfriend:

They ask if you have a pimp, or a boyfriend. I never say that I have a boyfriend. A girl will always say that it is not the case.

Sex workers also noted that they would not talk to the government during an intake about such things as exploitation. Jessica, a Hungarian, commented about girls with "pimp-boyfriends":

They don't want anything to change their situation, because they don't want to be alone. Some do know, but they just want to have someone. They just want that there is someone who is there for them.

Declining Assistance and Mobility

Sex workers who face a negative recommendation and therefore cannot work for a particular operator often react angrily and disappointed. "Nine out of ten are very angry, they deny it, say it is absolutely not true, they are furious," said a police officer who carries out intakes in one of the cities. Another

police officer explained that it is difficult to convince sex workers that they are facing exploitation:

There was this woman, she has a university degree and earned 300 Euros a month in Eastern-Europe. Here she earns 500 to 600 Euros a day. She had to give half of it to a trafficker. She looked at me as if I was crazy. She told me that she earns 200 Euros a day, something where she has to work for a whole month back home, and that she can take care of her whole family now. It's difficult to have these discussions with her. But that guy, he took 400 Euros every day. I told her that we do not agree with that here. But she didn't understand that.

While the government labels sex workers' situations as human trafficking and uses the negative recommendation, sex workers themselves subsequently leave and disappear out of sight of the government. This is the case in both cities that implemented the "negative recommendation." One sex worker saw that others could not start doing sex work and said that the government is "sending women away, that is not helping." Women are offered to file a report, and offered the assistance of care agencies, but according to the police and the municipality most decline assistance and go to other places or cities to work. Julia, who was offered an English course, went to the course because otherwise she was not allowed to work. She herself felt she could manage with her English.

Retaining Anonymity

In one city the municipality put serious effort into including sex workers when developing their sex work policy. Several consultative meetings were held. Although sex workers want to be involved in shaping relevant policy, our interviews suggested that fear of losing anonymity prevents them from speaking up. When it comes to initiatives to improve sex work conditions or to tackle human trafficking, sex workers want to be involved in shaping these measures, but what discourages them from actually attending consultative meetings is, apart from fearing a loss of anonymity, they also doubt the government would really listen to them and doubt that the government's real intentions are to improve sex workers' situations. In other words, the meanings sex workers ascribe to government policy causes them to respond in a certain way, even though they may find it important to be involved in policy development.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented that meanings that sex workers ascribe to their own situation, which vary from chosen, entrepreneurial, freedom, an improvement of earlier situations,

something they do not want to change, and as hard work. Regarding the governments' initiatives, they mean several things to sex workers, varying from support, misguided attention, false intentions, control, or discrimination. These meanings do not always match the meanings officials ascribe to the women's situations and to the intentions *they* have with the policy instrument. For the government, sex workers who depend on others or who do not speak any English sound alarm bells. Sex workers, however, do not always recognize these worries; rather, they mention other problems. The help of others with arranging sex work for them can mean possibilities, action or change, getting away from an unwanted situation, and an investment with the hope for more independence and better times in the end. This mismatch is shown in practice by the way most women react to a negative recommendation of the government. They do not perceive it as helpful, but get angry and are disappointed. Sex workers perceive the government's focus on pimps or others exploiting sex workers, and the importance the government attaches to independence. As a consequence, they withhold information about pimps and boyfriends from representatives of the government. Sex workers who are filtered out by the intakes mostly move to other cities to work. Most do not make use of the offered assistance by the authorities. This suggests that the governments' initiatives in fact can be counterproductive.

Regarding solutions, it is important that the initiatives to identify possible exploitation match sex workers' needs. Involving sex workers in the formulation and implementation of intakes could ensure a better match with their needs and ensure more appropriate treatment (Dottridge 2007; Meyers 2014). Meyers (2014) argues that "help organizations should be run by affected women and be open-minded about whether or not the trafficked individuals should remain in the sex industry." An interesting example of dealing with this issue is in India, where sex workers themselves carry out intakes (Jana et al. 2013). What also should be looked at is ways of involving sex workers in order to explore their meanings, where the importance of anonymity is taken into account. Our interviews show anonymity is an important condition for sex workers to join consultations. When it comes to matching solutions and needs, our interviews indicate that situations are labeled differently. While giving other people money is seen as an opportunity or improvement by some sex workers, it can be labeled as trafficking by the government; thus, it might make more sense to focus on providing information and help rather than to stop people who want or have to work under certain circumstances. The government could focus on the services or support that sex workers really need. Right now, supportive activities in the sex industry are not part of the ideal image of an independent sex worker, while in other employment areas mediation is a normal practice. By offering the right support, women might not need pimps to arrange travel or housing for them. Currently, sex workers not

only have to negotiate with difficult situations and hard work, they also have to negotiate with institutions and their labor restrictions, and with requirements of independence and self-reliance in order to survive as legal entrepreneurs (see also Anderson and Andrijasevic 2008, p. 144). Ironically, there is a chance that they might start using (and paying) other people to inform or prepare them for the intakes. Our study makes clear that in order to make sure that the formulated solutions match with the needs and everyday realities of sex workers, we need their input.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Maite Verhoeven declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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