



Possible Consequences of the Criminalization of Sex Work in Spain, Inferred from COVID-19 Lockdown Measures

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Accepted: 7 August 2023
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Abstract

Introduction In this paper, we explore the possible consequences of the criminalization of sex work in Spain through an analysis of the measures adopted during the COVID-19 lockdown, which were tantamount to a prohibition of prostitution.

Methods We interviewed 69 female sex workers (19 of them trafficking victims) from the lowest stratum and six escorts from the upper stratum of prostitution, during the period from March 2020 to May 2021. We also conducted an ethnographic study in a hotel operating in the middle to upper stratum of commercial sex work.

Results The months of home confinement showed that the prohibition of sex work affected women in more precarious and vulnerable situations more adversely, worsening their living and working conditions compared to before the pandemic, whereas the impact on the escorts was far less.

Conclusion If commercial sex work in Spain were totally or partially criminalized, sex work would not stop taking place, and nor would the demand for paid sex cease to exist. Rather, they would be driven underground, worsening the quality of life, and both health and working conditions in the practice of commercial sex work for women. On top of that, the implementation of such a policy would reduce or eliminate sex workers' relationships or collaborations with the police.

Keywords Criminalization · Sex work · Prohibition · COVID-19 · Policy · Women

Introduction

In Spain, sex work is neither prohibited nor regulated; in other words, it is extralegal, though the Spanish penal code does punish pimping/procurement, sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking. In recent years, there has been an ongoing debate about the possible criminalization of sex work, or at least of some of the social actors involved, particularly buyers and third parties. Indeed, the Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, has made a commitment to abolish prostitution before the end of his term of office,

criminalizing the client and any type of profit related to sex work.¹

Prostitution in Spain has gone through different stages, being either criminalized or regulated during the dictatorship (Guereña, 2003). With the arrival of democracy, the laws potentially criminalizing prostitutes were abolished. It was the so-called Vagos y Maleantes (Idlers and Vagrants) law that allowed for the detention of prostitutes, homosexuals, and indeed anyone deemed a nuisance to the dictatorship (Guereña, 2003). The 1995 penal code went further in no longer criminalizing intermediaries, leading to the development of commercial sex in brothels and flats. From that point on, press, TV, radio, and then internet advertising has been increasing, despite attempts in the Spanish Parliament to ban it (Valiente, 2004). Ads for paid sex were eventually removed from the newspapers on supposedly moral or ethical grounds, when in reality the competition from the

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¹ La Vanguardia 17–10-2021, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20211017/7796342/pedro-sanchez-compromete-abolir-prostitucion.html>

internet had already led to a considerable reduction, as the new technologies have reconfigured the way buyers and sellers connect (Sanders et al., 2020). However, it is only recently that such ads have been banned with a new law, although the means of prosecution have yet to be developed.² For some years now, the movement in favor of abolishing prostitution has gained significant momentum, culminating in proposals currently going through the Spanish Parliament for approval and development. If implemented, Spain would go from being a tolerant country to one that criminalizes sex work, following the legal model of Sweden or France.

The aim of this study is to explore the consequences that a potential criminalization—whether partial or total—of sex work in Spain would entail. A bill has been drafted that proposes to criminalize buyers and third parties. It appears to be more ideologically driven than the result of a rigorous study of the reality or the evidence regarding the current situation in sex work and needs of sex workers (Jordan, 2022; Tarantino, 2021). We analyze what kind of conditions the women were subjected to during home lockdown and the ensuing months of the pandemic, based on other studies about the impact of COVID-19 on commercial sex work in Spain (Meneses et al., 2022). During the strict lockdown (March 14 to June 21, 2020), all public brothels and hostess establishments were closed, with people forbidden to be on the street or in public, thus indirectly prohibiting commercial sex activity in Spain. This prohibition also affected the commercial sex work that took place in apartments or “date houses,”³ but because these are deemed to be residential, no inspections were possible without a court order. The prohibition implemented during lockdown was very similar to what a future criminalization of sex work in Spain might be like. Hence, it was the perfect scenario for describing and analyzing how prohibition might affect the women engaged in commercial sex work, particularly in more precarious sectors. This analysis could help us to visualize and anticipate what might happen under prohibition if it eventually comes to pass in Spain, and to be able to extrapolate it to any other similar reality in the rest of Europe.

This study engages with the following questions:

1. What aspects of the practice of commercial sex work would be most affected by its criminalization?

2. How would it affect the clients? Would they stop paying for sex?
3. What type of sex worker would be most affected by a ban on sex work?
4. Would the health of these women worsen, as suggested in the literature?
5. Could criminalization change the relationship that the women have with the police?

This study seeks to answer these questions, with the aim of evaluating the impact a possible criminalization of sex work in Spain might have on sex workers.

Background

Prostitution or sex work has given rise to major debates within feminism, characterized by very little consensus and deeply conflicting positions, which have divided the feminist movement on more than one occasion (studies reflecting this debate include Sloan and Wahab (2000), Beloso (2012), Comte (2013), and Scoular (2016)). Feminist approaches that understand sex work as exploitation include Marxist feminism, which emphasizes class and labor as well as the social and political contexts; domination theory, which sees sexuality as the basis of oppression, sex work being oppressive and violent; and Black feminist thought, which draws a distinction between the experience of Black women prostitutes and that of White ones in terms of criminalization and conditions of sex work (Sloan & Wahab, 2000). Sex workers are presented as symbolizing the social, sexual, and economic subordination of women and all women are reduced to prostitutes, in a worldview that is very close to the radical feminism that sees prostitutes as victims of patriarchy (Beloso, 2012). Such positions have been criticized by other feminists who accuse those who adopt them of not taking into account the experiences of sex workers, including male ones. Sex workers are thus constructed with a socially devalued identity that results in sex work always being a stigmatized activity (Comte, 2013).

However, in both Spain and Europe more generally, two views converge that enliven the debate even more, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the country. First, there is the view that all sex work is violence against women (Farley et al., 2004; Raymond, 2004). Though not new, this has become more prominent in certain current feminist and activist circles. Second is the view that conflates all sex work, particularly migrant sex work, with trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation (Farley, 2006; Hubbard et al., 2008; Post, 2011), despite only a small proportion of sex workers being trafficked women, with estimates overstated and not corresponding to reality (Weitzer, 2006; Fedina, 2015; Meneses-Falcón, 2021). Criminalization aims to

² La ley Orgánica 10/2022, 6 de septiembre de garantía integral de la libertad sexual.

³ Date houses and apartments are flats where the sex worker goes with the client to provide a sexual service. In the case of date houses, the service is only provided from the outside, the women not being available or waiting in the flat, as they make contact with their clients elsewhere. In an apartment, however, they are waiting for their clients and normally advertise their services via web pages while they stay in the flat. Another arrangement is “establishments,” premises with a license for the hostess bar and one for renting out the rooms where sexual services are provided.

diminish or eliminate the supply and demand, presupposing that through this intervention sex trafficking will be eradicated. However, so far it has not been demonstrated that this measure will definitively alter demand (Bettioe et al., 2017).

What has been shown is that there is currently a new wave seeking to criminalize and prohibit prostitution or commercial sex work (Weitzer, 2006). A trend has emerged, typical of earlier periods, that pursues greater regulation of citizens' behavior by the state and an evaluation of their morality, signaling to individuals what is socially acceptable and what is not, such as commercial sex (Bernstein, 2018). As Agustín (2006:1) has pointed out, "their enormous demand for sexual services and the fact that many women do not mind or prefer this occupation to others available to them" seems hard for contemporary societies to accept.

Looking at societies today, particularly European countries, there is a range of ways of understanding prostitution or commercial sex work, and of organizing it legally and judicially. We can group these into diverse positions and forms of legislation (McCarthy et al., 2012): "The categories full criminalization, partial decriminalization, and full decriminalization provide a useful heuristic for examining the various ways that governments use the law to respond to consenting adults' involvement as sellers, buyers, or third-party participants in the sex industry" (p. 268). There is the prohibitionist position, which totally or partly criminalizes sex work, now in a new form that involves punishing the client, as is the case in Sweden, France, and Norway; the regulatory or legalizing position, which sees commercial sex work as just another form of employment (Shrage, 2021) but specifies controls and limits, as in Holland, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland; another model would be decriminalization as in New Zealand or Belgium, which gives rights to sex workers; and, lastly, one that differs from the previous models, neither prohibiting nor regulating, criminalizing only profits or the violation of human rights, such as pimping/procurement or sex trafficking, which is currently the case in Spain and to some degree in Italy. Nevertheless, both countries have enacted laws that punish the practice of sex work in the street, thus, criminalizing the most precarious sectors (Villacampa, 2017).

Given that prostitution or commercial sex work has created a great deal of controversy at both the political and academic level, there is a considerable amount of literature in which all existing positions are debated. There is not the scope here to review all of this literature, but we can at least focus on the negative consequences that have been linked to criminalization in recent studies (Oliveira et al., 2020; Platt et al., 2018). Hence, we can point out some effects it can have on people selling sex. First, an underground market for commercial sex appears with worse operating conditions, characteristically furtive, and with worse consequences for the most marginalized women (Weitzer, 2009). Second, the risk of being subjected to violence is seven times

higher among sex workers, because the social stigma of sex work heightens due to it being seen as immoral and illicit behavior (Deering et al., 2014; Oliveira et al., 2020; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). Third, health and protection conditions worsen in those systems where sex work is criminalized (Platt et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2015). Fourth, it is difficult to carry out many of the anti-trafficking actions for the detection and protection of victims, because thorough inspections of underground commercial sex work in their venues cannot be conducted by civil servants or by police, who are those that would regularly undertake them (Armstrong, 2017; Weitzer, 2009). Fifth, the criminalization of buyers can lead to them failing to collaborate against trafficking, instead of offering up information to the police on situations of women they have been able to see in apartments or establishments in a possible situation of trafficking or sexual exploitation (Meneses-Falcón et al., 2018a). Sixth, women's decisions are ignored and infantilized, and considering that their consent is influenced by their life circumstances, they are thus not allowed to obtain significant income that they could not obtain from other sources, whether due to necessity or in order to make their personal projects possible (Bernstein, 2007; Hardy & Sanders, 2014; Sanders & Hardy, 2015). Seventh, the criminalization and prohibition of an activity make it more attractive (Meneses, 2011), adding more risks both to the buyer and the seller (Hakim, 2015). Lastly, the criminalization of commercial sex work leads to undeclared income abounding in an underground economy that moves a great deal of money without any direct effect on the national economy (Malgesini, 2006; Zaharie & Andreesc, 2014). Moreover, the legal status of prostitution or commercial sex work does not influence decision-making on engaging with the profession, whether as demand or supply: other structural and personal circumstances lead people to make such decisions (Abel et al., 2009).

It has also been suggested that excessive regulation and control do not always improve the conditions or quality of life of the women who work in the sex trade. In some countries, the regulation that has been implemented has not increased the freedom of sex workers (Hubbard et al., 2008). In addition, situations of coercion, exploitation, resistance, and agency have occurred due to police corruption or organized crime, all beyond the bounds of the legality extended to this activity (Sullivan, 2010). Shrage (2021) has outlined the reasons for not promoting the regulation or legalization of sex work and calling for pro-sex work rights legislation, drawing a comparison with other similarly controversial public-private issues such as abortion, marijuana use, or polygamy. For this author, opting for legislation may entail greater control over sex workers, and the requirement for licensing and medical check-ups may harm women by exposing them to greater risks, depending on the type of sex work they are involved in. It also increases stigma and discrimination against sex workers. Sex work should therefore be decriminalized as it reduces the incarceration of

mainly racialized minorities that suffer social discrimination, and respects the right to freedom and privacy among adults. The overall aim of this study, as detailed above, is to show the impact that the prohibition of sex work has had during lockdown and in the months following the COVID-19 pandemic, and what consequences might be replicated with the criminalization of sex work that Spanish policy appears to be heading toward.

Methods

The data used for analysis in this paper come from the authors' earlier study of the impact of COVID-19 on sex workers (Meneses-Falcón et al., 2022), as well as studies that looked at the context from previous ethnographic research in different prostitution settings such as brothels, hotels, or flats in the 4 years leading up to the pandemic (Meneses-Falcón, 2021).

Sample

Sixty-nine women were interviewed: three of them trans, nineteen victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and the rest working in commercial sex without any apparent coercion. The interviews were designed with the greatest diversity possible in terms of the women's socio-demographic characteristics and circumstances. In qualitative research, maximum diversity is more important than quantity. This is determined by theoretical sampling, not by statistical representativeness (Morse, 2000). All of the participants belonged to the lowest sector or worst condition of commercial sex work.

We also analyzed and used data obtained from an ethnographic study carried out during the pandemic in different sectors of sex work in the city of Madrid, particularly in a hotel that occupied a middle to upper echelon of the sex market. Ten visits were made, each 3 h long, between June, 2020 and June, 2021, to conduct informal interviews and carry out observational and communicative interaction. Contact was also established by telephone and email with six escorts in a middle to upper echelon of the sex market who did not use the hotel and were contacted via social networks.

Procedure

In order to conduct the interviews, the first step was to approach the researchers' contacts within NGO-run social projects in 14 Spanish provinces who were assisting sex workers during the lockdown and pandemic, and to raise the possibility with them of interviewing the women.

One single interview script was composed for all the NGO's social projects, which included the following topics: where the interviewee was when the state of alarm in Spain began; what

their main worries, events, or difficult circumstances were; what their family, financial, and health (COVID-19 infection) situation was; their commercial sex work—or sexual exploitation in the case of victims; social aid application; documentation management; and future expectations. Instructions were given so that the interview would be similar in all the social projects in the different provinces, focusing on attaining the most empathic conversation possible and explaining to the women the meaning of the interview. The interviews were carried out by professionals from the social projects who already knew the women and had established a relationship beforehand. The case of trafficking victims was particularly important in terms of preventing revictimization and following the protocols for interviewing victims (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003). These interviews were supervised by the researchers, who subsequently collected information on those aspects that had not been clear. To avoid potential bias, a session was held with members of the NGOs so they could explain and provide more information about each interviewee, with the interviews supervised to ensure there was no bias on the part of those asking the questions.

Basic socio-demographic data on all the interviewees was gathered, making it possible to create a profile. Informed consent was requested from all the women, the project having been previously approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Universidad Pontificia Comillas. The participants were given guarantees that the information they shared in the study would be anonymous and confidential. It was also made clear to them that their participation was voluntary, and that the interviews could be terminated whenever they no longer felt comfortable.

Analysis

Once the interviews had been transcribed, they were read by the researchers. First, we set out a manifest content analysis, based on the themes and central categories established when planning the interview script and the research objectives. These categories were COVID-19, economic situation, health, commercial sex work, trafficking, violence, official procedures, and family. These categories were refined as the content emerged, creating sub-categories that set aspects of the content and dimensions in an inductive-deductive way. The coding of all the interviews was carried out in parallel and separately by the researchers, who subsequently inspected both the aspects that coincided and those that might have some divergence, thus preventing possible biases associated with the researchers. We proceeded in the same way with the ethnographic material collected in the middle to upper sectors of commercial sex work.

The analysis was carried out using QSR NVivo 12 Plus quantitative analysis software. Following the coding process, units of analysis in the form of verbatim extracts were extricated, in which we identified manifest or emergent content

Table 1 Summary of results chart

	Low stratum sex work	Middle-upper stratum sex work
Context during lockdown	-One sector continued working -Trapped in apartments and establishments	-Stopped working -Stayed at home
Dimensions of commercial sex work affected by the pandemic	-Increase in commissions charged by owners -Work conditions changed, greater control by managers and owners	-Stoppage of mobility around Spain and Europe -Commissions stayed the same, as did work conditions
Effects on the clients	-They could not select clients, had to accept clients they would previously have rejected -Violent and unpleasant incidents	-Stayed in contact with their regular clients, who gave them money to help with their upkeep in the pandemic
Profiles	-Female immigrants, some illegal, without basic resources, in debt to traffickers	-Women established in Spain with papers in order -With basic resources to cope with the pandemic
State of health	-Deterioration of mental health: anxiety, stress and/or depression	-Situations of uncertainty and worry
Police control	-Distrust of police -Fines during the pandemic -Detained due to papers	-They had no contact with the police - No incident that required reporting/charges

corresponding to the central themes that met the objectives of the study. The subsequent analysis of these data generated interrelations between the different concepts, categories, and themes. It was constructed particularly according to whether the women were trafficking victims or worked in commercial sex through personal choice, as well as the sex work sector they were in. However, Cruz (2018) has pointed out in his/her analysis of migrant sex workers that the dichotomies between free choice and coercion are not binary, but rather to be found on a continuum between those two poles. A range of structural and individual circumstances can condition choices or coercions, especially when we analyze markets in the capitalist system and the type of sex work performed by migrant female sex workers (for example, street sex work or sugar daddy relationships).

Results

Of the 69 women interviewed, 51 had practiced commercial sex work before the pandemic. Forty-two did not continue working during the home lockdown, while 23 did. Twenty-two ceased to do commercial sex work after the pandemic, whereas 43 carried on in the business after the lockdown (Table 1). All of these women belonged to the lowest stratum of commercial sex work (defined by purchasing power, type of client, types of establishment or apartment, etc.). Almost a third made contact with their clients in public places before the pandemic. The average weekly income of these women was around 500 euros. Only seven of the women were Spanish, with Latin American women predominating, their mean age 37.7 (DS = 10.5) in a range from 21 to 64 years old (see Table 2).

The six escorts stopped their commercial sex activity during the lockdown, but once it was over they resumed with their clients, because many of these were known to them and stable, with contact taking place by telephone or email. Three of them

operated in a hotel and three independently in their apartment. All of them occupied a middle to upper stratum of commercial sex work, with a high income. The average weekly income of these women was around 1100 euros.

Below we give the results mainly of the interviewees from the social projects, and occasionally of those from a higher stratum. Although the social context during the lockdown and pandemic was similar for all the women, they did not experience it in the same way.

Context During the Lockdown

The day home lockdown was decreed in Spain, all non-essential activity (food, health, legal, and security services) was shut down. The population could not go outside except to buy food or walk the dog. Both the women and their clients made use of the latter exception, if they had a pet, to make contact.

At first I would go out with the dog to look for clients, because it was one of the reasons you were allowed to be out on the street. (Esperanza, Gran Canaria)

All leisure establishments were closed, not only during the home lockdown but also during some of the pandemic, and this included brothels. The women who lived in apartments, date houses, or establishments found themselves trapped in them. Overnight, they could not go out onto the street. In some cases, the owners allowed them to stay in their brothels or apartments, but in others they had to leave them upon closure.

the moment they imposed the lockdown, we didn't work again. We were stuck there, very bad because, apart from the fact that, because of the obligations and goals that you've got coming, and to get out of the debts quicker that you leave there. (Lucía, Murcia)

Table 2 Sample characterization

Ref	Age	Pseudonym	Country of birth	Type ^a	Sex work place
E01	36	Fenix	Brazil	SW	Mobility
E2	29	Joy	Nigeria	VN	Street sex worker
E3	42	Lada	Spain	SW	Flat
E4	50	Sandra	Colombia	SW	Mobility
E5	38	Valeria	Colombia	SW	Brothel
E6	23	Macarena	Venezuela	VP	Flat
E7	27	Camelia	Spain	SW	Flat
E8	29	Sol	Venezuela	VN	Flat
E9	51	Norma	Dominican Republic	SW	Mobility
E10	38	Verónica	Venezuela	VN	Flat
E11	24	Rosángela	Brazil	SW	Flat
E12	44	María José	Colombia	SW	Flat
E13	47	Gloria	Colombia	SW	Mobility
E14	34	María	Nigeria	SW	Street sex worker
E15	50	IK	Nigeria	SW	Street sex worker
E16	48	Marta	Spain	SW	Street sex worker
E17	37	Melisa	Brazil	SW	Flat
E18	21	Nelly	Nigeria	VP	Street sex worker
E19	30	GIFT	Nigeria	VP	Street sex worker
E20	42	Alfonsa	Ecuador	SW	Hotel
E21	23	Dunna	Chile	SW	Flat
E22	64	Nuria	Spain	SW	Flat
E23	40	Noelia	Spain	SW	Mobility
E24	44	Mary	Brazil	SW	Street sex worker
E25	22	Flor	Venezuela	VP	Flat
E26	42	Azucena	Colombia	VN	Flat
E27	28	Margarita	Colombia	SW	Flat
E28	34	Violeta	Colombia	SW	Flat
E29	38	Bea	Brazil	VN	Mobility
E30	35	Esperanza	Spain	SW	Mobility
E31	45	Carolina	Colombia	VN	Home
E32	53	Daniela	Colombia	VN	Flat
E33	33	Joana	Portugal	SW	Mobility
E34	30	Catalina	Romania	SW	Street sex worker
E35	24	Cristina	Cuba	SW	Mobility
E36	50	Loli	Morocco	SW	Street sex worker
E37	56	Margarita	Ecuador	SW	Street sex worker
E38	52	Sharmein	Panamá	SW	Street sex worker
E39	62	Carla	Argentina	SW	Flat
E40	36	Lucía	Honduras	VN	Flat
E41	30	Dominicana	Dominican Republic	SW	Flat
E42	24	Peri/María	Peru	SW	Flat
E43	30	Belen	Brazil	SW	Flat
E44	27	Baby	Brazil	SW	Brothel
E45	26	Adamna	Nigeria	VP	Street sex worker
E46	50	Luisa	Spain	SW	Street sex worker

Table 2 (continued)

Ref	Age	Pseudonym	Country of birth	Type ^a	Sex work place
E47	55	Yahairi	Dominican Republic	SW	Flat
E48	44	Paola	Dominican Republic	SW	Mobility
E49	39	Laura	Colombia	SW	Flat
E50	53	Shakira	Colombia	SW	Mobility
E51	38	Claudia	Colombia	SW	Flat
E52	46	Monica	Colombia	SW	Mobility
E53	37	Amparo	Romania	SW	Street sex worker
E54	30	Edilsa	Colombia	SW	Home
E55	42	Wendy	Dominican Republic	SW	Flat
E56	24	Mara	Paraguay	SW	Home
E57	35	Yolanda	Dominican Republic	SW	Home
E58	46	Naima	Colombia	SW	Home
E59	38	Laura	Colombia	SW	Flat
E60	31	Bilma	Nicaragua	VP	Mobility
E61	30	Iris	Colombia	VN	Flat
E62	31	Liz	Venezuela	VP	Flat
E63	40	Mariana	Colombia	VN	Flat
E64	38	Vali	Romania	SW	Massage parlor
E65	24	Valeria	Venezuela	SW	Flat
E66	54	Manuela	Spain	SW	Flat
E67	26	Diana	Ecuador	SW	Street sex worker
E68	29	Carlota	Venezuela	VP	Flat
E69	30	Ainara	Venezuela	VP	Flat

^aVP victim identified by police, VN victim identified by NGO, SW, sex worker

Those ($n = 15$) who practiced commercial sex on the street, on industrial estates, or on roadsides had to cease doing so outwardly. Some women continued to do so nevertheless, and were fined by the police.

At night the industrial estate is very bad, now we're going out earlier so the police don't fine us for being out on the street later than is allowed. (Adana, Sevilla)

Aspects of Commercial Sex Work Affected by the Pandemic

Being illegal, the apartments and date houses lacked licenses and thus any form of official control, leaving them able to carry on with sex work both under the lockdown and during the pandemic. In other words, prohibition did not mean a stoppage in activity. The owners of these properties pressured the women to continue working, since some clients continued to turn up in spite of the prohibition.

So they wanted to force me to work despite everything that was going on. I had a very bad time, because when I said I didn't want to work she told me, "well if you don't work, you're out on the street". So it was a very difficult moment because I didn't have anywhere to go either and I didn't know anyone else. Either I worked or I was out on the street, but I knew that my visa had run out – it was the visa they give for tourism. So automatically I was on the street or the Guardia Civil would pick me up and deport me... (Lucía, Murcia)

That we were locked up, that we had to work whether we liked it or not, we had to work fully exposed, we had to pay the rent, we had to pay the bills as well, in other words, we had to pay everything. (Ainara, Palma de Mallorca)

Commercial sex work is an activity with a high level of mobility in all strata of the sex market, but particularly for those located in a middle or upper stratum. During the home lockdown, borders were closed and movement within or between provinces or countries prevented. All brothels were considered leisure establishments and closed, except those with a hotel license, which opened up again once the home lockdown ended.

The receptionist tells me that the first two weeks the hotel opened up again, they were a little slow because they hardly saw any clients, but that afterwards everything carried on as before. Only that the clients older than 55 had disappeared and all the old men. She told me that there was one older man who went and who was scared stiff, but who couldn't anymore. He told her that it was a necessity and that he was risking it. I go over to the room where the women are waiting for clients and greet them. Half of them were new, and the most surprising was that all of them were Spanish. Generally, these women go off to work in other European cities, but with the closure of the borders they've had no choice but to stay in Spain, in those most select establishments, accustomed to receive a high income for sexual services. (Field Journal, Madrid, 22 June 2020)

The women usually choose their clients beforehand, but in highly exceptional circumstances they can accept clients they do not have much trust in—who are drunk or on drugs, or whose behavior is unpleasant. During the lockdown and the first few months afterward, that choice of clients was reduced or removed entirely.

The need is so great... Before you could say, "no, this guy's high or really drunk, I'm not going to attend to him", but now, as you feel you really need it, you accept what might happen. It's like, "oh, just please let someone come", you pray for anyone to come. So

out of necessity you attend to unpleasant people. But of course, before you could say, "no, this client is such a pain, I'm not going to attend to him"; but now if he comes, you attend to him. (Margarita, Cádiz)

Sure, before work was very good. Sometimes you would say, "oh, I don't want to attend to that person", so I'll attend to this other guy. Not now, now whatever comes is welcome because we need the money, to meet the responsibilities and obligations you have first. (Catalina, Madrid)

The commissions charged by the owners of the apartments rose from the generally established rate of 50%, or a fixed price was set for rooms. On top of this, the prices for sexual services decreased, or services were demanded that would not have been provided previously, and the requests for unprotected sex increased.

during the pandemic, they also made me offers to go to apartments of theirs [of the club] and work at 60%, something that doesn't happen anymore, come on ... so ... they took advantage, hey, to work there at 60% for the house and 40% for the girl. In other words, in the middle of the pandemic, if something happens with the police, nobody is going to stand up for you, but taking advantage of the situation that many many women, who are mothers and are over here alone, submitted to. To whatever: to going out in the middle of the pandemic, to going to the house of someone you don't know (Fenix, A Coruña)

You put up with the unspeakable and that is fucked up, because the clients that come are the ones that come and you almost have to go through anything; from not using protection to other things ... The thing is that I never wanted to go through that. Because before the lockdown, you accepted a few rules that involved being compelled, but I could be the one to set the rules, in exchange for a certain amount of money. In the lockdown it was worse because then you couldn't set any rules and we lacked food and we couldn't go beyond the front door. (Lada, Cádiz)

there are guys who keep their masks on because it's basic service where you don't even touch the guy, but at other times they ask me for kisses and "natural things" [unprotected sexual practices] and then it's us women who are putting ourselves in danger. In that way the guys don't look out for us at all – 2% care, the rest don't. Even in some of the calls they ask me if you can do it without protection. Obviously not, but come on, not now with the pandemic, nor before that. There are also some guys who ask you for kisses with tongue, and I don't kiss, ever ... The guys are a bit more aggressive and some come to you a bit more crazy or touched in the head. They even come with more demands. They

ask me for things that I wouldn't do before, oral sex without a condom, kissing. I've never kissed because to me it's something very personal, but they ask me for it a lot. (Manuela, Sevilla)

Some women, out of necessity and not finding any alternative source of income, turned to sex work for the first time. This beginning came about in the worst conditions, because the initial learning period was carried out with serious shortcomings due to it being illegal.

I started to look for a way to keep working, not caring whether I got infected or caring about anything ... I didn't think about that, only about making money, because I already owed a lot of money and needed to cover my expenses. (Margarita, Cádiz)

Just when the lockdown started was when I started in sex work, a few days before, in a house where a few other girls were working. (Claudia, Tenerife)

Effects on the Clients

Many men did not cease paying for sex, either during the home lockdown or the pandemic in general, unwilling to give up the service they had been enjoying. They took advantage of when they went shopping or walked the dog to seek sexual services. This reality took place throughout the country, evidenced by women from the different Spanish provinces where we gathered data and conducted interviews. Two types of clients emerged at that time, types that already existed and were familiar to the women: those that were undesirable and would not have been acceptable in other social conditions, and those who helped the women. The former are those clients who regard sex workers with contempt, and who consider that because they pay them, they are at their service and can do what they want with them—from not paying to behaving aggressively.

Well before everything had an exact price. We all had a rate and did not lower that rate. And so now ... for 30 or 20 euros you can get to be with me. And so before it was a select clientele, but now you can get like the drunk on the street corner, he can have you, you know? And the infections and everything are increasing. (María, Santiago de Compostela)

Sure, many, because they assault you and ... but also it is **what the owner of the apartment lets happen**. Because automatically if a client turns up and assaults you, and turns up a second time and you don't attend to him for whatever reason. But she [the owner] says, "no, he was drunk, you must receive him, you're going to receive him whether you like it or not, because I'm the boss here, and if you don't you're out on the street". (Lucía, Murcia)

By contrast, some women spoke in the interviews of their clients as people who helped them during the pandemic, more than public organizations.

The 13th, that was the last time I worked, then the lockdown came and it was really, really tough ... they fined me. Well, I had some friends of mine, clients of mine, who came to my house ... I had around five clients who came to my house, they're friends of mine. They would get away in the day, and they would arrive, stop outside, wash hands (Sharmain, Madrid).

the clientele changed a lot ... the normal, most regular client is the other kind, that client stopped coming ... that client didn't come, they didn't move around ... out of responsibility, out of fear, or because they couldn't due to age or health problems, now they didn't come anymore ... uh, it changed in that way or client, it changed ... Some asked us if we were ok, if we were getting work, if we had food to eat ... some clients who knew me paid my phone bill, or gave me money for food ... I had help from clients, even though I couldn't receive them at that time, but they helped me, so as not to worry ... that this was going to end and we would return to normality. Some of us even wondered about the possibility of stopping. (Belén, Santiago de Compostela)

This help came about because these men were more than buyers of sex. That is to say, they had a relationship of friendship and trust with the women, so they were the ones who helped them during the pandemic. This situation occurred mostly in the middle and upper strata of sex work, as we were able to verify in the fieldwork carried out during the pandemic.

During the lockdown, my usual clients of course followed the rules for their part in staying at home, and every now and again I received messages from them asking how I am and if I needed their help in anything urgent. Naturally, having contacts from a couple of years ago was a massive help in paying my bills, since one of them in particular offered to forward me the money I needed to get out of my jam, even when we were able to go outside and a couple of months afterwards. (Mayte, escort, 20 November 2020, personal communication by email)

Many of the women from the middle to upper stratum survived on savings obtained from sex work and thanks to assistance from their clients, without any kind of contact from government administrations or from charities.

Profiles of the Most Affected Women

The escorts may have lived through situations of worry and uncertainty, but the six women we kept in contact with were

able to pay their bills. The women who suffered a worse situation and faced a greater impact belonged to the lowest strata of commercial sex work. The most notable characteristics of these women were being undocumented immigrants in Spain, being in debt to traffickers due to their journey to Spain, and having no social support networks or friends who could help them.

I had a client who wanted to screw without a condom, and I said no. He started to, but I defended myself, and he left me quite banged up, but he finally left and didn't manage to penetrate me. But **I couldn't report it to the police**, because I have a deportation order and if I go to the police station, they'll take me away and I can't do that, no. So I let it be. Stopped working until the bruises and wounds faded from my body, you know, and that's that. (Baby, Santiago de Compostela) Well, what most worried me was the debt that was building up. Because I'm not used to being in debt, I don't like that ... I mean, so many hours working to hand it over to someone else and that I didn't see any of it. What I had in that apartment with the tension from the debt, the girl took all the money from us, that's horrible. And the girl who brought me over didn't let me have any contact with other people so that I wouldn't come to this, so to speak, what I am at this moment. (Verónica, Tenerife)

In the lockdown, my initial debt was already paid, but I couldn't leave the apartment because I had signed a service contract that I could not leave unfinished, since that would have put me in debt again there. (Carlota, Palma de Mallorca)

Yes, more than anything for that, because I decided to work because let's say it was the only option I had, having no papers ... perhaps many people wouldn't understand, but it's extremely complicated. In an illegal situation it's really difficult to get ahead, too difficult ... I didn't have the least idea what this was like. If normally to get ahead you, young, alone, in a really far-away country, with customs you never imagined existed, a culture completely different to your own, without papers, illegal, it's much more difficult to get a job, a place to live, get let's say medical attention, get ... even buying anything, you need a better telephone, you need certain requirements, to open an account ... certain requirements. It's pretty complicated and in a pandemic even more so. (Flor, Bilbao)

State of Health

While the women's physical state of health was, with a few exceptions, good, their mental health was another matter. Almost all the women gave accounts of states of anxiety, depression, or stress.

More on a neurological level because you've got more ... crises of anxiety, stress, depression ... what with there being no legal work, with prostitution also being complicated, the fear of getting infected with something, particularly that, you don't know the people you're going to be with there, if they are healthy or not ... that does give you more anxiety (Alfonsa, Barcelona)

Not of health, but mentally. In stress, in depressions, in keeping it together being low every day, in not wanting to do anything, that you're fed up with everything ... if I'm feeling so much lower, it's because of the apartment. I think it's not just me, but all of us. It's terrible, this is miserable, being afraid all the time. So, thank God, healthwise I'm not worse, but emotionally I am a lot. (Margarita, Cádiz)

It was not only the fear of doing sex work in the pandemic, but also the lack of income needed to survive and to send money to their families, the fear of catching the virus, or being detained and deported in the case of those women who were undocumented immigrants. But the worry and anguish were life affecting, since they could not see a way out in the short term.

My biggest worry right now is ... because a year has already gone by with us like this, so, my worry is, 'When is all this going to end?' For ... I worry about when this is going to end ... am I going to get a job? ... to send to my country, to my family ... it worries me a lot. Every day is very difficult and it seems that this is never going to end, it seems that it's here to stay, that it's never going to end. (Mary, Bilbao)

Police Control

As part of their actions in controlling trafficking networks, the police have had a leading role in inspecting establishments with a public license to uncover female trafficking victims and put a stop to trafficking networks. These tasks prove to be complex because, first of all, the women who work in the establishments do not trust the police, an essential precondition for detecting and identifying victims. The police controls that have been conducted in Spain are not always friendly to the women and this is borne out in the interviewees' accounts. During the pandemic, some inspections and control measures were carried out, and one of the women recounted her experience as follows:

Suddenly we're, I close my eyes and hear boom and it was the police, and they raided, raided the place, knocked the door down, all of them: hands on your heads and on the floor, all the girls on the ground and I, I mean, I in that moment felt so, so ... I said, no, they're going to deport me to my country, because I'm illegal, I

only have my passport and have already had more than three months here, than the 90 days, and I said they're going to deport me because apart from being in prostitution, I'm illegal. They put all of us in the apartment, then they bunched us all up in a sort of long corridor, and we were all sitting there with our heads down and there were lots of police, loads. The press came, everyone came ... that is, all the paraphernalia that you see in these types of procedures. So then, well, they asked all of us for our passports. When they saw my passport they said to me: but you're outside your 90 days' stay they give to tourists, and me crying I say no, I'm over, and he says to me, are you here of your own free will or under coercion? And I tell him my own free will, at least I'm not here by force. The guy said okay, you know that you can get into trouble for this and we can detain you, we can deport you to your country? (...) At that moment we are all there and they put us all in a room, they took our photos, obviously I didn't let them see my face. So they took the photo, but I was always bent down, as I knew that if this gets on the television I'm going to be pissed off. So they put us there in this room and there they took our ID numbers, all of us, because this is going to be ... they put us like in a database for what they did, something like that. They put us all in a room, gave us back our passports, and then told us: we're going to give you five minutes to grab your suitcase and leave. Me crying I thanked God, I gathered everything I could, I left some of my things there, obviously my black purse which was what most interested me, but they kept €600 that was in the till that they hadn't paid me yet. From all the work I did in the night and they confiscated 52 grams of coke. Yes I know that if they had wanted to bust us they bust us and we'd all get done. Well, 52 grams of coke, there were €4600 in the till. And so, well, they gave us five minutes to grab our bags, I grabbed my bag, I went to the bus station and I came to Benidorm on the first bus. (Valeria, Alicante)

Fines for breaching home lockdown were given to the women in the most vulnerable sectors of commercial sex work, while expulsion and deportation orders have continued to be issued, although it is true that the rate has been slowing. All these aspects would increase with a possible criminalization of commercial sex work, and there would be a total loss of confidence in the police: instead of being seen as agents of protection, they would become enemies.

Discussion

This study has shown how the situation of home lockdown and the subsequent months of pandemic in 2020 created a critical situation for the women who worked in commercial

sex in the lowest stratum and drove them underground. For these women, the standard of living and the conditions for practicing commercial sex work worsened, and their debts increased. We believe that such would be the circumstances that women would have to bear and live through following a possible criminalization of commercial sex work, even though they may not be criminalized directly. While women in a higher position in commercial sex work were able to stop working during the home lockdown, many of those in lower positions had to continue because they did not have the resources to survive outside of this activity, and thus could not allow themselves to stop working.

Our data show that prohibition had a greater impact on sex workers and trafficking victims than on escorts located at a middle to upper position of the sex market (McCarthy et al., 2012), entailing the criminalization of the poorest and lowest sectors of society. The results indicate that the women who ply commercial sex work outdoors suffer situations of greater vulnerability and worse living standards, mirroring what has been documented in France since paying for sex was criminalized in 2016. In a sample of 583 French sex workers surveyed years after the criminalization of their clients, 61.7% were street sex workers and the others worked via the internet or in establishments (bars, clubs, massage parlours, etc.). It was reported that 63% had experienced a deterioration in their living standards, 78% had lost income, and 42% were more exposed to violence than before the application of that new legislation (Le Bail & Giametta, 2018).

During the home lockdown due to the pandemic, commercial sex work did not come to a complete standstill in Spain, because the hidden sector of sex work continued to operate. Even prohibition of commercial sex work does not make it stop completely (Levy & Jakobsson, 2014). The most vulnerable sector of women had to continue to work in conditions of secrecy and taking on greater risks, as has been documented in other studies that examine what happens when sex work is criminalized (Adriaenssens & Hendrickx, 2012; Gertler et al., 2005). The criminalization and prohibition of commercial sex work do not, therefore, put an end to the activity—as verified in those countries that have this type of legislation—but rather enlarges the population that is criminalized, detained, and imprisoned for this crime. These legislative measures owe more to conservative ideological positions than the aim to eliminate or reduce the adoption and practice of the activity; nor do they seek to improve the lives of the most discriminated against women. In France, alternative support programs for women were set up alongside the criminalizing measures, but proved not to be easily accessible (Le Bail & Giametta, 2018).

Exploitation of the working conditions for commercial sex worsened with prohibition, since the owners of commercial sex businesses—particularly those in the lowest-level sector—heightened their margin of commission, thus increasing the

payment the women had to make for the use of a room and brothel resources. This meant narrowing the women's profit margin. When commercial sex work lacks any regulation, its only controls are those set out in the criminal code.

Clients did not stop paying for sex, turning instead to doing so secretly, illegally, and thus creating situations of greater risk since they demanded unprotected sexual practices, which the women ended up accepting due to the crisis conditions (Willman, 2008). Moreover, sex workers could no longer reject those clients that they had done previously, having to take on less desirable customers because the "good" clients did not go out to buy sex again until after the lockdown (Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Ślęzak, 2013; Krusi et al., 2014), a situation which led to more violence against sex workers (Calum et al., 2021), as noted above.

It has been shown that prohibition cuts down the number of clients who buy sex, as occurred during the lockdown, but does not eliminate them. Some clients developed strategies for getting to commercial-sex apartments (when walking the dog, shopping, or undertaking other permitted essential activities). Prohibition thus transforms the working conditions of sex workers and creates situations of higher risk because they cannot adequately negotiate with their clients nor select them as they would wish, as we have shown. Less tolerance of commercial sex work generates an uptick in violence toward sex workers, with a proportion of clients feeling they have the right to demand things that they would not in other circumstances (Krusi et al., 2014; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). In addition to this, the situations of risk actually prove more attractive to many men. It has been shown that risk is one of the most appealing aspects of commercial sex (Meneses-Falcón et al., 2018b). This could therefore have an unwanted effect on a group of men prone to adopting risky behaviors.

The high level of mobility that existed in sex work was also affected by the pandemic, particularly when the borders were closed in lockdown. That mobility forms part of the business strategy and of the strategies of the women themselves (Lopez-Riopadre, 2016). Lockdown highlighted the sex work of Spanish women, who are generally not recorded or taken into account in this profession, with only women of foreign origin made visible (Meneses et al., 2022). Applying a restrictive measure to commercial sex work could increase this mobility as a safety strategy in the face of police control, and so hamper the detection of trafficking victims, forced sex work, and sexual exploitation.

However, both the women in a more vulnerable situation and those who belonged to a middle to upper stratum had clients who helped them during the pandemic, because they possessed a relationship that went beyond mere sex. These tend to be regular clients with whom a good relationship, even friendship, exists. Different studies have shown how commercial sex is very diverse and the motives of buyers are far from homogeneous (Lucas, 2005; Bernstein, 2007; Huff,

2011; Meneses-Falcón et al., 2018b). It has been suggested that many men do not only seek sexual practices but also wish to have their emotional needs and desire for company fulfilled (Lucas, 2005; Milrod & Monto, 2013).

Contrary to expectations, the conditions that were created by the home lockdown due to the pandemic actually made some women turn to commercial sex work to cover their basic needs. Once again, it is economic necessity that pushes some to take up sex work (Sinha, 2014), and prohibition does not deter women from starting in sex work as had been imagined (Levy & Jakobsson, 2014). Sex work is one way of earning money that women can turn to when they do not have other options; they prefer it to other activities that require a greater time investment in return for less income, such as domestic service (Sinha, 2014; Zhang et al., 2015).

Lastly, relations with the police during the lockdown were tenser, more punitive, and less protective, creating greater distrust of the police among the women. In those cases where the women experienced unpleasant or risky situations with a client, they could not call the police to help them because they were breaking the law and could be fined. It has been argued that indoor sex workers have a better relationship with the police than those who work outdoors (Klambauer, 2017), even though the latter suffer greater victimization and are therefore more likely to report it (Connelly et al., 2021). It has been shown that the police's perception of sex work is framed by the type of laws they must apply—prohibition, regularization or legalization—which then influences how they apply those laws and how they deal with sex workers (Jorgensen, 2018). For most of the women interviewed, particularly those from the lowest level of sex work, the relationship with the police worsened. Many of them were illegal immigrants, and this increased the fear that they might be detained and deported to their respective countries. Even those who were trafficking victims reported fear of the police. It has been argued that police action should go hand in hand with public health approaches, in order to prevent the harms that their interventions in applying the law might entail (Sanders et al., 2020). It has been demonstrated that the decriminalization of sex work brings about an important change in police control, producing a better alliance with sex workers against crime (Armstrong, 2017). All the work that many police units have been carrying out in Spain, getting to know the women in sex work so as to detect and identify trafficking victims, would be halted and even undone if prohibition were implemented.

Before legislative measures are applied to vulnerable or stigmatized groups, there should be an assessment of the potential impact and consequences for these populations. A group of women should not be sacrificed based on ideological standpoints on sex work: in the fight against patriarchy and inequality, alternative paths can be taken that do not sacrifice marginalized women.

Limitations

Given that the data were obtained in the context of the pandemic, when it was difficult to move around and gather information, we have not documented all the sectors of the sex market equally, particularly because this is not an accessible context even when access is at its “easiest,” because of the social stigmatization of the participants. Furthermore, this study focused only on women, and we cannot transfer our conclusions to men, to trans, non-binary, or gender fluid people, who could experience different circumstances.

Conclusions and Implications

No single form of existing legislation has put an end to sex work or sex trafficking, especially not prohibitionist policies. The prohibition of prostitution or sex work would lead to greater secrecy, concealment, and danger for sex workers, particularly the most vulnerable, with effects on their well-being and health, along with further economic impoverishment, depriving them of any resource to survive.

The possible criminalization of sex work, whether complete or partial, would impact the most precarious sector of the sex market, which has less purchasing power and is more stigmatized, creating greater vulnerability both for sellers and buyers. Commercial sex, like many other markets, is segmented and hierarchical, with different socio-economic levels. For those people involved in the middle and upper strata of sex work, criminalization would not have the same impact as in the lower strata. The worst consequences would fall on the most socially disadvantaged women, thus exacerbating their precarious condition. Neither fines nor imprisonment would hit the businessmen, lawyers, doctors, engineers, or politicians who participate in the sex market as buyers, nor would they affect the women who occupy the highest ranks of sex work. It would be a new way of persecuting sex workers, as it was in past periods of Spanish history. Before applying legal measures to certain groups, the potential consequences must be assessed, above all if that application means heightened risks and lower dignity, less safety and more violence, less protection, and a worse relationship with the police, as well as the further impoverishment of populations suffering discrimination.

Author Contribution All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by Carmen Meneses-Falcón and Antonio Rúa-Vieites. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Carmen Meneses-Falcón and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials The data obtained and analyzed can be consulted by the reviewers as long as they comply with the ethical requirements that the authors have committed to the participants.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This research project was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Comillas University of Madrid on 20th October 2020. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study and publish.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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