

Labour Trajectories and Working Conditions of Sex Workers in Spain

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This study examines the labor trajectories and working conditions of sex workers in Spain. Drawing on survey data from 210 participants—primarily women and trans women with prior experience in the formal labor market—the research explores motivations for entering the sex industry, the comparative evaluation of working conditions, and the role of structural inequalities. Findings reveal that participants' previous employment was often marked by low wages, informal contracts, gender discrimination, and exposure to harassment and violence. In contrast, sex work was frequently described as providing greater income, autonomy, flexibility, and personal agency, despite persistent stigma and legal precariousness. Notably, 87 percent of respondents expressed willingness to formalize their occupation through social security registration if permitted by law. The findings challenge dominant narratives of victimhood, foregrounding the strategic dimension of occupational choice under structural constraint, and advocate for rights-based policy frameworks that recognize sex work as legitimate labor.

Key words: sex work; labor market; migrants; occupational choice; mobilities.

Introduction

In contrast to traditional sociological understandings of employment as a fixed and stable component of individual life trajectories, contemporary global societies are increasingly characterized by dynamic processes of mobility, fluidity, and displacement. This shift signals a departure from sedentary models of labor organization toward what [Sheller and Urry \(2006\)](#) conceptualize as the mobilities paradigm, which emphasizes the centrality of movement—both physical and social—in shaping work and life experiences.

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Sex work in present-day Spain exemplifies these transformations. Unlike historical patterns marked by relative fixity, contemporary sex work is embedded within broader transnational and internal mobility circuits. These movements involve both international migration—whereby foreign sex workers arrive in Spain—and internal mobility among Spanish nationals who relocate within or beyond the country in search of more favorable working conditions. Such patterns reflect not merely geographic movement but deep social change, captured by the sociological concept of motility, or the capacity to be mobile across social and spatial terrains (Kaufmann et al. 2004).

Within both the formal labor market and the sex industry, individuals engage in inter- and intra-spatial mobilities driven by the pursuit of economic betterment and social mobility. However, these mobilities are structurally differentiated. In the case of sex work, mobility is often shaped by pronounced stigmatization and social exclusion, which undermine workers' recognition and visibility in the public sphere. In some contexts, invisibility is a strategic choice, employed as a protective response to surveillance and marginalization (Shewly et al. 2020). Moreover, the legal ambiguity surrounding sex work in Spain exacerbates precariousness, depriving workers of access to formal labor rights, social security, and legal protections (Armstrong and Abel 2020; Sánchez Perera 2022).

Despite these challenges, mobility can function as a mechanism of relative inclusion within society. Nevertheless, such inclusion is often partial and conditional, frequently involving temporary withdrawal from visibility to evade stigma and legal repercussions (Shewly et al. 2020). In unregulated labor contexts such as Spain, sustained engagement in the sex industry often necessitates a tradeoff: the continuation of work in the sector may preclude contributions to the social security system and limit civic participation. As a result, many sex workers experience cyclical movements between formal labor and sex work, dictated by availability, legal constraints, and personal or economic needs.

This mobility is multidimensional. As Siegel (2012) argues, sex workers navigate both horizontal mobility—geographical relocations across cities, countries, or work settings—and vertical mobility—movement within the structural hierarchy of the sex trade. Importantly, vertical mobility may also entail social mobility, such as transitions from frontline sex work to managerial roles or ownership positions (Goldstein 1983). These forms of internal advancement complicate monolithic views of sex work as uniformly exploitative, revealing stratified pathways and differentiated aspirations within the industry.

The broader labor market context, characterized by precarity and flexibility, further compounds these dynamics. Migrant women, in particular, are disproportionately subject to occupational instability and are thus more likely to engage in labor-related mobility (Ruesgas and Viñas 2025). However, these experiences are not unique to migrant populations; they also affect certain segments of the native-born working class.

Crucially, mobility in sex work—and in labor more generally—is socially stratified and differentially accessible. Structural inequalities rooted in race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality deeply mediate individuals' capacities for movement and opportunity (Sheller 2018). Border regimes and immigration policies play a key role in shaping mobility trajectories, selectively enabling movement for some while criminalizing and obstructing it for others. As Glick and Salazar (2012) argue, while global elites may enjoy cosmopolitan freedoms of movement, impoverished and racialized populations are often rendered immobile through legal and economic constraints.

In sum, the sociological analysis of mobility within the sex industry reveals complex interactions between agency and structure, legality and illegality, visibility and invisibility. Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced approach that situates individual trajectories within broader systems of inequality, regulation, and social transformation.

The work is organized into four sections. First, after a few brief remarks on sex work in Spain, we provide an overview of the general labor market, with a particular focus on the situation of women and undocumented migrants, who often face barriers to formal employment and may view sex work as one of their few viable options. At the same time, we also address the question of to what extent is sex work an occupational choice. Second, we present the objectives of this study and describe the methodology employed. Third, we outline the findings from an online survey of sex workers, comparing their experiences in sex work with those in other employment. Fourth, we discuss these findings in light of the existing literature and the mobilities paradigm, highlighting this study's key contributions. One of the central findings is that precarity and negative experiences in the formal labor market are a significant factor motivating the transition to sex work. These insights point to the urgent need for inclusive labor policies that ensure labor protections and rights for all workers, regardless of gender, migration status or sector.

Background: some notes on sex work in Spain

Based on previous work carried out and published, we argue that sex work in Spain predominantly takes place within the informal economy due to legal ambiguity and the absence of labor protections (Clua 2015; Fita 2023; Rodríguez Martínez 2015)—sex work is an activity that is neither explicitly criminalized nor formally regulated under national law. The Spanish Penal Code criminalizes coercion and pimping, the inducement of minors or individuals with disabilities into prostitution, and human trafficking for sexual exploitation. In effect, this legal framework means that sex-related businesses may operate legally as long as there is no third-party profiteering from the sex work itself. Legally, such establishments are only permitted to charge room rentals and for ancillary services such as the sale of alcohol. Nonetheless, some businesses violate these rules by charging commissions per client or exerting control over sex workers. Contributing to legal ambiguity is the fact that regulation varies significantly

across the country, as regional and local governments hold substantial authority in this area. In certain municipalities, for instance, clients of sex workers may face administrative fines. In other sectors of the sex industry, such as digital content creation (e.g., via platforms such as OnlyFans), the state generally requires or expects such work to be carried out under a self-employment regime (independent).

The structural organization of the sex industry in Spain broadly parallels that observed in other European contexts (Meneses-Falcón and Tellería-Pérez 2025). The sector is predominantly characterized by indoor work environments, while street-based sex work constitutes an estimated 5–10 percent of the overall market. Women represent the majority of individuals engaged in sex work, with trans persons and men comprising a smaller, though not insignificant, segment. The sector is also marked by a substantial presence of migrant women, although their representation varies considerably across different regions and segments of the industry. Existing studies estimate that approximately one-third of women involved in sex work in Spain are Spanish nationals (Meneses-Falcón 2023a).

The participation of women and migrants in sex work is shaped by multiple structural factors. Two prominent issues are: persistent gender inequalities in the labor market (wage gap), which result in poorer working conditions for women and greater attractiveness of sex work; and restrictive immigration policies that limit the access of non-EU citizens to the formal labor market. In this study, we argue that these intersecting dynamics significantly influence the pathways of many women into sex work. Therefore, we aim to examine the labor market and compare working conditions in and outside of the sex industry in Spain.

Women in the labor market in Spain

The Spanish labor market remains highly segmented, with women disproportionately concentrated in precarious service-sector employment, including hospitality, caregiving, and small business—sectors characterized by low wages, limited job security, and high levels of informality (García-Valverde 2022; Ruesgas and Viñas 2025). Labor market analyses in Spain consistently highlight substantial disparities in employment access, income levels, and working conditions between men and women (Pérez-Ortiz et al. 2020). Between 2021 and 2023, male participation in the Spanish labor market surpassed that of women by 10–11 percentage points (57.14 percent vs. 46.93 percent at the end of 2023). Additionally, women are more likely to work part-time, often due to caregiving responsibilities. The female unemployment rate also remained approximately three points higher than the male rate (13.36 percent vs. 10.30 percent at the end of 2023) (INE 2020). Men's wages are on average 27 percent higher than women's, a gap largely attributed to occupational and sectoral segregation (Blas and Estrada 2021).

These disparities are deeply rooted in socially constructed gender roles that continue to assign the responsibility for domestic and caregiving tasks

predominantly to women. Such norms significantly influence women's participation in the labor market (Fernández and Tobío 2019). As a result, the burden of balancing work and family life falls unevenly on women, perpetuating inequalities in access to stable, well-paid employment. While Spain has made some progress in formal gender equality measures, particularly in legal and institutional frameworks, and with respect to salaries, advances in the redistribution of domestic and care responsibilities have been less pronounced. Family support policies, work–life balance initiatives, and parenting leave provisions remain limited and insufficient, further impacting women's ability to participate equally in the labor force.

Immigrant women without rights

As Oso (2018) highlights, migrant women in Spain play a crucial role as transnational caregivers, often heading households and sending remittances that support families in their countries of origin. Their labor, especially in domestic work, has also enabled many Spanish women to enter and advance in the formal workforce by outsourcing caregiving responsibilities. Despite this vital contribution, migrant women often remain socially invisible and face high levels of discrimination (Bedoya 2000). When working without contracts, they are especially vulnerable to abuse, including from actors who exploit their undocumented status and legal precarity (García-Valverde 2022). However, Juliano (2009), for example, draws attention to pervasive stereotypes that affect migrant women, particularly in narratives surrounding their migration. These often frame them as passive victims deceived and exploited by criminal networks. However, many are highly educated and qualified, yet are confined to precarious and low-skilled jobs due to legal and structural barriers.

As in many European countries, the migration regime in Spain significantly shapes the lives of migrant women and their access to the labor market. Many migrant women arrive in Spain on tourist visas and later attempt to obtain residence and work permits after their initial legal stay expires. However, acquiring legal status is a complex and restrictive process. According to current legislation (Article 124 of Royal Decree 557/2011, which regulates Organic Law 4/2000), migrants must demonstrate “rootedness” to qualify for regularization. This can be established through proof of two years of continuous residence combined with employment or through sustained social and family ties.

Participation in the labor market is therefore crucial for regularization. Yet undocumented migrants face substantial barriers to accessing formal employment. Companies risk sanctions for hiring undocumented workers, which severely limits their opportunities in the standard labor market. As a result, many migrant women have no choice but to work in the informal economy—especially in sectors such as domestic work, hospitality, and agriculture—where jobs are often precarious, low-paid, and lacking legal protections (Conde-Ruiz and Marra de Artúñano 2016; Gil and Navajas-Pertegás 2023; Farré and Bosch 2014). The precarious nature of informal employment makes it challenging for

migrants to fulfill the legal criteria required for regularization. Faced with these structural barriers, some women turn to occupations that, while not necessarily advancing their legal status, offer the prospect of higher earnings—such as sex work. This decision may stem from a range of factors, including systemic exclusion and limited access to the formal labor market.

Migrant women engaged in irregular or informal employment are frequently exposed to elevated risks of abuse, including economic exploitation and various forms of violence, as evidenced by a study on undocumented Nigerian sex workers in Turin, Italy (Baye and Heumann 2017). However, such vulnerabilities are not confined to the informal sector. In Spain, INE (2020) data show that 6.7 percent of women aged 16–54 reported job insecurity, 1 percent experienced workplace harassment or threats, and 24.5 percent faced excessive work pressure. While a Cármides Group study (León Pérez et al. 2025) found that 11 percent of workers likely experienced harassment regardless of gender, other research indicates clear disparities: 18.3 percent of women vs. 8.8 percent of men reported workplace harassment during their careers (Government Delegation on Gender Violence and CCOO 2021).

Sex work as occupational choice

Academic and activist discourse on abolitionism and prohibitionism has often constructed a singular, homogenizing narrative of people engaged in sex work—especially women—portraying them primarily as passive victims of exploitation or coercion, frequently under the control of third parties. These frameworks tend to conflate consensual sex work with human trafficking and forced labor, thereby obscuring the diversity of experiences within the sex industry and overlooking the agency many sex workers exercise in their occupational decisions. This conflation also neglects the reality that, for some, sex work constitutes a rational and strategic response to structural constraints and limited opportunities in the formal labor market—a point supported by empirical research (Rosen and Venkatesh 2008).

In Spain, early studies and media narratives frequently cited claim that up to 90 percent of women in sex work are victims of trafficking (De Miguel 2017). However, more recent studies challenge this figure. A study involving 415 women and trans women working in more precarious contexts found that 39 percent had entered sex work under coercive conditions, whereas 61 percent had not (Meneses-Falcón, Rua-Vieites, and García-Vázquez 2022). In another study of 553 individuals in a more economically stable, mid-tier segment, 13.2 percent reported some form of coercion (Meneses-Falcón 2023b). These findings suggest that the prevalence of coercion is higher in socioeconomically marginalized contexts.

Research further illustrates that many people—including women, men, and trans individuals—view sex work as a source of economic stability, autonomy, and professional satisfaction (Meneses-Falcón 2023a; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). This phenomenon is not unique to Spain. Studies in other contexts, such

as India, show that sex work can provide women with greater control over their time and bodies, higher incomes, and more flexibility for managing care responsibilities compared with many other forms of labor (Sinha 2014). Similarly, Zhang et al. (2015) observed that sex work may enable women to pursue upward social mobility and improve their families' financial situations.

The sex industry has also evolved alongside digital technologies, which have introduced new avenues for engagement that increase privacy, occupational control, and flexibility (Cunningham et al. 2018; Jones 2020). These developments have enabled participation from a wider range of individuals, including university students and members of the middle class, who may engage in sex work to finance education or achieve short-term financial goals (Bernstein 2016; Sanders and Hardy 2013). These trends challenge the stereotype that sex work is only associated with extreme socioeconomic deprivation. While vulnerability may influence some pathways into sex work, other factors, such as broader labor market exclusion and barriers to formal employment, as well as changing social status of the occupation, may have a higher weight. However, other circumstances leading to entry into sex work have also been highlighted, such as van Stempvoort and Janssen (2022) on students doing sex work, Dos Santos and Lo (2024) on male sex workers in South Korea, and Hardy and Sanders (2014) on labor and regulation in the stripping industry.

Methodology

In this work, we examine sex work as a pragmatic response to structural inequality and exploitative conditions in other precarious sectors of the labor market. In this respect, we ask the following research questions. What were the employment conditions and experiences of women before entering sex work, and how do these influence their decision to transition into the sex industry? How do working conditions in sex work compare to those in the standard labor market, particularly in terms of income, autonomy, violence, and work–life balance? To what extent is entry into sex work influenced by coercion versus economic necessity and structural factors? How do legal and migration statuses—particularly undocumented status—affect the working conditions and vulnerabilities of sex workers? What are the interactions between sex workers and public services (healthcare, social services, and law enforcement), and how are these shaped by legal and institutional contexts? Would sex workers be willing to formalize their employment if legal frameworks allowed it, and what implications does this have for policy and rights-based regulation?

An online survey was administered to individuals engaged in sex work in Spain who had previously held employment outside the sex industry, using Google Forms as the data collection platform, because it is simpler and better known. The questionnaire was developed in collaboration with sex workers, who also contributed significantly to its dissemination through peer networks.

The instrument comprised thirty-seven items distributed across three primary domains: sociodemographic information, experiences within the formal labor market, and experiences in sex work.

Additionally, an open-ended question was included to capture further reflections or comments from participants. The survey required approximately eight minutes to complete and remained open from October 2022 to October 2023.

A total of 210 individuals engaged in sexual services in Spain participated in the study. Of these, 92.9 percent (195) identified as women and 7.1 percent (15) as trans women. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 67, with a mean [standard deviation] age of 36.9 [9.30] years.

The sample is not representative of the broader population of sex workers, which limits the generalizability of the findings. As sex work involves a hidden or hard-to-reach population, achieving representative sampling remains a challenge. The participation of men and trans persons was also limited. While this partly reflects their lower representation in the sector, it does affect the diversity of perspectives included. Finally, not all sectors of sex work are equally represented in the sample. Most participants worked indoors, while individuals working in public or street-based settings were not included.

Our sample aligns with the so-called “mid-tier” segment of sex work in Spain (Meneses-Falcón 2023b; Meneses-Falcón and Tellería-Pérez 2025), composed of workers with previous employment in other sectors. Most individuals in this group have medium levels of education and include both Spanish nationals and long-term migrants with relatively secure residency status. Their work typically occurs in enclosed environments—such as private apartments, clubs, hotels, or designated homes—that offer a degree of privacy and autonomy. The average weekly income reported in this segment ranges between €1,000 and €1,500. This group provides valuable insights into how workers navigate between the sex industry and the formal labor market, illuminating broader employment conditions in late capitalism.

A particularly important aspect of our analysis concerns migrant sex workers, who frequently—but not exclusively—operate in more precarious sectors. These individuals work in less regulated environments, especially when facing limited access to education or formal employment. Their work is typically carried out in apartments and outdoor or semi-regulated settings such as streets, highways, industrial zones, and certain clubs. In these segments, the average weekly income is approximately €500 (Meneses-Falcón and Tellería-Pérez 2025).

Descriptive and bivariate analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 24. All variables were analyzed, and cross-tabulations were used to compare two specific groups—migrant workers with and without a work permit—using the chi-square test with a 95 percent confidence level.

However, quantitative analysis often has its limitations: It is not always possible to identify the reasons behind and the mechanisms of events and behaviors;

it provides little context to help explain the responses; and it reduces complex phenomena to mere numbers, as is the case with sex work.

This research project was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Comillas University of Madrid on 20th October 20, 2020.

Results

Sample description

Of the total sample, 53.8 percent ($n = 113$) were born in Spain, while 46.2 percent ($n = 97$) were born outside the country. Among the foreign-born participants, 4 were from Western Europe, 7 from Eastern Europe, 10 from Central America, 71 from South America, 1 from North Africa, 1 from Sub-Saharan Africa, and 1 from Asia. A majority of respondents, 62.4 percent ($n = 131$), held Spanish nationality. Among those who were not Spanish citizens, the mean length of residence in Spain was 11.01 [9.33] years, with a range from 1 to 42 years. In terms of legal status, 19.0 percent ($n = 40$) of participants did not possess a valid work permit, while 29.5 percent ($n = 62$) reported having undergone a process of regularization due to their status as foreign nationals. Access to healthcare was high, with 84.3 percent ($n = 177$) of respondents covered by health insurance.

Regarding educational attainment, 42.9 percent ($n = 90$) had completed upper secondary education or vocational training, 26.7 percent ($n = 56$) had completed lower secondary education, 23.3 percent ($n = 49$) held a university degree, and 7.1 percent ($n = 15$) had completed only primary education. In terms of family composition, 73.3 percent ($n = 154$) lived with family members. Regarding parenthood, 45.2 percent ($n = 95$) reported not having children, 38.6 percent ($n = 81$) had children living with them, and 16.2 percent ($n = 34$) had children who were not currently residing with them.

Experiences in the formal labor market

Participants reported previous work experience primarily in sectors such as domestic care (for the elderly or children), cleaning, hospitality (e.g., waitressing), telephone operations, and small business (Table 1). These jobs were characterized by low wages, with monthly earnings typically below €1,000, and by short durations, usually less than one year. Working conditions were demanding: the mean number of working hours per day in these roles was 9.9 [2.73] hours, with reported daily hours ranging from 2 to 24 hours.

A substantial portion of the sample reported experiences of workplace violence and harassment in previous jobs. Specifically, 47.6 percent ($n = 100$) indicated that they had suffered a violent incident, while 57.6 percent ($n = 121$) reported being harassed at work. Among those who experienced harassment, 38.6 percent ($n = 81$) identified their supervisor or employer as the perpetrator,

Table 1. Previous work experience.

Previous employment	Yes	Revenue	Duration
	Percent (<i>n</i>)	Less and more than € 1,000	Less and more than 1 year in business
Waitress	65.2 (137)	90.0%; 10.0%	44.6%; 55.4%
Cleanings	53.8 (113)	96.7%; 3.3%	66.7%; 33.3%
Childcare	41.4 (87)	98.6%; 1.4%	76.5%; 23.5%
Elder care	31.9 (67)	98.0%; 2.0%	73.9%; 26.1%
Telephonist	38.6 (81)	83.0%; 17.0%	56.5%; 43.5%
Commerce	48.1 (101)	77.9%; 22.1%	50.0%; 50.0%

29.0 percent ($n = 61$) reported harassment by customers, and 21.9 percent ($n = 46$) by coworkers.

A few participants also provided qualitative comments at the end of the questionnaire, offering further insight into the personal and structural challenges they faced in the labor market.

I never had an employment contract at my old jobs when it was promised to me, so I didn't quote anything at my age, 36. (Female, 36 years old)

I've always had problems with companies and individuals wanting to hire me because I have dependent children. (Female, 47 years old)

I feel exploited and undervalued in other jobs because I don't have enough money to survive. (Female, 48 years old)

When I was working as a waitress, there were some drunk customers and my boss was having fun with them, so the customers wanted to touch my breasts and butt. I grabbed a beer bottle and told him if you do that, I'll bash your head in. I've had many similar experiences in this job. (Female, 34 years old)

Experience in sex work

At the time of the survey, 94.8 percent ($n = 199$) of respondents were actively engaged in sex work. The mean age at which they began this work was 26.3 [7.20] years, with a reported range between 14 and 53 years. A subset, 4.8 percent ($n = 10$), began sex work as minors, between the ages of 14 and 17; 12.4 percent ($n = 26$) had already been involved in sex work in their country of origin, while 11.4 percent ($n = 24$) reported having been forced into prostitution.

Participants cited a range of rationales for entering sex work. The most common were financial motivations: 85.2 percent ($n = 179$) stated that it was the job that paid the most, 77.6 percent ($n = 163$) indicated an urgent need for money,

and 75.7 percent ($n=159$) considered it their best available option. Interestingly, 72.4 percent ($n=152$) also noted personal agency in their decision, stating that they “felt like it and wanted to try it.” Other reasons included inability to find another job (39.5 percent, $n=83$), external encouragement (18.1 percent, $n=38$), debts related to migration to Spain (7.1 percent, $n=15$), deception (0.5 percent, $n=1$), and other personal circumstances such as loss of relatives, separation or divorce, curiosity, desire for flexibility, and time constraints (24.8 percent, $n=52$).

Regarding work settings, 30.0 percent ($n=63$) worked in apartments or houses, 27.1 percent ($n=57$) from their own homes, 13.8 percent ($n=29$) in bars or clubs, 12.9 percent ($n=27$) in hotels, another 11.4 percent ($n=24$) in other locations (e.g., agencies or private residences), and 3.8 percent ($n=8$) in saunas or massage parlors.

A notable 87.6 percent ($n=184$) stated that they would register with the social security system as sex workers if it were legally possible. The mean number of hours worked per day was 6.7 [4.22] hours, with reported durations ranging from 1 to 24 hours. In this case, it does not mean they have customers 24 hours a day. Mean weekly earnings were reported at €1,066.77 [€816,970], with values ranging between €100 and €5,000. Meanwhile, weekly expenses associated with work averaged €316.9 [€531.35], spanning a wide range from €10 to €4,500.

Participants also identified the main advantages and disadvantages of sex work (Table 2). The most frequently mentioned benefits were work flexibility and the autonomy in decision-making, while the most commonly reported challenges were stigma and social discrimination.

Respondents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with sex work on a scale from 1 (very unsatisfactory) to 10 (very satisfactory). The mean score was

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of sex work.

Advantages of sex work	Percent (n)	Disadvantages of sex work	Percent (n)
It's a very flexible job	97.1 (204)	Stigma and discrimination	90.0 (189)
I decide what I always want	96.2 (202)	You've got to hide it	79.0 (166)
It allows me to take care of my family	88.6 (186)	It's more economically insecure	46.9 (106)
There's a lot of money to be made	82.4 (173)	It's more physically insecure	44.8 (94)
I work fewer hours at other jobs	82.4 (173)	You feel a lot of pressure	9.0 (19)
It is compatible with the studio	75.7 (159)	You suffer a lot of violence	6.2 (13)

8.5 [1.63], with a mode of 10, indicating that the highest score was the most frequently selected. These findings suggest that a majority of participants viewed their work in the sex industry as highly satisfying.

In open-ended responses, several participants shared personal reflections on their experiences in sex work. Many emphasized that they felt more respected and valued in this line of work than in previous employment within the formal labor market. These accounts reinforce the quantitative findings and underscore the complex motivations and emotional dynamics that shape sex workers' relationships with their occupation.

I feel fantastic in my current job as a sex worker, and I have not suffered like I did in a job with a payroll and a despotic and exploitative boss. (Trans woman, 44 years old)

I want everyone to know that I started as a sex worker seven years ago with the idea of doing this job for a few months to pay off some debts that I could not repay. To my surprise, I did not expect this job to be one where I felt so comfortable, respected and valued. I had worked in hospitality since I was 16 years old, at weddings, nightclubs, restaurants, after-parties, bars and pubs, and I was always treated badly by bosses, colleagues or customers. In this work I am treated with a sensitivity and respect that I enjoy. Thank you to this, I have now been working as a sex worker for 7 years, have managed to get into university at over 25, am in my third year of university and have a 2-year-old child that I look after. If it was not for the way this profession is seen in society, I would gladly do it all my life because I like what I do, I like the treatment and how I am taken care of and it gives me the opportunity to have time and money to live a decent life and realize my dreams and projects. (Female, 33 years old).

I have been harassed and raped in a job outside of prostitution. As a sex worker I have always been respected. (Female, 45 years old)

I am very happy to be a sex worker. I think I do very important, undervalued and invisible social work. I hope that they let us continue but make things better for everyone. (Female, 30 years old)

Among the 57 final open-ended comments submitted by respondents, only 7 (12 percent) explicitly referenced negative experiences in sex work. Two illustrative excerpts are included below:

This is a dangerous job because we are seen as a product with no say and not as professionals providing a service. There's a lot of sexism in the world. (Female, 30 years old)

Working too many hours, always for minimum wage, plus mental abuse and physical exhaustion. (Female, 31 years old)

While many respondents evaluated sex work more positively than their previous employment experiences, these comments highlight that significant challenges and risks persist in certain areas of the sex industry, especially when they lack documentation or are working in precarious or exploitative conditions. This underscores the urgent need to address the legal precarity of sex workers and to promote pathways out of illegality through rights-based policy frameworks and labor protections.

A portion of the sample reported having received assistance from formal support systems (Table 3). Specifically, 11.9 percent ($n = 25$) had accessed support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), while 19.0 percent ($n = 40$) received help from public social services when in need. Additionally, 6.1 percent ($n = 14$) indicated that they had received assistance from both sources.

Several participants also shared personal accounts of their experiences with basic social services. These narratives provide valuable insight into the accessibility, quality, and responsiveness of institutional support, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of the existing welfare infrastructure in addressing the needs of sex workers.

In healthcare, I don't say I'm a sex worker, so I'm not stigmatized or treated differently. (Female, 29 years old)

Migrant status and vulnerability

To examine the potential impact of legal status on working conditions and experiences, a comparative analysis was conducted between respondents who lacked a valid work permit ($n = 40$) and those who possessed one ($n = 108$). The results revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the key variables.

Table 3. Experience of care in public services.

	Social health percent	Social services percent	Police percent
They have not helped me ($n = 71$)	21.1	57.9	21.1
I was discriminated against for being transsexual ($n = 34$)	35.3	32.4	32.4
I was psychologically abused ($n = 34$)	23.5	39.5	36.8
They yell at me ($n = 31$)	22.6	45.2	32.3
I did not attend ($n = 41$)	39.0	39.0	22.0
They helped me a lot ($n = 57$)	78.9	10.5	10.5
I was treated very well ($n = 65$)	72.3	13.8	13.8
They solved my problem ($n = 65$)	84.6	4.6	10.8
They were very friendly ($n = 66$)	77.3	10.6	12.1

Table 4. Significant differences between migrant sex workers and native Spanish sex workers.

	Native Spanish Percent (n)	Migrants Percent (n)
Previous work		
Waitress**	73.5 (83)	55.7 (54)
Cleaning	54.9 (62)	52.6 (51)
Childcare	76.2 (48)	81.3 (39)
Elder care	29.2 (33)	35.1 (34)
Telephonist**	46.9 (53)	28.9 (28)
Commerce**	59.3 (67)	35.1 (34)
Violent incident in previous jobs**	57.5 (65)	36.1 (35)
Harassed in previous jobs**	66.4 (75)	47.4 (46)
Forced into prostitution	8.8 (10)	14.4 (14)
Reasons for entering sex work		
Debt to migration to Spain**	1.8 (2)	13.4 (13)
Felt like it and wanted to try it**	80.5 (91)	62.9 (61)
Work setting**		
Saunas	6.3 (7)	1.0 (1)
Bars or clubs	6.3 (7)	22.9 (22)
Apartment or house	26.8 (30)	34.4 (33)
Own home	30.4 (34)	24.0 (23)
Hotels	17.9 (20)	7.3 (7)
Others	12.5 (14)	10.4 (10)
Disadvantages sex work		
It more insecure**	55.8 (63)	34.0 (33)
Has medical insurance** (no)	8.8 (10)	23.7 (23)
Family members lived with them**	97.3 (110)	45.4 (44)
Children living with them*	43.4 (49)	33.0 (32)
Hours spent on sex work** ($\bar{X}$ /SD)	5.85/3.25	7.80 /4.99
Weekly expenses in sex work* ($\bar{X}$ /SD)	302.55/33.41	715.39 /89.42

* $P \leq .05$, ** $P \leq .001$ ($\bar{X}$ = mean, SD = standard deviation), the significant proportion is marked in bold.

This may be due to the sample. However, if we compare Spanish sex workers with migrant sex workers, we find some differences, which are shown in the [Table 4](#).

These comparative results reveal some interesting aspects. For example, in those sectors that tend to offer slightly better conditions than the other jobs analyzed, such as waitressing, small business, and telecommunications, there is a higher presence of native Spanish women because, although conditions may be precarious, these jobs require an employment contract, unlike childcare or elder

care, which tend to be more informal (García-Valverde 2022). However, in those sectors where there tend not to be any contracts, the presence of foreign women is greater. This is to be expected: foreign women are more likely to have debts from coming to Spain and hence devote more hours to sex work and have higher expenses in this activity.

Qualitative responses provided further context to these quantitative patterns. One respondent, a 29-year-old woman, shared:

How difficult it is to rent an apartment without a paycheck or anything.

Another, a 29-year-old trans woman, explained:

Since I do not have a work permit, I had no way to find a job to continue in the future. That's why I continue to work in prostitution, until my situation changes for the better.

Discussion

Structural conditions shaping engagement in sex work in Spain

The findings of this research reveal notable similarities in the work experiences of respondents within the formal labor market before transitioning into sex work. Participants had been employed in service industries, such as caregiving, hospitality, and cleaning, often earning less than €1,000 per month—below the established minimum wage—with some lacking access to social security coverage and working excessive working hours. These working conditions lead people to move to other activities or sectors that offer better economic benefits, such as sex work. In these cases, sustained job insecurity leads to both geographical and social mobility (Kaufmann et al. 2004). Their decision was primarily based on the assessment of tradeoffs in job conditions, corroborating previous research indicating that many individuals turn to sex work seeking improved economic stability (Benoit et al. 2025; Ernst et al. 2021; Gil and Navajas-Pertegás 2023; Hervias 2017; Karamouzian et al. 2016; Kelberga and Martinsone 2023; Sánchez Perera 2022). Notably, 90 percent of respondents stated their entry into sex work occurred without external coercion beyond economic hardship, echoing results found by the authors. Thus, entry into sex work generally reflects economic and other structural factors similar to other occupational choices, where workers seek improved conditions and financial security. Regarding working conditions, the research specifically addressed experiences of violence and harassment both within previous employment and sex work. While several studies emphasize a high risk of violence in sex work (Campbell et al. 2019; Dasgupta 2020; Herpai et al. 2021; NSW 2021; Platt et al. 2018; Shannon et al. 2015), the results obtained also underscore the prevalence of harassment and violence within formal employment contexts (León Pérez et al. 2025; INE 2020; Sinha 2014). About half of respondents reported experiencing

harassment or violence in their previous jobs. Importantly however, 5.8 percent of respondents experience significant violence within sex work, which they identified as a prime disadvantage. Violence against sex workers varies significantly by sector within the sex industry itself (Orchard et al. 2012) and may be higher in some other sectors. However, violence against women and the most vulnerable groups seems to have increased in recent decades throughout the world and also in the workplace (UN Women 2024).

Income levels in sex work compared with other employment types were another critical aspect examined. Most respondents previously earned approximately €1,000 monthly in conventional jobs, whereas their average weekly income in sex work matched this amount, effectively quadrupling their earnings. Approximately 80 percent of respondents identified sex work as the most financially beneficial occupation available to them. This aligns with findings by the authors, emphasizing sex work's financial attractiveness, especially in times of economic urgency (Herpai et al. 2021; Sanders and Hardy 2013). Additionally, freedom, autonomy, and work–life balance emerged as significant advantages of sex work. Consistent with various authors (Izcara Palacios 2020; Sánchez Perera 2022; Sinha 2014), respondents appreciated the control and flexibility afforded by sex work, facilitating easier management of family responsibilities, shorter working hours, and opportunities to pursue education. Our findings confirm sex work's flexibility in accommodating family obligations as identified in other studies (Sanders and Hardy 2013; Sánchez Perera 2022; Urdaci 2023).

The major obstacle to sex work is the stigma associated with virtually all sectors of the industry (Armstrong et al. 2024; Oliveira et al. 2023). It is precisely this fact that has the worst consequences for women and leads to negative perceptions. In this sense, combating stigma involves invisible mobility (Shewly et al. 2020), resulting in social and geographical displacement to combat the negative effects. Mobility serves as a strategy that enables sex work to continue on a sustained basis, even in the absence of formal regulation, by creating a sense of invisibility that offers those engaged in it a degree of security and peace of mind. On the other hand, the absence of social security and pension guarantees begins to be a drawback when sex work is continued for a long time. That is why, as we have observed, many women experience sex work as a temporary activity.

The study also addressed whether irregular migrant status exacerbates poor working conditions compared with migrants holding work permits. While results were mixed, undocumented workers reported higher exposure to violence and greater work-related pressures. Clandestine status exposes sex workers to exploitation by various societal actors, including police and clients. Migration enforcement policies thus exacerbate vulnerabilities, overshadowing migrant rights (López-Riopiedre 2016). Mobility regimes (Glick and Salazar 2012) have been discussed with reference to the privileged mobility of some groups in migratory movements as opposed to the immobility imposed on other groups that are declared illegal because of their origin, status, or racialization. In this sense,

for immigrant women from developing countries, prohibitions and the mandate of immobility are exacerbated by migration laws (Sheller and Urry 2006; Sheller 2018). Conditions in the labor market are harsher for them than for native women, and sex work becomes an opportunity for survival and work, although it is not without insecurity.

Interactions with public services when seeking assistance were another crucial area of inquiry. Participants reported positive experiences primarily with healthcare services, noting satisfactory treatment and support. Conversely, experiences with social services and police interactions were more negative. Relationships between sex workers and the police often vary depending on legal contexts (Sanders et al. 2020). In Spain, sex work itself is not criminalized, but related activities such as pimping, coercion, trafficking, and public solicitation fall under legal sanctions per the Organic Law 4/2015 on Citizen Safety. These regulations have significant implications on sex workers' experiences, rights, and access to support services (Villacampa 2016). The lack of recognition of the rights of sex workers constitutes a violation and structural violence against women in sex work, rights that they can legally obtain if their involvement in sex work is due to coercion or sex trafficking (Sánchez Perera 2022). This inequality of rights among sex workers leads to greater mobility in order to obtain better working conditions (Shewly et al. 2020).

Conclusion

This study underscores that sex work in Spain is predominantly a voluntary and rational occupational choice, shaped by structural conditions in the broader labor market. Sex work in today's society is carried out within a context of great mobility, both horizontal and vertical, as well as geographical and social. It is precisely this social mobility, in search of better working conditions, that constitutes the choice of sex work. Compared with some other jobs, sex work can offer substantially higher income, increased autonomy, flexibility, and better work-life balance, making it a viable and attractive employment option for many individuals, particularly women facing precarity in other sectors. However, vulnerabilities persist, notably among undocumented migrant sex workers, who face heightened risks due to restrictive migration and labor policies and societal marginalization. On the other hand, the stigma associated with sex work and working conditions in some sectors means that it is not an ideal option, although it is a viable option at specific times when there is high mobility.

We would like to highlight that many of those interviewed expressed a willingness to legalize their work if it were properly regulated. Recognizing sex work as legitimate employment aligns with the promotion of human and social rights, Amnesty International's 2016 recommendations, and with the positions of organizations such as the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, UNAIDS, and the World Health Organization,

which advocate for rights-based legal and policy frameworks that decriminalize consensual adult sex work, recognize sex workers' labor, health, and human rights, extend labor and social protections, reduce stigma and violence, ensure access to justice and health services, and center sex workers' self-determination and participation in policymaking.

Importantly, the study challenges several widespread stereotypes about sex work by highlighting the agency, economic motivations, and rational decision-making of those engaged in it. At the same time, it reveals often-overlooked conditions in the formal labor market—particularly in feminized sectors—where low wages, instability, and workplace harassment are prevalent. The findings advocate for comprehensive regulatory frameworks that formally recognize sex work, ensuring access to labor rights, protection from violence, and improved interactions with public services. Such frameworks would enhance the social position and the human rights of sex workers.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article will be shared upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to compliance with participant privacy and data protection regulations.

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