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A close-up photograph of a marble statue of a male figure, likely a classical or neoclassical work. The focus is on the upper torso and shoulder, with a hand resting on the man's right shoulder. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the marble and the musculature of the body.

# Masculinities at work

## Male-to-male internet escorting in Italy and Sweden

MARCO BACIO

DEPARTMENT OF GENDER STUDIES | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES | UNIVERSITY OF MILAN





Masculinities at work.  
Male-to-male internet escorting in Italy and Sweden



# Masculinities at work

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Marco Bacio



**LUNDS**  
UNIVERSITET



**UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI**  
**DI MILANO**

## DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the double degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University and the Faculty of Political, Economic, and Social Sciences at the University of Milan to be publicly defended on Thursday, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2023, at 14.00 in Aula Seminari, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Via Conservatorio, 7, Milan, Italy.

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*Professor Teela Sanders*  
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**Title and subtitle:** Masculinities at work. Male-to-male internet escorting in Italy and Sweden.

**Abstract:**

This research aims to map and analyse the phenomenon of male sex workers (specifically men who sell sex to other men) in Italy and Sweden. While female sex work has been studied by several scholars worldwide, there is a lack of attention on the male side of the phenomenon. This gap in the academic literature mirrors a more general "invisibility" and "misconception" of the issue in other domains: in politics, the press, and in public opinion. Moreover, although masculinity is a powerful concept in both sociology and gender studies, previous investigations have forgotten to analyse sex work from this viewpoint. Therefore, the main objective of the research is to analyse sex work from the perspective of masculinity in order to understand what types of relationships are created between sex workers and their clients and what role is played by masculinity; how the relation is shaped by it. Indeed, the first part of this contribution is devoted to the concept of masculinity and to which declinations of masculinities sex workers embody in their encounters with other men, considering the behaviour of both "straight" and "gay" male sex workers. Reflections on the construction of discourses about differing identities in male sex work are particularly useful to understand how – in the cultural contexts of northern and southern Europe – the masculinities involved can re-adapt to the normative gender order which requires the femininisation of men who have sex with other men, and the constant flaunting of a masculinity that can contribute to pluralisation of sexual desires and sexual subjectivities. Since selling sex and sexual services is perceived as a stigmatised activity, especially for those men who self-identified as "heterosexuals", men who engage in these behaviours need to find ways to justify their presence in the market. At the same time, it is possible to observe the growing presence of self-identified homosexuals in sex work. In the analysis, the behaviour of these two categories of sex workers is then compared to understand differences and commonalities regarding the type of masculinity employed. Indeed, doing sex work is also a way to do masculinity, a means through which sex workers can elevate themselves under different perspectives: socially, economically, and culturally. The research deals with these issues and grapples with the different sides of the phenomenon through a qualitative methodology. In-depth interviews with forty-five sex workers (the so-called "supply-side") were carried out in Milan and Stockholm to examine the working conditions of sex workers and the types of relationships they establish with their clients. Today, male sex work is strongly related to the use of the internet, new media, and mobile applications (or "apps"). Therefore, it becomes important to analyse how new technologies have shaped this activity and what type of relations they generate in terms of both social class and educational credentials. Another object of this investigation is the encounter between sex workers and clients, with the focus being on the strategies that sex workers employ and on how emotions and pleasure become instruments of these relations. Indeed, despite previous feminists' opinions that this relationship is charged with power – that exercised by clients over sex workers – it will be showed that power has a more nuanced presence in male sex working and that the sex workers themselves employ different ways to handle their relationships with clients. The last point touched on deals with clients themselves and their characteristics. If male sex workers have been relegated to the margin, their clients are even more marginalised. In the final part of this research some of the primary traits of clients are highlighted along with the motivation behind their decision to buy sex, according to sex workers' perceptions. All in all, this study shows that sex work in general, and male sex work in particular, can be analysed as an actual job and those who work in the field in the same way as other types of workers.

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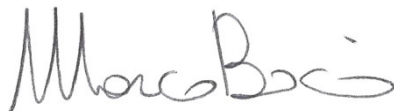
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Marco Bacio



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**MADE IN SWEDEN** 

*To my brother Edoardo*

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## **Conclusions**

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# Sammanfattning

Avhandlingens syfte är att kartlägga och analysera fenomenet manliga sexarbetare, specifikt män som säljer sex till andra män, i Italien och Sverige. Medan kvinnors sexarbete har studerats av många forskare runt om i världen, har den manliga sidan av detta fenomen inte uppmärksammats i samma grad. Kunskapsluckan inom forskningen speglar en mer generell osynlighet eller brist på förståelse för dessa frågor även inom andra områden – inom politiken, i massmedierna och bland allmänheten. Dessutom har tidigare forskning underlåtit att analysera mäns sexarbete som ett uttryck för maskulinitet, trots att maskulinitetsforskning är viktig inom både sociologi och genusvetenskap.

Därför är huvudsyftet med denna studie att analysera sexarbete ur maskulinitetsperspektiv för att förstå vilken typ av relationer som skapas mellan sexarbetarna och deras kunder och hur relationen präglas av maskulinitetsuttryck.

Första delen av avhandlingen handlar om begreppet maskulinitet och vilka typer av maskulinitet som sexarbetarna förkroppsligar i mötet med andra män. Den undersöker beteendet hos både ”straighta” och ”homosexuella” manliga sexarbetare. Att analysera konstruktionen av de olika identitetsdiskurser som är närvarande i manligt sexarbete är viktigt för att förstå hur olika typer av maskuliniteter – i två kulturella kontexter i norra och södra Europa – kan förhålla sig till den normativa genusordning som förutsätter en feminisering av män som har sex med andra män. Dessutom blir det viktigt att analysera deras ständiga iscensättande av maskulinitet, vilket kan bidra till en mer pluralistisk uppsättning av sexuella begär och sexuella subjektiviteter. Eftersom det uppfattas som en stigmatiserande verksamhet att sälja sex och sexuella tjänster till andra män, speciellt för dem som identifierar sig som ”heterosexuella”, måste de män som ägnar sig åt detta finna ett sätt att motivera sin närvaro på marknaden. Samtidigt är det möjligt att iakttä en ökning av andelen manliga sexarbetare som identifierar sig som homosexuella. Avhandlingen jämför dessa två kategorier sexarbetare för att analysera likheter och skillnader i maskulinitetsuttryck. Att sälja sex blir också ett sätt att iscensätta maskulinitet, genom vilket sexarbetarna kan höja sig själva på olika sätt, socialt, ekonomiskt, kulturellt.

Studien behandlar dessa frågor och angriper de olika sidorna av fenomenet med användning av kvalitativ metod. Den bygger på djupintervjuer med fyrtiofem sexarbetare, genomförda i Milano och Stockholm. På grundval av detta empiriska

material analyserar avhandlingen sexarbetarnas arbetssituation och de olika typer av relationer som de etablerar med kunderna. Idag är sexarbete i hög grad förknippat med internet, nya typer av medier och mobilapplikationer ("appar"). Därför blir det också viktigt att analysera hur de nya teknologierna formar deras aktiviteter och relationerna de etablerar i förhållande till både socialklass och utbildningsnivå. Ett viktigt studieobjekt för avhandlingen är själva mötet mellan sexarbetare och kunder, där fokus ligger på vilka strategier sexarbetarna använder sig av och hur känslor och njutning blir delar av dessa relationer. I strid med tidigare feministers övertygelse att denna typ av relationer bygger på en enkelriktad maktutövning från kundernas sida över sexarbetarna, visar avhandlingen hur makt spelar en mer nyanserad roll i manligt sexarbete, och att sexarbetarna själva utvecklar olika sätt att hantera relationen till kunderna.

Slutligen diskuteras också kunderna själva, deras personlighet och bevekelsegrunder. Om manliga sexarbetare setts ner på, så är deras kunder ännu mer marginaliserade. I sista delen av avhandlingen behandlas några viktiga kännetecken hos kunderna och även deras motiv för att köpa sex, såsom det uppfattas av sexarbetarna. Sammanfattningsvis visar denna avhandling att sexarbete i allmänhet, och manligt sexarbete i synnerhet, kan analyseras som arbete och sexarbetare som arbetare på samma sätt som vid andra typer av arbetsforskning.

# Sommario

Questa ricerca si propone di mappare e analizzare il fenomeno dei lavoratori sessuali (in particolare degli uomini che vendono sesso ad altri uomini) in Italia e Svezia. Mentre il lavoro sessuale femminile è stato studiato da ricercatrici e ricercatori in tutto il mondo, il *sex work* maschile appare caratterizzato da persistenti disattenzioni. Questa lacuna nella letteratura scientifica rispecchia una più generale invisibilità e mancanza di chiarezza sulla questione anche in altri ambiti: nella politica, nella stampa, e nell'opinione pubblica. Inoltre, sebbene la maschilità sia un concetto importante e ampiamente studiato sia in sociologia che negli studi di genere, le precedenti ricerche hanno raramente analizzato il ruolo che essa svolge nell'offerta di servizi sessuali. Pertanto, l'obiettivo principale della ricerca è quello di analizzare il lavoro sessuale dal punto di vista della maschilità per capire quali tipi di relazioni si creano tra i lavoratori sessuali e i loro clienti, quale ruolo ricoprono le forme di strutturazione di genere e, pertanto, come la maschilità modella queste stesse relazioni. La prima parte di questo contributo è quindi dedicata al concetto di maschilità e quali declinazioni di maschilità i *sex worker* incarnano nei loro incontri con altri uomini, verrà considerato il comportamento dei *sex worker* che si identificano come "eterosessuali" e di coloro che si autodefiniscono "gay". Le riflessioni sulla costruzione dei discorsi relative alle diverse identità implicate nel lavoro sessuale maschile sono particolarmente utili per capire come – in contesti tanto differenti dal punto di vista politico, culturale, e regolativo quali quelli di cui si tiene conto nella presente ricerca – le maschilità coinvolte possono riadattarsi all'ordine normativo di genere che richiede la femminilizzazione degli uomini che fanno sesso con altri uomini e la costante ostentazione di una maschilità che può contribuire alla pluralizzazione dei desideri e delle soggettività sessuali. Poiché la vendita di sesso e di servizi sessuali è percepita come un'attività stigmatizzata, soprattutto per quegli uomini che si autoidentificano come "eterosessuali", coloro che si dedicano a questi comportamenti devono trovare il modo di "giustificare" la loro presenza nel mercato. Allo stesso tempo, è possibile osservare una sempre più crescente presenza nel *sex work* di maschi che si autodefiniscono omosessuali. Nell'analisi, il comportamento di queste due categorie di lavoratori sessuali viene quindi confrontata per comprenderne convergenze e divergenze riguardo ai tipi di maschilità impiegata. Infatti, il lavoro sessuale è anche un modo per fare *le* maschilità, un mezzo attraverso il quale i lavoratori sessuali possono elevarsi sotto

diverse prospettive: sociali, economiche, e culturali. La ricerca affronta questi temi e si confronta con i diversi aspetti del fenomeno attraverso una metodologia qualitativa. Un totale di quarantacinque interviste semi-strutturate sono state somministrate a Milano e a Stoccolma con *male sex workers* (il cosiddetto “lato dell’offerta”) per esaminare le loro condizioni lavorative e i tipi di relazioni che essi instaurano con i loro clienti. Oggi, il lavoro sessuale maschile è fortemente legato all’uso di internet, dei nuovi media, e delle applicazioni mobili (o “app”). Diventa quindi importante analizzare come le nuove tecnologie hanno influenzato questa attività e che tipo di relazioni generano rispetto al posizionamento di classe sociale e alle credenziali educative dei lavoratori sessuali coinvolti. Un altro oggetto di indagine è l’incontro tra i *sex workers* e i clienti, con particolare attenzione alle strategie che i lavoratori sessuali utilizzano e al modo in cui le emozioni e il piacere diventano strumenti di queste relazioni. Infatti, nonostante le precedenti indagini condotte da femministe sottolineavano come questo rapporto fosse incentrato sul concetto di potere – quello esercitato dai clienti sulle lavoratrici sessuali – si mostrerà che il potere è sì presente nel *sex work* maschile, ma lo è in modo molto sfumato, e che gli stessi lavoratori sessuali impiegano modi diversi per gestire le loro relazioni con i clienti. L’ultimo punto di questa ricerca riguarda proprio i clienti e le loro caratteristiche. Se i lavoratori sessuali sono stati relegati ai margini, i clienti lo sono anche di più. Quindi, nella parte finale di questo studio vengono evidenziate alcune delle caratteristiche principali dei clienti e le motivazioni alla base della loro decisione di acquistare sesso, secondo le opinioni raccolte tra i *sex workers* intervistati. Nel complesso, l’analisi dimostra che il lavoro sessuale in generale, e quello maschile in particolare, possono essere analizzati alla stregua di un vero e proprio lavoro e coloro che vi operano possano essere considerati come un qualunque altro lavoratore.



# Introduction

## Stigma management on the internet

I approached sex work by chance. It came as a surprise, and after so many years of study and work I can say that I do not regret any single moment that I spent engaging with men who sell sex to other men in Italy and Sweden. From the very beginning, I identified two main problems: on the one hand, the stigma that is strongly attached to the sex-for-sale market and, on the other, the challenges of understanding such a complicated phenomenon. Sex work is a complex, uncomfortable, and controversial field. The problem with stigmatised activities is that in debates carried out in mainstream media, many people forget to focus on the subjects involved: their dreams, hopes, and passions are left behind and popular debate focuses on their activity, not who they are.

In particular, it is important to stress that there is not one single way to be a sex worker. It is not a static and fixed category of people, but it is kaleidoscopic, with many aspects to take into account. Class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, and place of birth or residence can profoundly influence one's choice to enter the sex-for-sale market and the circumstances through which a person engages in these activities. Therefore, I want to emphasise that my research is not about all men who sell sex to other men. I chose a specific group of sex workers, certainly among the most advantaged: those who live in two Western countries and who use the internet as a platform for contact. Thus, my qualitative research does not speak for and cannot be inferred to people in economically disadvantaged countries, people who are trafficked, or work in the streets of our cities. At the same time, I want to emphasise that the people I met deserve a proper analysis that takes as its point of departure their lived experience.

The current literature on sex work can be divided into three parts. The first, that is also the largest, are studies of women as sellers and men as buyers (Sanders, 2004b). The second part, consisting of far fewer investigation, are studies of male sex workers primarily with a pathological focus considering the homosexual activities the work embraces and the related HIV epidemic that, since the 1980s, made things even worse (Bimbi, 2007). A third part consists of a handful of studies on trans people selling sex (Kulick, 1998; Liguori and Aggleton, 1999; da Silva, 1999). Indeed, much of the literature indulges on the victimisation of those involved in the

sex-for-sale market, overlooking the agency of the actors. This makes my research all the more relevant since it deals with men who sell sex to other men, with the particularity that the suppliers are using the internet as a means to find buyers. The role of the internet is pivotal not only in my study, but also in our society and, in fact, the internet has profoundly affected the way in which this work is performed. I thus analyse possible changes in how men who sell sex to men regard their work and themselves. The so-called ‘homosexualisation’ of male sex work implies that this group of sex workers increasingly regard themselves as gay or bisexual and seek pleasure, not only monetary remuneration in their work.

The primary aim of this work is to analyse masculinity in male sex work. Although masculinity is a powerful concept in both sociology and gender studies, most previous research has not analysed sex work under this perspective. Even though the actors involved are men, and previous studies have highlighted the importance of masculinity not only in the man-to-woman relationship but also in the ‘gay world’ (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018), there is a lack of attention to this aspect in the field of male sex work. Thus, my first aim is to analyse sex work from the perspective of masculinity in order to understand what type of relationships are created between sex workers and their clients and what is masculinity’s role. Moreover, I explain how doing sex work is also a way of doing masculinity, a means through which sex workers can manage their identity from different perspectives: socially, economically, and culturally. But masculinity is a pervasive concept and masculinity plays a role in shaping other aspects of male-to-male sex work that will be analysed throughout this research.

As mentioned above, this is a qualitative study on men who sell sex to other men in two countries, namely Italy and Sweden, selected because of their marked differences in legislation and general attitudes to sex work. As I will show, however, these differences have minor importance in the ways the men I interviewed thought of themselves and their work, men who decided to engage in the commercial sex market and who chose the internet as a means to market their services and select their clients. The sample consists of 45 men who I met in Milan and Stockholm. This is a comparably large sample, especially considering that they decided to share with me a wealth of information, about their activities in the sex-for-sale market, as well as about themselves, their life before sex work and their dreams about the future.

This book has a total of seven chapters that can be divided into three parts. The first, Chapters 1-3, gives a general idea about both this field of study and what I want to achieve with my project. Chapter 1 presents my research questions and gives a brief overview of previous literature on male-to-male sex work. Chapter 2 introduces the theories I apply with regard to each research question. Chapter 3 is a discussion of the methodology and its instruments used in both the research and interview process

and an analysis of the material. Moreover, in this chapter, I discuss the ethical considerations and my position as a researcher in this field of study. Indeed, my position has been influenced by the participants themselves, their behaviour and their desire to tell and to share their experiences with me.

The second part of this book, Chapters 4-6, is dedicated to the empirical analysis of the material, with each chapter referring to a research question. In Chapter 4, I discuss the main aim of this study: how male sex workers construct their masculinity in their relationship with clients. Here, the most important results of my work are explained and motivated. In the following two chapters (5 and 6), I continue to discuss masculinity, engaging with other important aspects of the work of male escorts. In Chapter 5, I analyse the reasons why the men I interviewed chose to sell sex to other men, and both the role of the internet and the participants' class position will take centre stage. Moreover, in this chapter, I discuss the working conditions of being a sex worker in Italy and Sweden. Later, in Chapter 6, I highlight the relationship between sex workers and their clients and discuss, in the beginning of the chapter, what role power plays in this relationship and how the sex workers describe their clients.

Finally, the third and final part presents the conclusions, providing not only a summary of the main results of this work but, most importantly, offering what I hope can be a useful typology of male sex workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, as pointed out above, what lacks in the current literature on men who sell sex to other men is an investigation of their present situation. We have information about the past, before and after the HIV epidemic, but these notions are, in a sense, outdated because they do not consider the role of the internet and how sexuality has changed in recent years. It is my hope that the typology will give an important contribution to this field of study and, ultimately, will help sex workers obtain better working conditions.

I would also like to stress that this study became an opportunity of growth for myself. Indeed, engaging with other gay men, the majority of whom come from a middle-class background and from different parts of the world but with different ethnicities, had an impact during the interview process and also later, while analysing the collected material. As explained in Chapter 3, our encounters sometimes became similar to those which they have with their clients. Even though sex was always avoided, other types of connections emerged such as emotions of closeness and complicity. Quite unexpectedly, the men I interviewed cared about me and my research project, and they decided to open themselves to me in a frank and sincere way. I do not believe they always told me the truth, as lies are as insidious as they are unavoidable, but the point I want to make is that the interviews became something more than posing questions and listening to the answers. These



interactions made it possible for my research to embrace a multitude of aspects of the sex-for-sale market.

Finally, I wish to clarify what I want to achieve with this book. It is my hope that this study can contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of both sex work and male sex work. While this study cannot be inferred to include all and everyone who sells sex, it is however a way to shed light on the men involved in the sex-for-sale market.

It is important for me to thank all the male sex workers who took time to tell me their stories, stories and lives with ups and downs – in some cases the downs hurt more and hit harder than others – but with the desire, the will, and the agency to continue living their lives in spite of society’s stigma and of those who continue to victimise them. For me, it has been a privilege to meet them all and I wish to thank them for their trust and faith in me.

I hope the reader allows me to conclude with a personal note. This study helped me to better understand sex work, the people who populate it, and those who gravitate around it, but, even more importantly, it has been an occasion to be proud of the community of which I am a part. The gay community is wide, different, complex and uncomfortable, resourceful and resilient, but still hidden, surrounded with stigma and hate. But here “we” are, always ready to fight for our rights and our dreams, until equality among all will be achieved. I found a lot of parallels with the community of male sex workers. This study is dedicated to them.

# Chapter 1

## Male sex work through time and space

The act of selling sex or, more broadly, sexual services, has always been part of our history. The first historical records come from ancient Greece and the Roman Empire (Cantarella, 2015a; 2015b; 2016). In some of these records even the presence of young men and men in the act of selling sex is acknowledged (Cantarella, 2016; Friedman, 2014). According to Friedman, it is possible to find “male sex work in ancient Greece and Rome, pre-modern and Renaissance Europe, Japan in the days of the samurai, colonial and industrial America, and *fin de siècle* Western society” (Friedman, 2014, p. 4). But most of the attention on the part of society and researchers has always been on women as sellers and men as buyers. Some years ago, Dennis (2008) analysed 166 articles published in peer-reviewed social sciences journals, between January 2002 and March 2007, and he found that 84% of the articles discussed only female sex workers, 10% only male, and 6% both. It is only in recent years that the attention of researchers has begun to include male sex workers. Another scholar wrote: “the literature on sexual payments among men is very thin” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 125). All in all, the studies on men who sell sex and sexual services constitute only a small fraction of the whole literature on sex work. At this stage it becomes interesting to pinpoint some of the reasons behind this marginality. Two main reasons can be distinguished.

The first one is more pragmatic: the number of men who sell sex and sexual services is very low compared to women (Scott & Minichiello, 2014). But this assumption is also strongly correlated to the concept of “visibility”. It is impossible to count, numerically, to define the exact numbers of women or men who sell sexual services. Even in countries where a registration is compulsory to work officially in this market, such as Austria and Germany, the registers are not very useful because few sex workers, usually non-EU citizens, decide to register voluntarily. The reason for this is that once a person is registered the stigma attached to sex work is so strong that the person will still be considered a sex worker even when she/he decide to leave the market (Wagenaar et al., 2017). The first studies in this field were strongly attached to street prostitution, and in that context the visibility of women is much

more prominent than that of men. Male both sellers and clients tend to avoid streets to protect their identity, much more than male clients of women sex workers tend to do. Due to this greater accessibility to women in the street, researchers focalised their attention on them. Of course, gender differences matter here, and the direct consequence has been attention only on women.

The stronger bias toward men engaging in homosexual behaviour leads us to the second reason that explains this lack of attention. According to Davies and Feldman (1997), studies on male sex workers are marginalised because they deal with two peripheral academic interests: prostitution and homosexuality. First of all, the presence of male homosexual prostitutes contradicts much of the previous analysis that identifies sex work with women who sell sex and men who buy sex from them. Indeed, previous feminist studies have investigated prostitution and sex work under the gender equality paradigm and whether/how prostitution reproduces patriarchal societal structure. This epistemological discussion has silenced the constellation of men selling sex to men (Spanger, 2018). Secondly, the fact that this man-to-man sexual exchange contract is happening in an era of gay liberation creates problems in understanding the egalitarianism of the gay community (Davies & Feldman, 1997). For a long time, homosexuality has been neglected in both society and academia. Gender studies are a recent field of research and in some countries, including Italy, gender studies are not at all institutionalised (Beccalli & Bacio, 2018; Di Cori & Barazzetti, 2001; Leone & Magaraggia, 2010). For this reason, researchers have not studied these two categories together. The “problems” of studying men that sell sex are two-fold: male sex work challenges understandings of an inherent gender inequality in sex work, and it disregards the developments of gay sex inside the gay community.

With this dissertation I aim to contribute to the research on male sex work and address the issue in a new way. The experiences and stories of men who participate in the exchange of money for sex and sexual services to other men need a different approach. Indeed, this project hopes to shed light on male sex workers in order to understand the way in which they do their job. It is positioned within the so-called “new sociologies of sex work” (Hardy et al., 2010) where, according to the three British authors, the attention of scholars has moved from “standard” research on prostitution to new boundaries of sex work. For example, attention has shifted from women who sell sex on the street to women who use online spaces to find clients, from studies of sellers to studies of buyers (or from the supply side to the demand side), and from studies of women to studies of men. Moreover, I decided to study sex work because it is part of a broader analysis of sexuality in our society and in our time. The fact that I decided to examine male sex workers in particular has different motivations, some of them have already been highlighted in previous pages and can be summarised by the fact that studies on this particular phenomenon have long been neglected. Also, as a gay person, I found it interesting to devote this

research on men who have sex with other men. Finally, I chose to study Italy and Sweden because when I first started exploring this field it was immediately clear to me that Sweden was an important country to study due to its legislation but also because there was a lack of research on men who sell sex to other men, although a few studies have been conducted since the 2000s (e.g., de Cabo y Moreda, 2018; Eriksson & Knutagård, 2005; Eriksson, 2004; Holmström, 2019; Kuosmanen & de Cabo y Moreda, 2018; Rydström, 2019; Siring, 2008). On the other hand, Italy, my country of origin, has both a different legislation and a different moral take on homosexuality and prostitution (Leccardi, 2009), as well as a different representation and discourse around masculinities (Bellassai, 2004; 2006; Ciccone 2009; 2019). To compare these two countries would be a challenge that could lead to new ambivalences and contradictions concerning sex and sexualities, homosexuality, and sex work.

In the next section, I present the three research questions that will be addressed in the later empirical chapters (Chapters 4-6) and that are supported by different theories (presented in Chapter 2) and a qualitative methodology (Chapter 3). Instead, the second section of this first chapter is devoted to understanding how male sex work has been studied in the past.

## 1.1 Adding perspectives to a lesser known phenomenon

This research project has changed since its early stages. In the beginning, the focus of my research was on the different legislation present in Sweden and in Italy and on effects these provisions had on the life and work of male sex workers. After I conducted the first interviews I realised that legislation was not a key issue (Bacio, 2021a), so I shifted my attention to different aspects of the relations between the sex workers and their clients.

The overarching question is related to the concept of masculinity, a largely unexplored feature in sex work research. My research thus tries to close the gap between previous studies on masculinity (a central aspect in both gender studies and sociology of culture) and sex work research. In order to do so, I also look at the working conditions and relationships they establish with their clients during their encounters. In addition, I engage with the concept of power relations and clients' behaviour during their meetings.

My research questions are:

1. Which types of masculinities do sex workers embody? How do they describe their activities and their relations with the clients and what type of explanation or justification do they provide?
2. What types of economic constraints do they experience, from the perspective of educational credentials, class position, working conditions, and bodywork?
3. What type of relationship is established between sex workers and their clients? What is the role of power and money? What do we know about clients from the sex workers' perspective?

Considering the theme of this work, I examine the masculinity of the male sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden. The work of Connell (2005) is prominent in defining this concept. According to the Australian author, it is impossible to avoid body when discussing masculinity: the body is “inescapable” and not fixed. Connell asks if it is at all possible to be a man without being masculine. Furthermore, men aim to achieve a hegemonic form of being men: “masculinity is shaped in relation to an overall structure of power (the subordination of women to men) and in relation to a general symbolism of difference (the opposition of femininity and masculinity)” (Connell, 2005, p. 223). This seems to be true not only for heterosexual men but for gay men as well. In her chapter “A very straight gay”, Connell (2005) stresses that gay men can and want to experience a hegemonic form of masculinity in their path to achieve the acceptable “compulsory heterosexuality” that our society requires. Then, not only heterosexual men reject effeminate traits, but even many gay men reject effeminate gays, usually those who have a passive sexual role. To understand how male sex workers talk about what they do with other men during paid sexual encounters, I employ the work of Rinaldi (2020) who is one of the few researchers who have studied the concept of masculinity in male sex work. It is, however, of vital importance to stress the difference between our two studies, in order to better understand the contribution of our respective work to the field of masculinity. First, the Italian sociologist studied sex work in public venues such as a porn cinema and cruising areas in southern Italy, whereas my sample comes exclusively from the so-called online space. Moreover, almost all sex workers Rinaldi (2020) met self-identified as straight while my sample is mainly composed of men who self-identify as gay or bisexual. These two differences are not of minor importance, but are pivotal because the results that arise from them make this overarching question important.

In particular, according to Rinaldi (2020), not only did the men who sold sex to other men declare themselves to be straight, but they also displayed hegemonic forms of masculinities. The act of having sex with another man did not affect the

way they talked about what they are doing. This was made possible because the straight-identified male sex workers considered their clients as deviant, as perverts and, ultimately, as effeminates, stressing that they themselves were always active while their clients were always passive. At the same time, since my sample is largely made up of men who self-identify as gay and bisexual it becomes important to understand their behaviour in gendered terms. Indeed, did the gay sex workers I met try to achieve hegemonic forms of masculinities? How did they define their male clients? Even though also gay men want to achieve hegemonic masculinity, according to Connell (2005), the presence of multiple forms of gay subcultures is a sign that among gays there is space to formulate resistance to and subversion of the hegemonic forms of masculinities. Indeed, this is what Rinaldi (2020) called “homosexualisation” of male sex work: when self-identified gay men sell sex to other gay men without the aim of achieving hegemonic forms of masculinity or power. Indeed, since online escorting seems to be more emancipated, organised, and stratified (in terms of race, sexual orientation, identity construction, and sexual practices, as well as in terms of age, appearances, and ways to perform) than on-street sex work (Rinaldi, 2020), this is exactly where it becomes easier to find a more equal behaviour between sex workers and their clients.

The second research question focuses on three aspects concerning the sex workers’ education, working conditions, and body work. The first aspect investigates the sex workers’ educational credentials. Indeed, new technologies have had an impact on sex work, not only in the way in which the work is done (for example moving the activities from on-street to the online space, but also to new forms such as cam-sex) but internet and the online space have also had an impact on who is selling sex. Bernstein (2007) asks: “what were the underlying connections between the new ‘respectability’ of sexual commerce and the new classes of individuals who were participating in commercial sexual transactions? What was the relationship between the overwhelmingly white, native born and class privileged women (and men) who were finding their way into sex work and more generalized patterns of economic restructuring? How did the emergence of new communications technologies transform the meaning and experience of sexual commerce for sex workers and their customers?” (Bernstein, 2007, p. 474). I ask the same questions because there are many similarities between our two samples, even if her study is about women and not men. But the different gender relations do not correspond to a different behaviour: “why are middle-class women (and men) doing sex work? Can sex work be a middle-class profession? [...] How are we to explain its [referring to sex work] apparently increasing appeal to individuals with combined racial, class, and educational advantages?” (Bernstein, 2007, 474). In order to corroborate her hypothesis, Bernstein uses Bourdieu’s notion of the new petite bourgeoisie that seeks its occupational and personal salvation via an ethic of fun: “Whereas the old morality of duty, based on the opposition between pleasure and good, induces a [...]

fear of pleasure and a relation to the body made up of ‘reserve’, ‘modesty’ and ‘restraint’, and associates avert satisfaction of the forbidden impulses with guilt, the new ethical avant-garde urges a morality of pleasure as a duty. This doctrine makes it a failure, a threat to self-esteem, not to ‘have fun’” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 367). In this way, middle-class sex workers who engage in sexual experimentation are not in it just for the money, but are also seeking “fun, pleasure and freedom” (Bernstein, 2007, 477).

The second aspect of this particular research question deals more specifically with the sex workers’ working conditions. For this, I am inspired by the work of Sanders and colleagues (2016) about female sex workers that work online. Moreover, since the relationship between sex workers and clients is based upon the exchange of money, I deal with the rates of the services provided to understand how much sex workers can earn from their activities. To do that, I use the studies of Logan (2014; 2017). At the same time, I compare two different lines of thought about how the encounter is set and developed between the sex worker and the client. On the one hand, it is possible to use Simon and Gagnon’s sexual script theory (1974) or what Sanders called “it is just acting” or “emotion management strategies,” a theory according to which sex workers develop strategies to capitalise sexuality through the construction of a manufactured identity (Sanders, 2005). On the other hand, it is also possible to understand it in terms of what Bernstein called “bounded authenticity” (Bernstein, 2007) and what Walby later, in connection with his sample on male online escorts, called “touching encounters” (Walby, 2012). According to Simon and Gagnon, scripting theory does not consider identity as fixed, but as precarious, something which must be constantly achieved. Their approach to sex and sexuality highlights the specificity and the gesture of the body (Simon & Gagnon, 1974). Scripts are organized in two ways. First, the actors bring with them conventions that govern sexual conduct, conventions that are culturally bound. Second, the script must be accepted by the actors in order to produce arousal. If the script is rejected, the interaction fails. In this view, sex is not biological, but a social process. Sex is thus determined by the culture of the actors. There are three types of scripts: cultural, interactional, and intrapsychic (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). According to the two American sociologists, sexuality is based on stereotypes and conventional settings of sex. For these reasons, encounters follow the script, the enactment. There is no other possible evolution than the one already predicted. Here it is possible to find the difference between Simon and Gagnon and Walby. According to the latter, the sexual script is not a product of the culture, but it is produced by the participants who through direct contact learn what they can do with their bodies. Only the touching, gestures, and direct interaction during the encounter between the sex worker and his client can produce sexual meanings (Walby, 2012). Even if Walby explained the relationship between sex workers and clients with the scripting theory, he decided to go beyond and to demonstrate that it is unpredictable

or, at least, it cannot be fully predictable by the scripting theory alone. Indeed, “if sociological analysis starts not from identity but from the assumption that interaction can generate new meanings and ways of bodies coming together, the sociology of sexuality can get away from abstract starting points and move with the contingency of corporeal encounters” (Walby, 2012, p. 31). Subsequently, Walby employs the theory of “bounded authenticity” of Bernstein: “an authentic, yet bounded, interpersonal connection developed by and by the will of sex workers that includes also their clients” (Bernstein, 2007, p. 473). So, the question emerges, did the sex workers I met in Sweden and Italy follow a “manufacturing identity” or did they embrace clients into an authentic bond?

Finally, in the third point of the second research question, I use the concept of bodywork as presented by Wolkowitz (2006). According to this author, there is a lack of attention among sociologists regarding workers’ health and safety. The postmodernist approach to the body stresses the individual agency of the workers to use their own body to work, and sex workers are not excluded. Indeed, in a chapter devoted to the “prostitute body” Wolkowitz (2006) defines sex work as “the most embodied form of work” and she highlights the relation between “the body and the self” of the people who engage in these activities. What are the working conditions of men who sell sex to other men? What type of bodywork do they perform? Later, Walby (2012) discussed flaws in the research on bodywork: “when scholars have studied working bodies, they have assumed that these bodies are heterosexual male bodies, so they have neglected queer bodies and women’s bodies at work. Male-to-male internet escorting represents a form of body work that requires body reflexive practices generated out of concern for and touching of other men’s bodies” (Walby, 2012, p. 142). Inspired by these theories, I investigate the main features of sex workers’ bodywork and how they perform their job with their own bodies together with their clients’ bodies. The last part of Chapter 5 is dedicated to another important aspect of this job, which Walby called “body trouble”, and it is related to the use of condoms and HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Finally, with the third research question, I focus on the relationship between sex workers and their clients. In the past, the attention of literature on “prostitution” and the focus of many feminists’ debates was on the conceptualisation of power in the relationship between sex workers and clients. Who has the power and how do they exercise it? Very often the answer to this question was that the client exercised power over the sex seller in an unambiguous and one-sided way. I discuss the concept of “sexual contract” that Pateman (1988) employed more than thirty years ago to see if what she thought about the relationship of female prostitutes and their male clients is still valid for the relationship between male sex sellers and predominantly male clients. Pateman (1988) described the prostitution contract as a slave contract where one side (the client) is able to exercise power over the other side (the prostitute). According to Pateman, this contract allows no freedom or



agency, there is just the patriarchal power of men over women. In addition, I analyse how power plays out during the encounters between my research participants and their clients and which part, if any, is in control over the other.

Toward the end of my analysis, I shift attention from sex workers to their clients. What do we know about them? I employ sex workers' experience and knowledge about their clients to understand something more about this "other side of the coin". Some previous research has stereotypically conceptualised clients as perpetrators of violent crimes or pervers. These studies portrayed male clients negatively "which is possibly because much of the research on clients relied on data obtained from sex workers themselves" (Scott et al., 2014, p. 154). So, what do male sex workers know about their clients? Minichiello and colleagues (1999) carried out one of the first studies of male clients of male sex workers. While, more recently, Sanders (2008) interviewed a large sample of male clients of female sex workers. Both studies offer good comparisons in terms of age, class position, professions, marital status, and sexual position. At the end of every interview, I have always asked the same question: "Why do your clients pay for sex?". The last focus of this sixth chapter is what reasons motivate men in both Italy and Sweden to look for sex with sex workers instead of seeking other ways to find sex with other men.

Each research question embodies more than one aim. Indeed, in each question I go into greater depth in more than one aspect of the life and work of the sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden. But every research question follows a clear pattern: the first is the concept of masculinity, the second regards the economic constraints and the main characteristics of the job they perform, and finally the focus is on the relationship they develop with their clients. Moreover, these three research questions are strongly linked to each other, and they work only in relation to the others. Indeed, the concept of masculinity, as we will see later, works only when put in relation to the context in which the sex workers perform their activities. Then, knowing how they started selling sex and about the relationships they build with their clients can also be analysed in relation to the masculinity they embody. At the same time, power relations with clients and clients themselves acquired interest alongside the hierarchy of masculinities, as Connell (2005) described. So, the concept of masculinity is the overarching question and, also, the *fil rouge* that must be followed in order to understand this work in full.

## 1.2 One look back and one forward: male sex work between old and new studies

### 1.2.1 A brief history on sex, sexuality, and male sex work

It is important to highlight that almost the entire scientific production on male sex workers is composed of articles, papers, and book chapters. Apart from Walby (2012) and Rinaldi (2020), I did not find any other book-length study devoted to research on men who sell sex to other men, although a few anthologies on the topic do exist (Aggleton, 1998; Minichiello & Scott, 2014; Smith & Grov, 2011). As pointed out by Irvine (2014), research on sexuality and, by extension, on sex work is a form of “dirty work”, an occupation that is simultaneously socially and academically necessary but also highly stigmatised. This concept of “dirty work” affects researchers and also the subjects of these studies in a vicious cycle. Bimbi (2007) studied research on male sex workers from 1947 until the early 2000s. He divided it into four different types: 1) male sex workers as psychopathological; 2) typologies of male sex workers; 3) sex workers as vectors of disease; 4) sex as work.

Considering the first type, two initial studies on male sex workers appeared in 1947 in the United States and both interpreted homosexuality as a mental illness (Butts, 1947; Freyhan, 1947). It took almost twenty years before another American author wrote: “if we were to ignore the sexual proclivities and way of life and observe them as only teenagers [...] it would be difficult indeed to label the group pathological [...] are they male prostitutes as a result of some neurotic, psychopathic or psychotic syndrome? Quite likely not” (MacNamara, 1965, p. 204). Despite this study, Bimbi (2007) found research that fell under the umbrella of the first paradigm until the late 1990s. West (1998) wrote that since gay-identified sex workers were already stigmatized due to their homosexuality, the stigma of sex work has no or little effect on them. Also, a study of fifty gay and bisexual sex workers in New York, recruited online, highlights that many of these sex workers do not feel any stigmatization for their work since, for them, sex work is normative in the gay community. Moreover, being offered money for sex is flattering and ego-boosting for many gay men (Koken et al., 2004). According to Goffman (1961), the management of identity is an important tool to minimise one’s own sense of inferiority for those who face stigmatisation.

Regarding the second type, various studies have focused on creating typologies of sex workers. One of the first typologies was formulated by Ross (1959) who identified three types of male sex workers: the street hustler, the bar hustler, and the callboy. Implicitly, he claimed, these typologies lead to a hierarchy of male sex workers. According to Luckenbill (1986), this hierarchy is based on the level of safety and income. Later studies continued on this path of classification and

hierarchies: some classified according to the place where workers and clients meet (Allen, 1980), others to the sexual identification of the workers (Price, 1984; Weisburg, 1985), or to the professionalism of their activities (Van der Pool, 1992).

The third type of research identified by Bimbi (2007) is strictly correlated to the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and of the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). The literature regarding male sex workers in the late 1980s and 1990s was “obsessed” by the use of condoms (e.g., Aggleton 1998; Boles & Elifson, 1994; Estep et al., 1992; Hickson et al., 1994; Pennbridge et al., 1992; Pleak & Meyer-Bahlburg, 1990), even if male sex workers were (and still are) very well educated about HIV (Prestage, 1994; Rinaldi & Bacio, 2022a). This is also the focus of Johnson (2016) in a study of male sex workers selling sex to female sex tourists in Jamaica. Lorway and colleagues (2009), however, represent an exception in that they engaged also the life-stories and community-building among male sex workers in Mysore, India.

The fourth type, which is also the most recent, presents sex work as a legitimate way of earning money (Browne & Minichiello, 1996; Minichiello et al., 2001; Parsons et al., 2004; Rinaldi & Bacio, 2022b) and this paradigm leads to research on male sex workers that use the online space to find clients and to advertise their services (as for example the work of Walby, 2012).

At the same time, other authors have retraced the history and presence of male sex workers in society. An example is Kaye (2014), who states that “the history of male prostitution extends deep into the past, mirroring the historical depth of what was referred to [...] as ‘the world’s oldest profession’: female prostitution” (Kaye, 2014, p. 36). At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in both the United States and Europe, the more common practice of male prostitution involved biological men who dressed as women, commonly referred to as “fairies” or “cross-dressing”. While, from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries another important pattern of male prostitution involved heterosexual male soldiers. At the same time, although less frequent, it is possible to find heterosexual men of the working class (Kaye, 2014). Moreover, according to the American sociologist, male prostitution has only recently been recognized and associated to homosexuality. There is still some research that stresses the heterosexuality of the men involved in selling sex and sexual services. Indeed, gay men were mainly portrayed as child molesters and this became “particularly prominent during three waves of antigay bigotry [in the United States]: from 1937 to 1940 (when FBI director J. Edgar Hoover called for a ‘War on the Sex Criminal’), from 1949 to 1955 (the McCarthy period), and in the early 1970s (when singer and former beauty queen Anita Bryant led a movement to ‘Save Our Children’ from ‘the homosexual menace’)” (Kaye, 2014, p. 40). This began to change only with the “gay liberation” of the late 1960s and early 1970s: “gay men began selling sex to one another in much larger numbers, mostly working off the street through escort

agencies and ads [...] the gay liberation era marked the first time that most gay men began to buy sex from other gay men” (Kaye, 2014, p. 46). The problem of stigmatisation is also addressed by Oselin (2018). Inspired by Goffman (1961), she showed how people involved in street prostitution are more susceptible to stigma than other groups of sex sellers, but also how identity work can reduce the effects of stigmatisation.

Another way to present the history of sex work and sex workers is to look at the instruments used by sex workers to advertise themselves. Tyler (2014) studied the evolution of male sex workers’ advertising techniques which, of course, followed the development of the internet: “MSM [men who sell sex to other men] reveal three main spaces for advertising and promoting their services: notices posted in gay pubs, magazines aimed at gay readership, and the internet [...] website categories can be subdivided into individual sites, agency sites, and social-networking sites” (Tyler, 2014, p. 88). Postcards or “calling cards” are now just a memory of the past. While Tyler, who studied the advertising market in London, underlines that in 1991, a new magazine called *Boyz* was launched, and it included a column titled “Escorts & Masseurs” where people had the possibility to put an ad. The British psychologist studied all the advertisements in the magazine from 1991 to 2011 and noticed that the numbers of ads in the category “escorts” were much more numerous than the ads in the category “masseurs”. For example, in every issue of 1994 it was possible to find, on average, about 25 ads for masseurs (representing the greatest number of ads in the entire considered period) and 80 ads for escorts. While in 2001, there were about 22 ads for masseurs and almost 130 ads for escorts (representing the greatest number of ads in the entire considered period) (Tyler, 2014). Thus, escorts were notably more numerous than sexual masseurs. After 2001, the numbers of ads fell dramatically due to the advance and wide availability of the internet.

According to this author, “most of the men I interviewed made a clear distinction between the ways they use their profiles. Some maintained personal profiles on altogether different sites for strictly social purposes. However, some said they initially used their personal profile to experiment with sex work” (Tyler, 2014, p. 94). Often, gay men who used these apps got offers of money from other members and sometimes it happened that gay men accepted this money, which could be the starting point of their “career” in the sex work market. There are two main strategies for advertising: “some used a scattergun approach, placing advertisements with several publications and sites simultaneously and having no solid measure on how much business they were attracting through particular media. Others, advertisements only in publications where they realized a high return on their investments” (Tyler, 2014, pp. 95-96). Finally, pictures and photos are widely used by sex workers. Actually, a profile without pictures is like not having any profile at all. Of course, “the stigma of homosexuality and prostitution may have influenced men’s choice of whether to include photographs that would identify them” (Tyler, 2014, p. 96), and

still some men avoided pictures of their face and prefer to focalise clients' attention of other parts of their bodies.

The conjunction of sex and sex work leads to important theories on sexualities. For example, "The Transformation of Intimacy" (Giddens, 1992) is a useful tool to understand how sexuality changed our society and to examine the relationship between sexuality and modernity. Giddens writes about the changes that society has adopted around a topic that claims public relevance but that has always been relegated to the private sphere. Sex is not biology, sex is life, Giddens claims. In his view, sex, love, and gender cannot be separated, they exist because they stay together. What Giddens aims to explain in his book are the potentialities of the "pure relationship": "a relationship of sexual and emotional equality" (Giddens, 1992, p. 2). The key point in Giddens' analysis is the concept of "plastic sexuality". The British sociologist introduces the emancipation of sex and the understanding that sex is pleasure: "Plastic sexuality is decentred sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction [...] initiated somewhere in the late eighteenth century" (Giddens, 1992, p. 2). Under the influence of religion, especially the Christian and Catholic religions, sex was banned as a sin and for this reason the pleasure, the pleasure to have sex, was forbidden. Sex was relegated to a physical activity with the aim of reproduction. On the other hand, Giddens highlights that "homosexuality has been affected by changes as great as those influencing heterosexual conduct" (Giddens, 1992, p. 13). Homosexuals have endured difficult challenges and suffered all types of discrimination, as well as physical abuse. The recognition and respect that members can benefit from today is also a history of marginalisation and moral condemnation.

This leads to the paradox which Foucault called "the repressive hypothesis" (Foucault, 1977): while modern people think they are becoming more and more liberated and that sexuality was repressed in the Victorian age, in reality people are becoming less and less free. Modern times and civilisation mean discipline, and the rise of this disciplining power produces "docile bodies." Bodies are regulated. But power can also become an instrument for the production of pleasure (Foucault, 1978). Indeed, a characteristic trait of modern societies is not to have condemned sex to the shadows, rather modern societies are condemned to talk always about sex as if it is a secret (Deleuze, 1986). Sex, then, is constantly discussed and investigated. The effect is not to suppress perversion, but to give it an analytic, visible, and permanent reality (Foucault, 1978). The struggle for sexual liberation is part of the same apparatus of power that the movement denounces (Giddens, 1992).

### 1.2.2 Prostitution and sex work: the meaning of words

At the beginning of this chapter, I used both the words “prostitution” and “sex work”. It may be useful to discuss their meaning. Sex work and sex workers are two recent terms that have been invented, originally, by sex workers themselves. If we employ again the definition that divides old research on prostitution from new sociologies of sex work, then it is possible to consider prostitution and prostitute as old definitions and sex work and sex workers as a new way to define this market. Indeed, the same authors wrote that the word “prostitution” quite exclusively designated the act of direct sexual services and not all the diverse and varied forms that sex work can assume (Kingston & Sanders, 2010). Sex work is an umbrella definition that covers various forms of direct and indirect sexual activities: “from lap dancing to phone sex, dominatrix to prostitution [...] it also considers the role of those who are integrated in the ‘sex as leisure’ industry such as phone sex workers, maids, managers, lap dancers and sex shop assistants” (Kingston & Sanders, 2010, p. 3). So, as this market evolved, and it became something more than “just” sex, for many authors sex work became a more appropriate way to define the system. At the same time, prostitution and prostitute are pejorative terms with strong stigmatisation attached to them.

Nevertheless, scholars’ opinions about these words are ambiguous. According to American medical anthropologist Padilla: “Sex work is useful analytically as both a general term to refer to all expressions of sexual-economic exchange that are at least partially based on a desire to satisfy economic or material needs. It is also useful politically [...] where positioning sexual-economic exchange of ‘labor’ permits access to certain kinds of human rights, social legitimacy, or basic human dignity [...] [But] ‘sex workers’ was not a term of self-reference that was very meaningful to most of the men I interviewed [...]. The terms have emerged more from academic, advocacy, and public health contexts that may not reflect the local meanings of sexual-economic exchange to the individuals we ‘study’” (Padilla in Harriman et al., 2007, pp. 285-286). On the other hand, American sociologist Boden affirmed that: “[the use of sex work] while it may remove some of the moralistic baggage of the term ‘prostitute’, it presents some definitional and functional problems. For example, does any work that entails the performance of some sexuality fit into this definition? Would, for example, pornographic performers be included? What of actors in so-called, soft-core porn? What of swimsuit models in men’s magazines? Are telephone fantasy operators included? Authors of erotica? What of sex therapists? Erotic dancers? Belly dancers? [...] Is a brothel-owner a sex worker? A pornographic film producer? [...] While I might agree that the term prostitute is laden with moralistic baggage, I think the answer is not to replace a specific term with a vague term. Rather, I think the answer is to reform the use of the original term” (Boden in Harriman et al., 2007, p. 288).

To complicate the scenario even more, these terms assume a different connotation if we look at the place (or space) where these concepts are used. Padilla already highlighted that for men who sell sex in the Dominican Republic the terms sex work and sex workers is not appropriate. It is, therefore, important to understand how these terms are used in Italy and in Sweden. In Italy, there is not a proper translation of the terms sex work and sex workers: even if some scholars use “*lavori sessuali*”, the majority continue to use the original English words. Moreover, not one of the sex workers I interviewed in Italy referred to that term. Prostitution and prostitute have strong connotations but not always in a bad way in Italy. On the contrary, in Sweden these words have assumed a unique definition that is directly correlated to legislation. In Sweden, the use of one term instead of the other highlights the position in favour or against the legislation. So, for example, Swedish institutions, such as local authorities or health services providers, use the word prostitution while the two largest Swedish associations that fight for sex workers’ rights in the country (Red Umbrella Sweden and Rose Alliance) use the term sex work. I learned from my fieldwork, especially in the beginning, how important it is to use the appropriate words with the people that live and work in Sweden. Based on the analysis of the interviews that I present in the next chapters, how the men I met in Italy and Sweden prefer to define themselves will be demonstrated. The Italian men I interviewed generally preferred the word “escort” while the words used by Swedish men ranged from escort to sex workers. In both cases only a tiny minority used the word prostitute. For these reasons, I decided to follow my interviewees, and, in this dissertation, I use the words sex work and sex workers (sometimes also escorts) and not prostitute and prostitution to define them and their activities.

### **1.2.3 Does legislation matter?**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the first version of this research included, as a main focus, a discussion on the different legislation enforced in Italy and Sweden. After the first interviews, it was quite clear that sex workers (and apparently also their clients) were not very affected by the two legislations. I subsequently decided to elaborate different research questions on more relevant topics and published the piece of my initial research dedicated to the two different legislations elsewhere (Bacio, 2021a). Although this present work is not a dissertation on legislative frameworks, I believe the legal framework where sex workers operate is worth a few pages.

The fact that there are several different types of legislation shows how controversial this practice is, and that, in general, countries have very different ideas about how to regulate this market. As pointed out by Garofalo Geymonat: “often the fact that a country says ‘no’ or ‘yes’ to prostitution has not a real impact on the decrease or increase of sexual market, it is more correlated with local and global economic

dynamics” (Garofalo Geymonat, 2014, p. 75, my translation). Along the same line, Holmström and Skilbrei affirmed: “the prostitution market is both highly flexible and international and this means that its development is influenced by many different factors. In such a market, the law has limited scope to produce predictable outcomes” (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017, p. 91). Many governments and politicians would like to control sex work. In some cases, they want to put an end to the market, and to do so they make laws that ban sex work and criminalise sex workers and clients. But the only real effect that they can control seems to be related to the visibility of this phenomenon, what has been called “spatial switching” (Hubbard et al., 2008). Even though for some politicians this can be already a successful achievement, the real possibility of ending the commercialisation of sex is limited. Indeed, sex work is an international rather than a national phenomenon and it is difficult, if not impossible, to be managed by local authorities and their local policies (Garofalo Geymonat, 2014).

There are many different ways to define the legislation available worldwide pertaining to sex work. Östergren (2017) divides the current policies into two main categories, “abolitionism” and “prohibitionism”, where the first is usually limited to abolishing the purchase and facilitation of sexual services, while the second makes all aspects of sex work illegal. However, Östergren also proposes another category where “criminalisation”, “legalisation” (or “regulation”) and “decriminalisation” are put in contrast. Moreover, the first category can be divided into “criminalisation of the client” and “criminalisation of the seller” to separate what happened in Sweden in 1999 from the policies of other countries (Östergren, 2017). At the same time, the Swedish sociologist also proposed her own terminology, dividing policies into three categories: “repressive”, “restrictive”, and “integrative”. Even if less common, it is possible to use a typology based on four categories such as the one of Matthews (2008) who divided “regulationism”, “decriminalisation”, “legalisation”, and “prohibitionism” or the typology adopted by Garofalo Geymonat (2014): “criminalisation” (or “prohibition”), “regulation” (or “legalisation”), “abolitionism”, and “decriminalisation”. With the first type, a state decides to completely outlaw sex for exchange of money. These countries have legislation that is directly aimed at sex workers and define their activity as a criminal offence. Inside this group, there are also countries that shifted the attention from workers to clients, such as Sweden. In the second group, sex work is recognized by the state (only between adults and without any constrictions) and the sexual activities are regulated by laws. In the third type, sex work is not illegal per se, but the ban is on both illegal activities (such as trafficking) and third-party gain (such as brothels and pimping); Italy fits into the latter subdivision. The last group is also the newest: decriminalisation has existed only since 2003 with New Zealand being the first country, and still one of the few, to adopt this policy. In New Zealand there is not a special law on sex work and the act of selling sex and sexual services is equal to any other economic activity



(Garofalo Geymonat, 2014). Finally, Danna (2014) used a five-tiered scale: “prohibitionism”, “regulationism”, “abolitionism”, and the new categories of “neo-prohibitionism” (the criminalisation of the client) and of “neo-regulationism” (non-punitive towards sellers).

The story of regulated prostitution in Italy is linked with the two decades-long Fascism period as its end. Regulated prostitution was ended by Act No. 75 dated 20<sup>th</sup> February 1958, better known as the “Merlin Act”. According to Italian catholic and abolitionist author Da Pra Pochiesa (2011), the law was approved after ten years of discussions, debates, and studies but was also helped by the 1926 “Geneva Slavery Convention” and the 1949 “UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of Prostitution and Others” (Da Pra Pochiesa, 2011). The “*Legge Merlin*” or Merlin Act (from the surname of the Italian member of Parliament who first proposed this law) does not make prostitution itself a crime (the exchange of sex for money between consenting adults is not illegal and those doing so commit no offence) but outlaws brothels, as well as house-sharing by prostitutes, and leaves liable to prosecution any intermediary (between prostitute and client) aiding and abetting the purchase of sex. Indeed, the Italian Prostitution Act had two main aims. The first was to close the regulated brothels where, according to the promoter of the law, women were oppressed and reduced to slavery conditions. The second aim was to stop the obligatory registration of sex-selling women by both the police and the health authorities (Da Pra Pochiesa, 2011). In 1958, there were three thousand women registered as prostitutes, but the real numbers were higher, and the first unintended effect of the legislation was to push prostitutes onto the Italian streets. But this, according to the Italian author was manageable until the 1970s when the first prostitute migrant women arrived in the country. Indeed, the numbers of on-street prostitutes increased dramatically making the phenomenon even more visible. It is important to highlight this aspect because also the implementation of Swedish legislation, which I will present later, is markedly oriented toward migrant women. The Merlin Act is still enforced in Italy and it is also very present in Italian culture. After 1958 nothing happened at the national level. From time to time, politicians have used prostitution as an electoral issue but without clear or factual ideas about what to do and, especially, without any parliamentary majority that can support changes, in any direction. In recent years, city mayors have tried to counteract street prostitution with fines to both sellers and buyers, but these have been “spot” actions in order to “clear cities” from on-street sex activities without long-term solutions.

In contrast, the Swedish Sex Purchase Act was originally presented as part of the “Women’s Peace Bill”, with the aim “to combat prostitution, which was seen as harmful, both for those directly involved and for society at large” (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017, p. 83). The law had two major goals: reducing prostitution (both by short-term policing of it and on the longer term by promoting a profound change of

the attitudes towards it) and reducing human trafficking for sexual purposes (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017). However, the major target of public authorities, such as the Swedish police, have been migrant women (Vuolajärvi, 2019). In 1999, Sweden introduced a law that criminalised the clients of sex sellers. According to the original law, clients were punished with a fine and in theory even with prison. In 2011, the prison sentence was increased from six to twelve months, and in 2022 a proposal is being prepared that will make prison the only possible punishment. In 2014, statistics revealed that only two hundred cases were reported each year, of which only 10% led to a fine or to prison (Garofalo Geymonat, 2014). In spite of this, “in international debates on prostitution policy, the case of Sweden [...] takes centre stage” (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017, p. 83). Indeed, Swedish legislation became a model for other countries, “the Swedish model” or “the Nordic model” since later both Norway and Iceland, and, to a certain extent, Finland approved similar legislation. The term “Nordic model” is inappropriate, even if it is used by many scholars worldwide since, on the one hand, both Denmark and Finland have a different kind of legislation (Finland’s law is only applicable to the purchase of sex from trafficked sex sellers) and, on the other, even if Norway approved the similar legislation enforced in Sweden, both the discourses and the way in which the law is perceived by the population is completely different (Bacio, 2021a; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011).

After more than twenty years, did the Swedish Sex Purchase Act achieve any of its goals? In order to make an assessment it is important to check the efficacy of a particular law, its direct and indirect effects, as well as the unwanted ones. Also, since the Swedish legislation became a model policy to fight prostitution that has been exported to many other countries (such as Norway, Iceland, and recently even France and Ireland), it is important to understand what happened after this law was approved and enforced. According to Holmström and Skilbrei (2017) it is very difficult to evaluate if the Swedish law has produced any effects or not. First, they discuss the possible reduction of the extent of prostitution. According to Kotsadam and Jakobsson (2014) the prevalence of prostitution is more prominent where it is legal (as in Denmark) and less prominent where it is illegal (as in Sweden). As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the main problem with this assumption is that it is highly focalized on visible prostitution and not on the online sector of the phenomenon. It can be said that since 1999 the number of women (and maybe even men) who sell sex on the street in Sweden has decreased but it is almost impossible to say the same about online prostitution. The second aim of the law was to change society’s perspectives on prostitution. According to Jonsson and Jakobsson (2017), in a country where prostitution is legal and/or regulated the level of acceptance is higher compared to a country where the purchase of sex is illegal and criminalized. Indeed, “this suggests that the Sex Purchase Act has led to increased support in the population for banning not only buying sex but also selling

sexual services” (Svedin et al., 2012, p. 33). So, it appears that the Swedish population not only is strongly in favour of its legislation but also that it supports an extension of the law that would criminalise also the sellers. This, however, goes against the foundation of the legislation which was to protect the victim (the sellers) and to criminalize the clients (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017; Vuolajärvi, 2019).

Another aim of the law was to end the trafficking of human beings with the purpose of prostitution. The data produced by the Swedish National Police Board itself tend to confirm a decrease of trafficking, but the real problem is how to define trafficking and what counts as trafficking; “these problems make it very difficult to state that the Sex Purchase Act has decreased trafficking in Sweden” (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017, p. 93). Even if we take for granted that the Swedish legislation achieved its aims, the major problem in studying sex work in Sweden is the strong politicisation of the phenomenon. Moreover, the legislation focuses only on men who buy sex from women prostitutes and male sex workers are not acknowledged; even if the law is formulated “in gender-neutral terms, the intervention model is explicitly gendered in that its aim is to target men’s actions and attitudes as clients of women prostitutes” (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017, p. 83). Even though the two legislations are not going to take centre stage in my research, and despite the fact that sex workers appear confident in saying that their work is not affected by the laws, sometimes I use the legal framework as a tool for comparison of my analyses.

#### **1.2.4 Sex work and feminism**

I think it is worthy to conclude this section with a general discourse on the different ideas toward sex work that led to opposite positions within feminist movements. It is useful to give to the reader a general idea about these arguments. Moreover, I deal with power relations at the beginning of Chapter 6 and this discussion simplifies the presentation of later theories. To make this part as concise as possible, I turn to two scholars who have summarised the broad and sometimes difficult to follow discussion about sex work. The aim of Zelizer’s book, *The Purchase of Intimacy*, “consists of analysing the relationship between everyday practices and legal disputes when it comes to intimate economic interactions” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 1). Zelizer analyses taboos that exist against sex for hire and maintains that the common beliefs are that “intimacy corrupts economy and the economy corrupts intimacy. Yet [...] people often mingle economic activity with intimacy. The two often sustain each other” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 1). According to the American sociologist, “relations of sexual intimacy frequently include transfers of money” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 18). Moreover, she identifies three clusters of debates around money transactions and intimacy: 1) separate spheres and hostile world; 2) nothing-but; and 3) connected lives.

The first cluster concerns the separation of intimacy and economic activities. “In a normative version, the hostile worlds view places rigid moral boundaries between market and intimate domains. It condemns any intersection of money and intimacy as dangerously corrupting” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 22). However, “if prevailing analyses of intimacy and economic activity get causes and effects wrong, but still point to problems real people face, how can we improve on the faulty arguments of separate spheres and hostile worlds?” This is where the second cluster comes in. “One possibility is that some simpler principle – economic, cultural, or political – actually explains what is going on; that is the nothing-but line of argument” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 29). Indeed, the difference between the first two clusters is the position they have on prostitution. According to the hostile world there is no possibility of contamination between economy and intimacy, while for the second cluster the contamination occurred but only under negative circumstances.

In this second cluster, Zelizer uses prostitution as an example of how the nothing-but theorists understand intimacy. While “this view sees cultural representations as determining both the character of intimacy and the place of economic transfers” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 31), this is not the only way to see prostitution for the nothing-but theorists. Another way is the one that sees prostitution as “the result of coercive, and more specifically patriarchal, power structures [...]. Commercialized sex, as in prostitution, from this perspective is no different from unpaid sex in rape, dating, or marriage. The problem here is not commodification but men’s coercion of women” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 31). Moreover, since power is a form of coercion, those who belong to the nothing-but position interpret the clients’ use of money as a form of power that overcomes the prostitute.

In the third and last cluster, “people create connected lives by differentiating their multiple social ties from each other, making boundaries between those different ties by means of everyday practices, sustaining those ties through joint activities (including economic activities), but constantly negotiating the exact content of important social ties” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 32) and it is of course here where Zelizer wants to establish the purchase of intimacy. The majority of discourses around intimacy, sex, and money (or economic transactions in general) are focalised under the first and second clusters. To contrast the hostile world perspective on prostitution, Zelizer employs American philosopher Nussbaum (1998) who “documents the wide range of paid occupations in which women accept money for ‘bodily services’, from factory workers and domestic servants to nightclub singers, masseuses, and even professors of philosophy” (Zelizer, 2005, pp. 84-85). Indeed, “yet despite sharing many features with these other forms of ‘bodily services’, only prostitutes are stigmatized” (Zelizer, 2005, 85) which happens because of the strong morality against commercial sex. In this way, women degrade themselves to the lowest level of society’s morality but, for Nussbaum (1998), we should instead concentrate on expanding women’s limited labour

opportunities, education, skills training and creation of jobs. Moreover, the criminalisation of sex work is not the answer because it will not correct the unequal labour market but rather further limit poor women's employment opportunities (Zelizer, 2005).

Likewise, Hirshman and Larson (1998) argue that to make selling sex between consenting adults a criminal activity is not a good solution. Instead, they suggest the regulation of commercial sex via existing labour laws because sex work is a form of work. If we analyse in greater detail what Nussbaum (1998) wrote on "taking money for bodily services", we read that "all of us, with the exception of the independently wealthy and the unemployed, take money for the use of our body [...]. Some people get good wages, and some do not; some have a relatively high degree of control over their working conditions, and some have little control; some have many employment options, and some have very few. And some are socially stigmatized, and some are not" (Nussbaum, 1998, pp. 693-694). Prostitution is the most stigmatised profession because "it is widely believed, however, that taking money or entering into contracts in connection with the use of one's sexual and reproductive capacities is genuinely bad. Feminist arguments about prostitution, surrogate motherhood, and even marriage contracts standardly portray financial transactions in the area of female sexuality as damaging to women and as involving a damaging commodification and market alienation of women's sexual and reproductive capacities" (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 695). The fact that Nussbaum engaged only with women is not problematic because it is true that the debate surrounding this field has been characterised by the division among feminists concerning the nature of prostitution. It is yet another sign, maybe the most prominent one, of men's domination, or it can be conceptualized as a choice and an activity where women are in control of what they are doing. Indeed, Nussbaum called for a "fruitful debate about the morality and legality of prostitution" (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 696); on the one hand this debate should consider what it means to take pay for the sexual use of one's body, and on the other it should consider the options and the choices available to "poor working women". However, when Nussbaum wrote this important piece of the literature, the discourses on prostitution were greatly anchored on women and also on a particular category, poor women. In a later contribution, Bernstein (2007) found that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century sex work had become a job "with a new respectability", where both women and men of the so-called "middle-class" and with high educational credentials had stepped in. Nevertheless, what I want to stress here is that Nussbaum (1998) made a clear point for my analysis: prostitution can also be considered as a form of bodily service, detached from its "pervasive" stigmatisation.

At this point, a digression is needed, looking at the main feminist theories on sex work. According to Scoular (2004), the main problem of discourses on the sexual

market is that “there are limitations in viewing prostitution as straightforwardly paradigmatic, given the contingencies and diversity of the structures under which it materialize” (Scoular, 2004, p. 343). The British socio-legal scholar divided the feminist perspectives on prostitution into three theories: 1) domination theory; 2) sex radical theory; and 3) postmodern subjects’ theory. Domination theory can be bound together with what Zelizer called the “hostile world”. Indeed, in this first theory prostitution is understood as violence against women. What Barry (1979) called “sexual slavery” or Jeffries (1997) who defined prostitution as “male sexual behaviour characterized by three elements variously combined: barter, promiscuity, and emotional indifference [towards another human being]” (Jeffries, 1997, p. 4). Moreover, according to domination theory there is no distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution, because men use prostitution to maintain the dynamic of possession on women: “womanhood [...] is confirmed in sexual activity, and when a prostitute contracts out the use of her body she is thus selling *herself* in a very real way (Pateman, 1988, p. 207, emphasis in the original). This view reduces women to prostitutes and prostitutes only in their sexual acts (Scoular, 2004). “In doing so radical feminist theories reduce women’s identity to a single trait, regardless of the structuring roles of money, culture or race” (Scoular, 2004, p. 345).

As opposed to domination theory, sex radical feminist theory sees prostitution as complex social practices: “as diverse as the work in the area of sexuality is, there is a tendency amongst the most rhetorical writers to cast the deviant category itself as normative, especially when striving for legal recognition, at the expense of more pluralistic struggles around sexuality” (Scoular, 2004, p. 347). In other words, sex-radical feminists are sceptical if not outright against the idea of equating commercial sex to erotic diversity, because the opinion that this activity reinforces the dominant norms of heterosexuality and femininity is still present (Scoular, 2004). The third theory regards sex workers as postmodern subjects. Its proponents focus on research and change the terminology to sex work instead of prostitution. A good example is O’Connell Davidson (1998) who considered the variety of forms that sex work can take and also the different degrees of control or power of the workers. At the same time, also O’Neill (2001) “utilizes a sophisticated combination of post-modern insight and ethnography to highlight the socio-economic processes and structures that lead women into prostitution yet avoids viewing prostitution as either inherently oppressive or as an expression of sexual freedom” (Scoular, 2004, p. 349). In other words, feminists have different opinions about sex work and, from here, what to do with them. Feminists who adhere to the domination theory generally call for laws that stop and outlaw the sexual market; sex radical feminists would rather aim for laws that regulate the market, while feminists who regard sex workers as the postmodern subjects logically would aim for decriminalization of sex work.

Before presenting the results of this research, the next chapter considers the theoretical foundations of this study while in the third chapter I discuss the methodology used for this project and, then, I present the sample. Moreover, I deal with what it means to study sex work in both Italy and Sweden, and the consequences of the research and its legitimacy. In the second empirical part (Chapters 4-6) I present the results divided according to each research question.

# Chapter 2

## Male sex workers and the need to know more

In this second theoretical chapter, I present the theories employed in the subsequent three empirical chapters (Chapters 4-6). My research is inspired by the so-called “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006; Urquhart, 2013). Indeed, after the first preliminary interviews with some key informants as well as male sex workers, it became clear that the correspondence between previous theories based on female sex workers, but even on male on-street sex workers, were poor and, sometimes, even misleading. As an example of this mismatch, I can mention the initial intention to study the effects of the different legislations on the life and work of online male sex workers. The interviews themselves and the sex workers I met between Italy and Sweden then inspired me to create a more appropriate analysis.

In recent years, there have been two major studies published on male sex workers which became the major inspiration for this work: first, the work of Walby (2012) on male-to-male online escorting in some Anglophone countries and, second, the work of Rinaldi (2020) on male sex workers in the south of Italy. These two studies are important but for very different reasons. Although they both examined male sex workers, their approaches are very different: Walby (2012) studied male sex workers that sell sex online, as I am doing in this study, but he focused his attention exclusively on the encounters sex workers have with their clients, what he called “touching encounters”. On the other hand, Rinaldi (2020), with his ethnographic research, studied male sex workers that sell sex in several public venues (a porn cinema and a cruising area), mainly stressing the masculinity of his sample, which is also the aim of my study. Furthermore, both authors offered important cues for my research which became the foundation of my work. In the vicinity of these two studies, I found a “galaxy” of other research mainly based on female sex workers. As I presented in the previous chapter, the majority of scholars internationally who have done research on sex work have studied women as sellers and men as buyers. For my part, I adopted what I considered the most relevant theories on female sex



workers, trying to find correspondence between female-to-male and male-to-male sex work.

I divide this chapter into three sections, one for each research question. The first section is devoted to discussing my overarching question about masculinity in male sex work. My main theoretical framework is based on the work of Connell (2005) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) to explain the concept of masculinity and its division in different forms as a hierarchy where, at the top, we find hegemonic masculinity, and on the work of Rinaldi (2020) one of the first researchers who linked masculinity with male sex work. These studies are all relevant to my research and are at the core of my theory about the different behaviour that male sex workers have in their relationship with clients; a relationship where masculinity takes centre stage. There are, of course, other studies that have inspired me, such as Kulick (1998), with an analysis of gender formations among Brazilian *travesti* sex workers, arguing that gender is indeed constructed in specific cultural and social contexts. According to Kulick, the sexual practices of the *travesti* are instrumental for the formation of their sense of gender.

Canadian criminologist Marques (2011) has pointed out how the regulation of prostitution has been inscribed in a heteronormative framework, making male sex work understudied and under-represented in research. More recent work by Magugliani (2022), Moliner (2020), and Wade (2016) will also be discussed. Other works on masculinity have also shaped my thinking, but their approaches have proved less fruitful in connection with my research. Boellstorff (2004) deals with masculinity and homophobia in Indonesia and offers important insights about straight masculinity in relation to same-sex sexuality, but he does not discuss masculinity formations among gay men or male sex workers. Hearn (1992; 1998; 2015) has published extensively on masculinity, violence, social welfare, and global masculinities, but does not specifically address problems of masculinity connected to sex work.

I found inspiration from Bernstein (2007) for the second section regarding her study on online female sex workers who she describes as belonging to the so-called “middle-class”; then, I call on Bernstein (2007) again but for another theory she developed, called “bounded authenticity” as opposed to what Sanders (2005) found in her research on female sex workers in the UK, which she called “emotion management strategies”. Even Walby (2012) engaged with Bernstein’s (2007) theory on the nature of these encounters. Moreover, Sanders, probably one of the most well-known sex work researchers, has inspired the analysis of my material related to what it means to be a sex worker in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, in the third section, I discuss power relations between sex workers and their clients, starting with Pateman (1988) and her theory of the “sexual-contract” based, again, on female sex workers. I turn the attention from sex workers to their clients in my last chapter.

Although clients were not the primary focus of my work, during the analysis of my material it became clear that they deserve some attention. In this context, I start from Minichiello and colleagues (1999), who analysed the main characteristics of male clients of on-street male sex workers in three Australian cities more than twenty years ago, and finally discuss the reasons that led clients to buy sex from sex workers in Italy and Sweden.

## 2.1 Men, masculinities, and sex work: finding the balance among these categories

Canadian sociologist Marques (2011) points out how male sex work, in spite of its having been around as long as female sex work, is largely under-researched, and how the studies which do exist have most often conflated it with homosexuality. In fact, she contends, the regulation of male sex work was not possible until homosexuality as such became problematised and pathologised. The same models were used to explain this phenomenon as were applied to female sex work, describing the male sex worker a victim of social problems such as child or adolescent abuse or drug abuse. Davies and Feldman (1997), however, argue that even if some male sex workers report that earlier experiences of child abuse or drug problems contributed to their decision to enter the sex industry, there is no evidence that this connection is causal. In my sample, as I will show, a few men report such experience, but this did not dominate their narrative.

Several studies of vulnerable masculinities show how the dominance of research on female sex work and trafficking of women generally has constructed men as perpetrators, thus making it difficult for trafficked men to be recognised as such (Magugliani, 2022). Furthermore, changes in immigration politics have put an end to social upward mobility for young migrant workers, relegating them to menial jobs. The answer to this, however, has most often been to enhance a sort of racialised masculinity by adopting a wholesome lifestyle, more seldom resorting to prostitution or illegal activities (Moliner, 2020).

Wade (2016) argues that the interconnectedness of race and gender constructs marginalised masculinities that “guarantee the dominant social position of White men and the subordinate social position of racial- or ethnic-minority men” (Wade, 2016, p. 922). Observations like these help us understand racialised masculinity as what Connell (2005) has dubbed “marginalised masculinity”. But for my research, Nardi’s discussion of gay masculinities has proven more helpful. According to Nardi (2000), gay masculinities have swung between developing a feminine masculinity and searching for more “masculine” expressions. However, developments during past decades demonstrate the futility of looking for unambiguous expressions of femininity

or masculinity. Rather, Nardi contends, “what becomes relevant is understanding people in terms of the various ways they enact masculinity or femininity and the multiple forms these take” (Nardi, 2000, p. 5).

If we talk about masculinity, however, it is impossible to avoid Connell. Indeed, she offers the deepest and most complete analysis on this topic. According to the Australian author, masculinity is situational, it is something that a man does, rather than something that a man is: “masculinity is not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity. It is also extended in the world, merged in organized social relations” (Connell, 2005, p. 29). Connell (2005) clearly demonstrates how masculinity is an action more than a condition, highlighting the agency of bodies in social processes and their interactions: “with bodies both objects and agents of practice, and the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined, we face a pattern beyond the formulae of current social theory. This pattern might be termed body-reflexive practice” (Connell, 2005, p. 61). Indeed, body-reflexive practices form, and are formed by, structures. In this sense, the practices that construct masculinity are “onto-formative”. The importance of Connell’s work has been to identify that men have different ways to express their status, which is to affirm a position of hegemony within a power structure where women are subordinate to men and where there is a strong symbolic gender dichotomy (Connell, 2005). Thus, men exercise power over women and, at the same time, over other men with the hegemonic form of masculinities (the other forms that masculinity takes are complicit, subordinate, and marginalised masculinities). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have noted a hybridisation of hegemonic masculinity, also because some heterosexual men have appropriated aspects of gay masculinities (such as the metrosexual identity). The boundaries among different types of masculinities have therefore become much more blurred than in the past. But masculinity is not only a characteristic of heterosexual men but something that all men express, even those men who identify as gay. Indeed, Connell (2005) called one of the chapters of her book ‘A very straight gay’, stressing that even gay men can experience hegemonic masculinity in their path to achieve the acceptable “compulsory heterosexuality” that our society requires. Thus, not only do heterosexual men reject femininity, but also homosexual men do the same rejecting effeminate gays. So, in trying to be accepted, even inside the gay community, the typical dichotomies of the heterosexual world may be reinforced, distinguishing the masculine from the feminine in a way that is translated in the division between active and passive sexual roles. This way, gay men are also in a position to adopt, negotiate, or reject a particular gay identity (Connell, 2005). Indeed, men (in the metropole) never had so much power, but “man” does not represent a homogeneous group of people: the meaning of masculinity, the varieties of masculinities, the difficulty of reproducing masculinity, the nature of gender, and the extent of gender inequality all come into question and are furiously debated (Connell, 2005). It is

within this supposed power, where men of the urban landscapes of the Western world have “to adopt, negotiate, or reject” hegemonic forms of masculinities, that I found the connection between Connell and Rinaldi, and between masculinity and sex work.

As previously mentioned, the work of Rinaldi (2020) is pivotal for my overarching question as well as the related features of this research. During his ethnographic research, Rinaldi (2020) focused on the type of masculinities that the men he met employed in order to explain their involvement in sex for sale with other men. This has inspired my work, but it is important to stress two main differences between our studies, namely that Rinaldi’s research participants self-identified as heterosexuals, while the majority of my sample saw themselves as gay or bisexual, and also that Rinaldi’s informants met their clients in physical places, while the men I met worked exclusively online. Paradoxically, these two differences made Rinaldi’s (2020) analysis of the masculinity of his population more comparable to my research. Indeed, the differences became commonalities and what was left behind in his work became an unprecedented result of mine.

The main point of Rinaldi (2020) is that amongst male sex workers there are different types of masculinities, and male sex workers use different narratives and negotiations that position themselves inside the “masculine spectrum”. These strategies, at first, help sex workers justify their presence in the sex-for-sale industry. Rinaldi (2020) calls these strategies “repertoire”. First of all, we learn to become “sexual” (Gagnon & Simon, 1973), and we should look at sex work as a “joint action” (Blumer, 1969): how we do sexual things with other sexual subjects. According to Rinaldi (2020), people do not react only to physiological sexual instincts, but it is the symbolic system of the subject that explains his sexual behaviour. Moreover, in sex work, subjects explain their involvement in this job through the involvement of other subjects, such as clients. According to Shibutani (1986), a social world can be considered a community, not as a physical space, but as a symbolic environment where people share the same type of interests, and its borders are created within the limits of the effective communication. The use of a “social world” is important in my case because sex workers do not share a physical space (such as a cruising area, a sauna, a porn cinema, etc.), but they do form a community with interests that correspond.

Moreover, Rinaldi (2020) focused on the so-called “alignment actions” (Hewitt, 1998): every subject tries to make coherent their actions, to justify their behaviour, and the idea of themselves. This, especially in sex work, is much needed for those men who risk being stigmatised as “deviant”, and as homosexuals. These alignment actions are a way to speak and communicate with others in order to avoid stigma and negative judgments from other members of society. Rinaldi (2020) highlights two types of alignment actions: “reasons” (*motivazioni*, in Italian) and “accounts”

(*giustificazioni*), which together form the “repertoire” (*repertorio*). The “reasons” are public explanations that sex workers give in order to explain to others and to themselves why they did what they did and why they are going to do what they are going to do (Hewitt, 1998). On the other hand, the “accounts” are a sort of excuse that sex workers provide (to themselves, to the researcher, to other people in society), and these excuses are a clear message that men who sell sex to other men give legitimacy to the gender and sexual norms of our society (being a man or being a woman). In doing so, they try to neutralise the effects of their (homosexual) actions.

All of this led us to the focus of Rinaldi’s (2020) work: the type of masculinity that sex workers embodied. In theory, male sex workers should aim for a hegemonic masculinity, but this type is difficult to achieve, especially if their main activity is to sell sex to other men. To explain the behaviour of the sex workers, Rinaldi defines a type called “threatening masculinity”. It is important to stress that male sex workers not only use the excuses or the “neutralisation mechanism” (Rinaldi, 2020) after they meet their clients to mitigate the shame or the guilty feeling, but also before, as a tool to justify their (homosexual) behaviours. In doing so, these sex workers neutralise every emotional pulse or pleasure in what they do with other men. Once again, it is important to stress that these are men who have sex with other men while claiming they are not gay. Thus, they must justify their presence in this market, and affirming their masculinity, over the femininity of their clients, is exactly the way they found to “survive”. Indeed, Lasén and García claim that “masculinity is a homo-social enactment grounded in a compulsive demonstration of male attitudes and manners by men for other men’s gaze. Any failure in following cultural stereotypes of manhood runs the risk of being read as a breaking of one’s own masculinity. By denying other men’s virility and by pointing to their flaws, men can reach a position of legitimacy for their own male embodiments” (Lasén & García, 2015, p. 725).

In order to “do it” (to have sex with other men without being homosexual) Rinaldi (2020) affirms that the subject needs to justify to himself and to others (1) why he thought to do it, why he is doing it, why he will do it, why he will stop doing it; (2) to understand what and how to feel and try; (3) to manipulate his interactions with clients and other actors involved in sex for sale. These subjects (who define themselves as heterosexual men) conform to the norm (the hegemonic masculinity of heterosexual men) even though they deviate from it (since they have sex with other men), but they follow the norm even when they deviate from it, because they represent themselves as heterosexuals, they act as “male” even though they deviate from the traditional norm. Paradoxically, or maybe not, it is possible to find and say the same thing also for some clients of transgender sex workers. Indeed, previous research on straight male clients (Huysamen 2019; 2020) looking for sex with men or trans women stress that having sex with a trans woman means that clients can

continue to define themselves as heterosexual or, at worst, bisexual, avoiding the label of being gay. Specifically, Huysamen wrote, “the paid sexual encounter provides some men with an opportunity to have their non-heteronormative sexual and emotional needs met in a context that insulates them from the undesirable threats to their heterosexual social identities that would result from realizing these desires elsewhere. The boundedness of the paid sexual encounter allowed these men to compartmentalize their sexual identities [...] Consequently, it can be argued that, while paid sex allows men a space in which they can deviate from the straight line of heterosexuality, it is also the very thing that allows them to maintain the illusion that this straight line exists in the first place” (Huysamen, 2019, p. 527).

Reynolds’ claim that “the culture surrounding ‘straight’ MSM [men who have sex with men] sex distinguishes itself explicitly from a culture of homosexuality” (Reynolds, 2015, p. 225) finds validation either way: there are straight sex workers that have sex with homosexual clients and also homosexual sex workers that have sex with straight clients, sex workers and clients thus both maintaining their sexual orientation (as heterosexual) and their hegemonic masculinity (over the femininity of their clients and sex workers, respectively). Indeed, sex workers tend to position themselves inside hegemonic and normative gender rules in order to avoid stigmatisation: “since some male sex workers are not able to compete with other males in the conventional world (for reasons attached to economic, class, and ethnic inequalities) and their masculinity is emptied of hegemonic characters, in doing sex work, their activities become a value, one of the few values they can spend in the society at large, they can be male and, in this way, overcome their clients” (Rinaldi, 2020, pp. 257-258, my translation).

At this point, it is also important to add another view on male sex workers and masculinities that comes, this time, from an American author. Logan (2014) performed an economic analysis on sex workers’ advertisement strategy. He did not interview any sex workers, but quantitatively analysed the advertisements of American male sex workers on different websites: “as the male escort market in the United States does not use intermediaries who could control their prices and earnings of male escorts, how male escorts price their services are understood to be conditional on their personal characteristics and advertised sexual behaviors” (Logan, 2014, p. 109). He formulates these two hypotheses: “[1] in the market for male sex work, we expect clients to prize physical characteristics that mark hegemonic masculinity, such as muscular physiques, body hair, and height. We also expect feminizing features, such as excess weight and thinness, to be penalized [...]. [2] If the market for male sex work mirrors the gay community at large, we expect the analysis will show that black men who advertise themselves as tops and Asian men who advertise as bottoms command higher prices, thus reflecting the value of conforming to ethnic sexual stereotypes” (Logan, 2014, p. 116 and p. 118). Logan used the so-called “Gay Concentration Index” (GCI) in order to understand if the

presence of male-to-male sex workers is higher in cities where the gay community is larger. Apparently, from his analysis, there is no such match: “the evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that male escorts serve a market that includes a substantial number of heterosexually identified men” (Logan, 2014, p. 127). Moreover, his results showed that having a shapely and muscled body was understood as a sign of virility and masculinity, allowing sex workers to ask their clients for higher price. On the contrary, ethnicity did not produce any price outcome for the sex workers. The combination of hair colour, eye colour, ethnicity, and body hair did not produce any better price outcome for the sex workers.

Moreover, Logan (2014) analysed the sex workers’ sexual behaviours. He paralleled hegemonic masculinity with sexual positions, assuming that having an active role, or being “top”, would give a large price premium while being passive, or “bottom”, would receive a substantial penalty. At the same time, he found an intersection between sexual roles and ethnicity: “the results are striking: Black, Hispanic, and white men each receive a substantial premium for being tops, but the largest premium is for black men”. Then we find the Hispanics and white tops men for whom “the penalty for being bottom also varies by ethnicity: white bottoms face a penalty” but the highest price was paid by black bottoms, while “there is no bottom penalty for Asians or Hispanic [...]”. These results are consistent with the intersectionality theory, in which black men who conform to stereotypes of hypermasculinity and sexual dominance are highly sought after, and those who do not conform are severely penalized” (Logan, 2014, p. 133 and p. 135). There is a primary problem with Logan’s analysis: since he did not meet with or interview any sex workers, throughout his research, Logan, equated specific physical traits and even sexual positions of online escorts with fixed types of masculinities. In this way, all the possible nuances or specific traits of the subjects became fixed characteristics. The question then arises whether the sex workers I met also talk in the same way about their physical characteristics and sexual positions.

As I mentioned, my sample differs from the one of Rinaldi also because the majority of the sex workers I met self-identified as gay or bisexual. It is important to analyse not only the behaviour of straight sex workers but also, and mainly, how sex workers who are non-heterosexuals talk about their masculinity. Indeed, as Holter (2005) said, we should challenge the dichotomy masculine versus feminine and homosexual should be at the frontline of this change, subverting “the never-ending association of the homosexual with the effeminate” (Edwards, 2005, p. 2). Indeed, a gay man can be masculine as much as a heterosexual man. This led to the final point of Rinaldi’s (2020) work. He acknowledges that online escorting is more emancipated, organised, and stratified (in terms of race, sexual orientation, identity construction, and sexual practices; but also, in terms of age, appearances, and way to perform it). He employs the concept of “homosexualisation” of sex work that was used, at first, by Johansson (1990) in the “Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality”,

without explaining properly what the words mean or with a research in support of it. Walby (2012), who analysed the behaviour of male-for-male internet escorting, did not analyse masculinity as a prominent argument or highlighted the concept of “homosexualisation” but, indirectly, his work is an important contribution towards this new phenomenon. Even though the research of Rinaldi (2020) contributed to confirm the standard idea about the dichotomy of masculine/feminine in sex work, the Italian sociologist was one of the first to conceptualise what “homosexualisation” is exactly about:

The origin of a gay culture allows for the possibility that men who self-identify as gay begin selling sex to other men that specifically require their services. Indeed, it is interesting to observe that the more stigmatised identities are reinforced, the more normative identities do not get involved in the sexual-economic exchange since they are strengthened by this semantic opposition. If sexual conduct is not grounded on the basis of enacted practices and role, but expressed in an identitarian nucleus on the choice of the object of desire, there will not be “males” who will offer services, but only “those males” who want to stay with men of the same group, or a type of “deviant men”, or marginal identities, that are looking for an easy way to get money. In the ‘70s, the scientific community started challenging the heterosexuality of hustlers and other males in this market, moving forward towards a “homosexualisation” of prostitution with representations and accounts of a reality – with the development of new technologies, chats, and apps – of a plurality of subjects involved, of a professionalisation (with the development of escort agencies and escort websites); these changes blurred the boundaries between pleasure and work occupation, between everyday life and profession, between the different *sexual personae* that engage in these sexual interactions. New scenarios and more contemporary paradigms then emerged. Here, the scientific production sees prostitution not as a pathology or a criminal activity but as “sex work”: sex workers go beyond the stigma associated with their activities, they try to differentiate the personal dimension from the professional dimension, and to claim better and safer living conditions [...]. Contemporary prostitution assumes the characteristics of sex work, with demands of “normalisation” and the formation of new identities or, on the contrary, with the request of a different problematisation of heteronormative representations (Rinaldi, 2020, pp. 71-72, my translation).

While Rinaldi (2020) was one the first to conceptualise this new phenomenon, his research did not demonstrate it. Therefore, I have the opportunity, with my study, to see if men who self-identify as homosexual and who sell sex to other men are able to achieve this “homosexualisation” of male sex work and, if so, under which terms and circumstances. This is all the more plausible since, as I wrote, Connell (2005) identified the presence of multiple gay subcultures; that there are multiple and diverse ways of being gay; that it is where resistance and subversion of the hegemonic form of masculinity can be found. On this, Plummer wrote:



Past thinking on sexual identities has depended on a rather crude binary system, but this is starting to change. At the very least, in the modern Western world, new identities may be starting to appear: the “S&M”, the fetishist (e.g. foot fetishist, underwear fetishist, armpit fetishist), the macho gay, the passive gay, the chubby gay, the “buff gay”, the queer, the vanilla gay, the hypersexual, the man who is not really interested in sex, the sex crazed, the “chicken hawk”, the “bear”, the jock, the good husband, the voyeur, the heavy pornography user, the masturbator, sugar daddies, rent boys, the polyamorous – to name only a few. Start to put adjectives in front – sexy, unsexy, attractive, unattractive, rough, tender, philandering, serial killer, aging, married – and a further world of proliferating sexual identities opens up. Use the word “sexual” to identify the kind of body you have – beautiful, macho, thin, sick, fragile – and whole new embodied sexual identities appear. Put them alongside other categories – man, woman, Asian, Chicano, African American, Japanese – and another world of “hyphenated” sexual identities starts to appear. New dialogues work to splinter and fragment any one unitary model of the male sexuality (Plummer, 2005, p. 18).

Finally, attached to the “homosexualisation” of male sex work, there is the opinion of Kaye (2014) about male sex work: he offered what he defined a “simple way to understand sex work”, stressing that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are gay men who buy sex from other gay men. An opinion that also Rinaldi (2020) agreed with and also inspired his research affirmed that today’s landscape of sexual services among gay men is constituted by “simple” gay men who decide to engage in sex for money, selling sexual services to other “simple” (gay) men. At first glance, a banalisation of this phenomenon, but also a way to understand it properly in a situation where other theories on sex-for-sale are so attached, stigmatising the behaviour of those who engage in this market, both sellers and buyers.

## 2.2 Sex work as work: a job with new respectabilities

After presenting the masculinities embodied by the sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden, I try to understand why, in the first place, they decided to engage in these activities, selling sex and sexual services to other men. To do that, I employ Bernstein (2007) and her work on the so-called “middle-class” engaging in sex work. Indeed, even Connell wrote: “class is rarely mentioned [in policy statements or politicians’ speeches] except in vague appeals to a ‘middle class’ that we are all supposed to belong to” (Connell, 2011, p. 58). According to Bernstein (2007), the development of new technologies and the internet had an impact on sex work not only in terms of how sex is sold but also on who sells sex. She referred to sex work as a profession with “new respectability” and she highlighted the strong presence of middle-class professionals. Less clear in Bernstein’s discourse is the direction of this connection: is it the presence of the middle class that has made sex work a more

respectable profession or is it the change of sex work as a more respectable profession that has brought people of the middle class to engage with this kind of job?

What were the underlying connections between the new “respectability” of sexual commerce and the new classes of individuals who were participating in commercial sexual transactions? What was the relationship between the overwhelmingly white, native-born and class-privileged women (and men) who were finding their way into sex work and more generalized patterns of economic restructuring? How did the emergence of new communications technologies transform the meaning and experience of sexual commerce for sex workers and their customers? (Bernstein, 2007, p. 474).

Where does this new respectability come from? Apparently, internet is the answer. Internet and new technologies in general (such as “dating apps”) have changed the ways sex workers do their job and advertise themselves. Paradoxically, the shift from street walking to online sex work has been facilitated also by laws that criminalize sellers and/or buyers. This “spatial switching” (Hubbard et al., 2008) did not only produce a change in the place where sex work is performed but also a change in the characters who do this job. Bernstein (2007) asks herself why white women (and by extension even white men) coming from the middle class and with educational credentials decided to engage in sex work instead of doing other conventional types of jobs. In order to understand the phenomenon, Bernstein quotes Florida (2004) who uses the notion of “creative class” to explain the formation of most technologically-advanced urban economies in late 20<sup>th</sup>-early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. According to Bernstein (2007) the majority of her interviewees explained their presence in this market through “an ethic of fun”. In defining this category, she started from Bourdieu’s (1984) definition of the “new petite bourgeoisie”:

Despite the huge expansion of jobs in postindustrial dot-com economies, patterns of gendered inequality within the high technology sector meant that even white, college-educated women were likely to be excluded from the highest-paying positions [...]. Given the gendered disparities of postindustrial economic life, the relatively high pay of the sex industry (compared to other service sector jobs) provides a compelling reason for some women from middle-class backgrounds to engage in sexual labour (Bernstein, 2007, p. 475).

According to Bourdieu (1984) “the new petite bourgeoisie” is composed of individuals who fell into one of these two trajectories: “those who have not obtained from the educational system the qualifications that would have enabled them to claim the established positions their original social position promised them [...], [and] those who have not obtained from their qualifications all they felt entitled to” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 357). Today, the situation is even more complex than the one depicted more than thirty years ago. First of all, people use education to move from

the working class to the middle class. Second, in many Western countries, education is available at a low cost, so it should not sound strange if more educated people engage in sex work. So, according to Bourdieu (1984), it is a fault inside the educational system, in terms of qualifications provided, that creates a class of people that does not match the employment market requests. In this regard, for Bernstein (2007), women and men engage in sex for money to claim their space in society. Of course, it is possible to agree with her view only if we understand sex work as a legitimate form of work, a profession chosen among the many available in the market economy.

Sanders and colleagues (2016) focused their attention on other job characteristics of the sex workers they met in the United Kingdom. They conducted a survey of about 240 sex workers finding that “many respondents had also worked in other sex markets before doing independent escorting: 35% had engaged in webcamming; 30% had worked for an escorting agency; 24% in brothels, parlours or saunas; and 8% of respondents had worked in the street-sex market prior to independent escorting. This points to independent escorting as part of a longer trajectory within the sex industry, with sex workers moving between, and overlapping, different sex markets over time” (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 6). The same variability emerged in Walby’s (2012) qualitative study, where out of thirty respondents, two began in the sex trade via street-level prostitution, a few worked in escort agencies and massage parlours, two others worked in the porn industry before starting independent escorting, and all the others started directly with online sex work. Indeed, Minichiello and colleagues (2013) stressed that today the largest cohort of male sex workers are represented by those who work online. The same is true for women: Cunningham and Kendall (2011) estimated that 93% of independent female sex workers are located online. Finally, a large amount of research stressed that men who sex sell online differ substantially from those working on the street in terms of better education, older age, more likely to identify as homosexual, lower rates of drug use, and higher rates of HIV/STDs testing (Bimbi, 2007; Leary MCouns & Minichiello, 2007; Logan, 2010; Minichiello et al., 2013; Parsons et al., 2004).

In addition, Sanders and colleagues (2016) studied other aspects of the “working conditions” of UK sex workers, such as the level of control of their working activities as a key element in determining the quality of the job in terms of both physical and psychological well-being. They also discussed the job satisfaction of UK-based online sex workers in terms of remuneration and flexibility of work hours. Job satisfaction has been used in broader feminist debates around sex work. Sanders and Hardy (2015) measured job satisfaction among women in the strip industry, revealing that levels of job satisfaction were high amongst the survey sample of internet-based sex workers. Therefore, the three British authors reiterated the same questions in their online survey where “respondents typically selected positive or neutral words. Out of the top seven characteristics chosen to describe

their work, six of the characteristics were positive: 91% of sex workers described their work as 'flexible' and 66% described it as 'fun'; over half of the respondents (56%) found their job 'rewarding', 'skilful', 'sociable' and 'empowering'" (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 7). Moreover, the authors gave respondents the possibility to comment further about their working conditions: "the most common responses were 1) financial rewards; 2) flexible working hours; 3) the choice and freedom they have in their decision around when, where, and how to sell sex" (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 7). Indeed, "overall responses indicate that respondents revealed a great deal of choice in their decision making" (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 7), and that "these results indicate that for this sample of independent escorts there was a high level of control and autonomy over their working patterns and daily decision in their sex work" (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 8). This positive feedback from online female sex workers in the UK is corroborated also by the answers of my sample made up of online male sex workers in Italy and Sweden.

It is worth noting, though, that the female sex workers' positive comments about their activities are given even in a context where bad situations occur quite often, what Sanders and colleagues (2016) called the "experience of crimes" toward sex workers. According to Campbell (2014), sex workers fear a wide range of hate crimes motivated by "whorephobic", homophobic, and racist attitudes as well as other crimes (robbery, violence, and rape). Recent studies regarding indoor sex markets highlighted that this market is safer compared to on-street sex work (Kinnel, 2008; Sanders & Campbell, 2007). Even though Boff (2012) and O'Doherty (2011) claim that indoor sex workers are increasingly experiencing violence, especially migrant sex workers who have been defined as the most vulnerable group of sex workers (Brown & Sanders, 2016). In their quantitative study, Sanders and colleagues (2016) found that "about half of respondents had been victims of crime during the course of their sex work. Most commonly this manifests in the form of threatening or harassing texts, calls and emails and verbal abuse" (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 9). Other crimes experienced by sex workers are the removal of condoms, robbery, stalking, physical assault, fraud, attempted robbery, rape, sexual assault and attempted sexual assault, attempted physical assault, threats with knife, physical assault with weapon, and threats with guns (Sanders et al., 2016).

Turning our attention from the experiences to the characteristics of the encounters sex workers have with their clients, we find interesting and opposing theories. On the one hand, we have Sanders (2005) with "emotion management strategies", and on the other, Bernstein (2007) with "bounded authenticity" (the latter having also been used by Walby (2012) under the definition of "touching encounters"). Sanders (2005) employed the so-called "script theory" of Simon and Gagnon (1986) who present the so-called interactionist sociology. In their first book, *Sexual Conduct* published in 1974, they defined identity not as something fixed but as something precarious that must be constantly achieved. For the American sociologists, the

focus became the body and its gestures (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). The actors in any sexual meeting share conventions about how sexual conduct should be carried out, conventions that come from the culture of the actors themselves. Both actors must accept the script to produce arousal. If the script is rejected, also the interaction fails. Instead of considering sex and sexual conduct as governed by biological behaviours, they considered this a social process that is learned (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). So, it is the interaction, in our case between sex worker and client, that produces arousal. Over time, this “sexual script theory” has been adjusted and three types of scripts have been defined. These are: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts. The first type of script, as the name suggests, come from the culture. The interpersonal script is still based on the culture and is the translation of the cultural script in the interaction between two or more people who engage in the sexual conduct. The third, intrapsychic script, is the inner story or dialogue of each participant based on his/her memories, plans, desires, and fantasies (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

This theory has been successfully applied, for example, in Mutchler’s (2000) study on young gay men who have sex with men. Moreover, according to Sanders (2008), sex workers use a fixed script: “the script is a set of shared conventions based on mutual dependency and sets out the boundaries and roles that determine control, power, initiation, pleasure. [...] Sex workers who are in control of their work and surroundings often plan and ‘act out’ the sexual script to work in their favour to gain maximum profit and control” (Sanders, 2008, pp. 401-402). At the same time, Sanders (2005) analysed the relationship between women who engage in indoor sex work (such as saunas, brothels, escort agencies, and women who work from home) and their male clients. According to her sample, sex workers tend to develop “emotion management strategies” when having sex with their clients in order to separate sex as an “economic unit” of their job, from the sex they have in private romantic relationships. O’Neill (2001) described that sex workers tend to separate the body from the self in order to gain more control in the relationship with clients. This strategy includes “bodily exclusion zones”, areas where the sex workers do not want to engage in direct contact with clients. The most prominent example are kisses. Indeed, some sex workers consider the act of kissing a very intimate thing and they try to avoid it during the encounters with their clients: “these parts of the body and specific sex acts are considered too intimate to be sold, or reserved for the worker’s own sexual pleasure” (Sanders, 2005, p. 326). Another study highlighted that sex workers use a condom “as a psychological barrier”, of course the condom is, first of all, an instrument to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and, in the case of women sex workers, pregnancy, but sex workers develop also psychological meanings around the condom (Twigg, 2000). In this regard, Sanders wrote that female sex workers found “comfort in the fact that the condom prevented the flesh of the client touching their own body, particularly internally” (Sanders, 2002, p. 563).

Beyond kissing and condoms, according to Sanders (2005), there is also a third tool that sex workers use when engaging with clients, that is the preference for domination services. This happens for three reasons: “firstly, there is a simple economic calculation here, because domination services are a specialist market, and so reap higher remuneration than ordinary sexual services. Secondly, there is a direct reduction of body contact and penetration is rarely involved [...]. Domination requires less of the female body compared to intercourse and often implements (such as whips, chains and lather) are used, which increase the physical and psychological distance between the worker’s body and that of the client [...]. Finally, the fantasy of domination rests on the client’s subordination to the female” (Sanders, 2005, p. 327). Moreover, despite these three concrete examples, Sanders engaged in studying the behaviour of sex workers towards their clients. According to the British criminologist, the female sex workers she met create a “manufactured identity”, which takes the form of “a pseudonym, a fictitious life story, a family background and a childhood history” (Sanders, 2005, p. 328). Of course, women do not want to reveal their real identity because they are concerned that clients can stalk them or meet them in “real life”. This “manufactured identity is implemented as a strategy to protect individuals further from the negative repercussions of working in a clandestine and illegal activity”, moreover “manufactured identity is constructed as a business strategy” (Sanders, 2005, p. 329). Interaction with clients is an act that prevents the client from knowing the personal identity and the private character of the sex workers. The key point for Sanders is to highlight that sex workers want to clearly and strongly separate their private life from their working activities. This is a way to both protect themselves and survive in this stigmatised job. This constructed identity becomes a business strategy: “emotional labour is a central aspect of the women’s relationship with the client and involves them in manipulating, suppressing and falsifying their own feelings in life in order to do the intimate work” (O’Neill, 2001, p. 89).

In contrast to this theory, it is possible to find what Bernstein (2007) called “bounded authenticity”, a theory that was later developed by Walby (2012) under the name of “touching encounters”. According to Bernstein (2007), the relationship between sex workers and their clients is not always fiction or part of the job but it can lead to a form of authenticity where personal emotions are disclosed, and pleasure is achieved:

Ironically, it is precisely amongst the middle-class women and men, who are the most strident purveyors of the normalising term “sex work” that sexual labour is most likely to implicate one’s “private” erotic and emotional life. Those who have fought hardest for the social and political recognition of prostitution as “work” [...] are also those for whom the paid sexual encounter is likely to include emotionally engaged conversation as well as a diversity of sexual activities [...]. [This] requires a larger investment of time with each client [...] and is more likely to take place within the

confines of one's own home [...]. Since middle-class sex workers generally charge per hour rather than for specified acts, their sexual labour is diffuse and expansive, rather than delimited and expedient (Bernstein, 2007, p. 482).

So, for the American author it is particularly middle-class sex workers, both women and men (even though she studied only women), with high educational credentials, in post-industrial urban spaces of the West, that are more likely to engage in real emotions and pleasure with their clients compared to women and men who work on the streets and do not use internet. Of course, we should not forget that "yet the attachment of a monetary fee to the transaction constitutes a crucial element in the erotic exchange [...]. As with other forms of service work (therapy, massage), successful commercial transactions are ones in which the market basis of the exchange provides an important emotional boundary for both worker and client, but one which can be temporarily subordinated to the client's desire for authentic interpersonal connection" (Bernstein, 2007, p. 483). Achieving real emotions and sexual pleasure with clients does not mean that a monetary compensation is avoided: this is first and foremost a relationship based on the exchange of money. In any case, Bernstein concludes saying that:

Evidence of middle-class sex workers' efforts to manufacture authenticity resided in their descriptions of trying to simulate – or even produce – genuine desire, pleasure and erotic interest for their clients [...] it could also involve the emotional and physical labour of manufacturing *authentic* (if fleeting) libidinal and emotional ties with clients, endowing them with a sense of desirability, esteem or even love (Bernstein, 2007, p. 484, emphasis in the original).

It is important to also add the view of Walby (2012), since the Canadian sociologist studied exclusively male sex workers. According to him, the sexual script theory has several limits because interactions between people, any type of interaction, including the one between sex workers and clients, can produce different outcomes. He tried to link sexual script theory with Bernstein's concept of "bounded authenticity". In his research, he demonstrates that the relationship between male-to-male sex workers and their clients cannot be fully predictable in advance and, moreover, that sex workers do not engage in forms of "manufactured identity". Even if they separate their private life and "private sex" from the work and the sex they do with clients, male-to-male internet sex workers are not scared or afraid of sharing their emotions and achieving pleasure with their clients (Walby, 2012). The key point is that "touching bodies" produce unpredictable results, because when a sex worker touches the body of the client and, at the same time, has his body touched by the client, what happens after cannot be settled in advance, or predetermined by a script or a set of scripts (Walby, 2012).

As Walby (2012) highlighted, sex work is a job performed with the body, the bodies of the sex workers. Thus, it is interesting to discuss Wolkowitz (2006) and her theory

about “bodywork”. According to the British author, there is a lack of attention among sociologists regarding workers’ health and safety. Wolkowitz (2006) has a postmodernist approach to the body, stressing the individual agency of the workers to use their own bodies for work. In her chapter, dedicated to the “prostitute body”, she defined sex work as “the most embodied form of work” and she highlights the relationship between “the body and the self” of the people who engage in these activities. Moreover, Wolkowitz (2006) acknowledges that all the feminists’ debates on sex work are on female prostitutes, and it is about time to extend these debates to include also men. In his 2012 study, Walby took on the task of incorporating Wolkowitz’s definition of bodywork in his sample of male escorts because “when scholars have studied working bodies, they have assumed that these bodies are heterosexual male bodies, so they have neglected queer bodies and women’s bodies at work. Male-for-male internet escorting represents a form of body work that requires body reflexive practices generated out of concern for and touching of other men’s bodies” (Walby, 2012, p. 142).

Indeed, for Walby (2012), it is through touching that every contact between sex workers and their clients are a form of bodywork. For this reason, sex workers also need to work on their own bodies. Walby (2012) operationalises bodywork in different categories of “touching”, such as: waxing and shaving, gym training, douche, erection, management of body fluids, clients’ smell, body muscles, penis size, disgusting things, Viagra, different types of gay bodies, and ugliness of clients and their bodies. Finally, the body and its use during the encounter leads us to discuss the primary “obsession” of the literature on male sex workers in the late 1980s and 1990s which investigated the use of condoms and the spread of HIV/AIDS (Bimbi, 2007). It is not a surprise that even Walby (2012) studied the use of condoms among the online male sex workers he met: “it is difficult to shift into a discussion of HIV/AIDS because of the trauma it has exacted in so many people’s lives, especially those of men who have sex with men. [...] The term ‘body trouble’ suggests how bodies can be problematised by public health agencies, the law, our sexual partners, and other regulatory agents” (Walby, 2012, p. 157). Walby invented the term “body trouble” to stress the “obsession” around this topic of the previous literature, together with the problematisation that continues even today among public health agencies and other regulatory bodies, legislators, and sexual partners. For this reason, I always asked the sex workers I met if they are using condoms or not during their encounters with clients. Since, on average, my sample is constituted by young men who did not directly face the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the ’80s and ’90s, it is interesting to understand if and how they contract the use of a condom with their clients, and if they are or not afraid of HIV and STDs in general due to the advance of medicine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. About this, Walby wrote “sex, however, is biographical. Men who did not live through the 1980s, who did not see their friends dying, may not experience the same visceral defensive response”



(Walby, 2012, p. 160). Young generations are taught to use condoms both to prevent unwanted pregnancies and to avoid STD transmission; for gay men, only the latter is applicable. It is interesting to note how Walby concluded this part of his research: “despite public health literature’s claims about barebacking, male-for-male internet escorts do not seek transcendence through unsafe sex, partly because they want to continue with their work and partly because they are all well educated about HIV/AIDS” (Walby, 2012, p. 161).

## 2.3 The complex workings of power: sex workers and their clients

Another line of reasoning in the literature of sex work comes from radical feminists and their understanding of the power relationship between sex workers and their clients. It is important to stress that feminism is not a singular word, but it is plural since there are more views on sex work than the main idea that sees sex workers as victims of their clients. According to Pateman (1988) the prostitution contract is a slave contract where the patriarchal power of men is exercised over women. In a capitalist society, men’s demand leads to women’s bodies being sold as a commodity. Pateman’s work (1988) is very important because she is one of the first scholars to consider that patriarchal rights do not belong to fathers but to all men and for this reason, it is masculinity as such and not “only” patriarchy that should be challenged. Her data is from a different period than mine, and she has studied women who sell sex, not men. However, her overall arguments have been used consistently, and are still used in debates about prostitution in Sweden (e.g., Ekman, 2013), which is the reason I find it relevant to discuss them here.

It is difficult for me not to agree with Pateman in her discourses about patriarchy and masculinity and the effects that the exercise of these “rights” provoke in women, but I struggle to agree with her when she deals with prostitution. Pateman (1988) shares with many radical feminists the idea that prostitution is a type of violence against women that cannot be tolerated (see, for example, Dodsworth, 2015; Jeffreys, 1997; 2009; MacKinnon, 1993). She claims that women cannot freely choose to enter the prostitution contract because they do not share the same position with men (who propose the agreement). Women are by definition in an inferior position and obliged to accept the disadvantaged terms offered by this contract: “women can be used sexually by men in addition to being used as a labour force, and, through sexual use, the slave labour force can be reproduced” (Pateman, 1988, p. 65). In the chapter titled “What’s wrong with prostitution?”, Pateman unravels the problem with sex for money. I do agree that sex work is an integral part of capitalism and that the internet, together with other factors, has contributed to

making this activity more widespread; also, different from other authors, she not only acknowledges the presence of male sex workers but also considers that they share the same situation as female sex workers: “male homosexual prostitutes, on the other hand, are not uncommon, and, from the standpoint of contract, they are no different from female prostitutes” (Pateman, 1988, p. 192). This juxtaposition is possible because in both cases the one who exercises power (or more simply, who demands this service) is a man. But in her criticism of prostitution, she affirms that: “the final defeat of status and the victory of contract should lead to the elimination of marriage in favour of the economical arrangement of universal prostitution, in which all individuals enter into brief contract of sexual use when required” (Pateman, 1988, p. 193). Most of these discourses have been heard in Sweden, when the law that criminalised the clients of sex workers was proposed to Parliament and then approved; the Swedish legislation is, of course, gender neutral even though it has mainly targeted men buying sex from women.

As I noted, feminism is not singular but plural, because not all feminists have the same opinion on sex work. Recently, pro-sex work feminists started engaging and producing an important piece of work on sex for money (in Chapter 1 I described both Zelizer, 2005 and Scoular, 2004). These authors allowed the public to hear the voices of the sex workers themselves, without filtering them, and a new constellation of meanings of the relationship between sex workers and clients appeared. But Pateman continues to affirm that: “there is no desire or satisfaction on the part of the prostitute. Prostitution is not mutual, pleasurable exchange of the use of bodies, but the unilateral use of woman’s body by a man in exchange for money” (Pateman, 1988, p. 198).

If we go beyond the American author, it is possible to find other discussions about the relationship between sex workers and their clients that tend to confirm her view regarding the presence of power but overturns the person who is in charge of it. Indeed, both Rinaldi (2020) and Rebucini (2014), who studied male-to-male sex work in public places, far away from the internet, stressed that power is a fundamental part of the sex worker-client relationship. The sex workers they met – Rinaldi (2020) in the south of Italy and Rebucini (2014) in Morocco – want to exercise power over their clients, because sex workers use sex work as a way to compensate for the weaknesses they have in their everyday life. The sex workers they met were very different from those I met in Italy and Sweden as in both Rinaldi (2020) and Rebucini (2014) sex workers came from precarious living conditions: they were poor, without education, and with a lot of anger. Sex work became the place where they could overturn the imbalances they face in everyday life, transform deprivation into a will for revenge, and their clients, according to their stories, always surrender to the power they exercise over them.

The last section of the present dissertation will shift the attention from sex workers to their clients. If male sex workers have not been prominent in sex work literature, even less attention has been devoted to their clients: “[Modern research and discussion] largely ignored clients, who remain a mysterious and elusive population” (Scott et al., 2014, p. 152). Only recently, and thanks to the so-called “new sociologies of sex work” (Hardy et al., 2010), clients have seized the attention of researchers. As we know, buying sex is a stigmatised activity and for this reason clients are even more stigmatised than the workers, in particular, male clients of male sex workers face even more stigmatisation due to the homosexual activity involved (Scott et al., 2014). Moreover, in Sweden clients are criminalised and increasingly stigmatised due to legislation but also for other political reasons (Kulick, 2005; Kulick & Rydström, 2015; Rydström, 2019).

But as Scott and colleagues claim, “in recent years, however, changing conceptions of sexuality have resulted in some normalization of the clients of MSWs” (Scott et al., 2014, p. 152). The first point that needs clarification is that “MSWs operate in diverse work environments and are not an homogenous group nor are the clients who use their services” (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 511). Moreover, “the literature indicates that there is wide diversity in terms of client demands and desires, yet clients do share something in common: all pay to step outside the complex web of rules, meanings, obligations and conventions which govern non-commercial sex” (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 511). Like most other research on men who buy sex from men, my assumptions on this population are based on what sex workers told me about their clients. Indeed, even the first ever study on clients of male sex workers relied exclusively on the voice of sex workers: in 1999, Minichiello and colleagues studied the clients of male sex workers in three different Australian cities. In the conclusions, they acknowledge that “without the perspective of the client, this data remains partial” (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 517), but they were the first to give a general idea about the basic characteristics of this population, in terms of age, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, country of birth, and drug use. It is important to highlight that this research, and other studies that followed, portrayed male clients negatively, probably because the data on sex workers were filtered by rather negative views conveyed by the sex workers (Scott et al., 2014).

Sanders (2008) also provided some basic knowledge on male clients of female sex workers. So, what do we know about them? Honestly, not much. We know something about their age: according to Sanders (2008) they are on average 45 years old with a range of 22-70 years, while Minichiello and colleagues (1999) stressed that 31.7% of clients are in their 40s and 28.7% in their 30s. Regarding other characteristics: “the clients of male and female sex workers have been found to be married, widowed, single and divorced, bisexual, heterosexual and homosexual men from predominately the upper middle class” (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 511). In her research, Sanders found that “eighteen participants [out of fifty] were married and

a further seven were in a long term relationship” (Sanders, 2008, p. 403). Specifically, in terms of class, 61.9% of male clients of male sex workers are from the so-called “middle class” (Minichiello et al., 1999) while Sanders describes the clients she met in this way: “only seven men did not have any formal qualifications: 34 had a higher education degree. Occupations were predominantly professional including a lawyer, a pilot, and several men involved in teaching or academia, engineering, banking, media, sales and IT” (Sanders, 2008, p. 403). Finally, according to Minichiello and colleagues, male sex workers “reported that in 61.2% of the cases they had some information about the clients [...]. Client’s occupation was the most commonly known information (48.4%), followed by client’s home number (26.8%), and client’s home address (26.0%)” (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 515).

The last question I posed to every sex worker I interviewed was: ‘Why do your clients pay for sex?’. Indeed, with the proliferation of apps such as “Grindr” and the liberation of sex among gay men, I thought it was interesting that the phenomenon of paying for sex is wide and flourishing in our society, especially in Sweden where clients are even criminalised. In her book, Serughetti (2019) affirms that in general it is mostly the “culture of consumption” that drives and explains why men are buying sex from women. Clients are neither oppressors nor victims but ordinary men; labelled even as “ordinary men” (Colombo, 1999) to highlight that all men are potentially clients of prostitutes. Previous research, such as O’Connell Davidson (1998) pointed out that men pay for sex in order to exercise complete control over the sexual encounter or, even, with another person, preferably a woman. While Plumridge and colleagues (1997) found that for some men there are also non-sexual explanations such as the need for company, friendship, and emotions.

Serughetti (2019), on the other hand, while trying to summarise all the previous interpretations about this phenomenon, identified three possible terms: need, control, and pleasure. The first term recalls the basic interpretation of prostitution as a physiological need of men to have sex with women or with female prostitutes. Feminism has widely discussed this view of sex for sale as part of men’s desire to satisfy their sexual impulse and, today, this term appears too basic to understand in full sex work. Even the second term, control, recalls the traditional view of masculinity as the subordination of women to men. But, at the same time, within this it is also possible to observe the opposite phenomena: the powerlessness of men. The sense of impotence is then solved through the temporary control of a prostitute, in this way men fulfil their revenge, or they are compensated for the lack of control over women in their everyday life (Serughetti, 2019). The last term, pleasure, links the notion of sexualities with commercial transactions and it recalls theories already discussed above (such as Zelizer, 2005; Sanders, 2008; and Bernstein, 2007) (Serughetti, 2019).

At the same time, Scott and colleagues (2014) reviewed the literature of clients' motivation, emphasising three main points: seeking power, seeking intimacy, and seeking motivation. In the first, power is read as domination, but it can be valid either way: the domination imposed on the sex workers or the domination of the sex worker. The second point highlights the fact that sex with a sex worker can provide both seller and buyer with pleasure and a sharing of emotions. In the third, clients look for something they cannot have with their existing relationship and fulfil their unmet sexual interests (Scott et al., 2014). Finally, Sanders (2008) identifies five key features of the traditional sexual script that men, as regular clients, adopt with their "special" sex workers: 1) the role of communication; 2) courtship rituals; 3) sexual familiarity; 4) the desire for mutual "satisfaction"; and 5) sex as the "extra": emotions, friendship, and "connection". First of all, it is important to point out that the British criminologist focuses only on "regular clients", i.e. clients who frequently come back to the same sex worker. Once again, she employs the "script theory" of Simon and Gagnon (1986) to show that regular male clients of female sex workers share a common set of characteristics.

With "the role of communication", Sanders (2008) explains that the exchange of mobile numbers is frequent and, more importantly, a mutual disclosure of thoughts, ideas, and conversation are the typical frames, and that clients and sex workers do not engage in "small talk". Moreover, the boundaries of commercial sex are pushed away, and emotions are allowed together with the possibility of both sides being vulnerable. Even though some clients are able to confine their emotions to the commercial context, other men are not able to do that, and they engage in a genuine relationship with sex workers. The second point, for Sanders (2008) is called "courtship rituals" where regular clients are less inclined to a temporal relationship without emotions but oriented toward in-depth and more holistic relations. At the same time, sex workers act as sexual initiator: "the commercial sexual interaction is not necessarily a sexual conquest (something that normative heterosexual men may pursue) but can instead be an emotional conquest that produces the desired connections for the client" (Sanders, 2008, p. 406). In Sanders' view, the presence of young people among clients is not linked with the need of a sexual conquest, but with the need of being initiated to sex and, in my case, sex between men. The third characteristic highlighted by Sanders (2008) is called "sexual familiarity". Here, familiarity and comfortable interactions between sex workers and clients occurred, which gave both parties sexual and emotional security, and in this way built a trusting and steady relationship.

The fourth script is called "desire for mutual satisfaction". This characteristic of the relationship between sex workers and clients attempts to provide an answer to the following question: is it possible to have mutual sexual and non-sexual pleasure or is the focus only on the pleasure of the clients? According to previous research, sex workers do not receive pleasure from clients (Weinberg et al., 1999), but "the

literature documents a strong discourse amongst male clients regarding their desire to ‘give’ sex workers pleasure” (Sanders, 2008, p. 408). Moreover, “the desire for mutuality is intrinsically functional in men’s individual sexual stories and tied closely to issues of self-esteem, sexual performance, and body image” (Sanders, 2008, p. 408). The point is that the goal for these regular clients is to achieve mutual sexual pleasure with the sex workers and, in this way, their relationship becomes much closer to “conventional relationship” rather than “commercial sex relationship” (Duncombe & Marsden, 1996).

The last script is called “sex as the ‘extra’: emotions, friendship, and ‘connections’”. Sanders (2008) repeats that, with regard to regular clients, sex work is a “listening occupation” where trust and intimacy play a key role. Analysing the interviews she conducted with male clients of female sex workers, Sanders (2008) underlines how clients compared the relationship they have with sex workers with a “regular relationship” in terms of friendship, sometimes even saying that this resembles the emotional support of a spouse or a close friend: “whilst sexual pleasure experienced by clients of sex workers is usually not mutual, relationships of trust, friendship and other normative relations may be genuine and mutual, reflecting strong features of non-commercial relationships” (Sanders, 2008, p. 410).

It is surely clear how this long list of theories and authors very often intertwine. After all, the object of the analysis does not change. The focus is always on male sex work, male sex workers, and male clients of male sex workers. But, as I explained in the previous chapter and will repeat throughout this manuscript, this research cannot be extended to all the people who engage in the activity of selling sex and sexual services in any part of the world.

The next chapter presents the methodology used in this research, beginning with a discussion of the qualitative methodology and the use of the semi-structured interview technique. I then progress to the definition I use to include male sex workers in the project, and describe how I got in touch with them and the process of interviewing people who sell sex. In addition, I present my sample and the 45 men who I interviewed between Italy and Sweden. I also focus on Atlas.ti, a qualitative software created upon grounded theory that supported the analysis of the collected material. In the second part of the chapter, the ethical considerations and role of the researcher while studying sensitive fields, such as sex work and male sex work in particular, are addressed.



# Chapter 3

## How to study male sex work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

This chapter presents the methodological part of my research and is divided into two parts. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss qualitative methodology and the use of the semi-structured interview technique, followed by the definition I use to include male sex workers in my project. I then describe how I got in touch with them and explain the process of interviewing people who sell sex. The fifth section of the chapter presents the sample of this study, the 45 men I met in Italy and Sweden, while the sixth section discusses Atlas.ti, a qualitative software that helped me analyse the material collected. The second part of the chapter is devoted to ethical considerations and the role of the researcher and their positionality while carrying out research in a sensitive field. Here, I discuss what it means to be a “queer researcher” (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2019). In addition, I also present the shortcomings and problems that arose from selection of the sample to the interviewing processes and from analysis of the material to the results of this study.

### 3.1 Qualitative methods and semi-structured interview technique

The subjects of this research are male sex workers in two countries: Italy and Sweden. Specifically, my aim is to study who is selling sex in these two European countries, how they sell sex, and what types of relationships they establish with their clients. This subject is under-researched in both sociology and gender studies, and I see my research as explorative. For these reasons, the research design has been inspired by “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006; Urquhart, 2013), an approach that allows investigation of social phenomena without setting up a hypothesis beforehand, underscoring, at the same time, the relevance and need of empirical analysis. In this theoretical frame, this study is based on sex workers and their stories collected in Italy and Sweden, more than on pre-constituted theories and hypotheses. As Charmaz (2006) pointed out, the main challenge of grounded



theory to positivist knowledge production is to depart from the collected material and to build theory from the material, not the other way around. Thus, my sampling allowed me to build an analytical framework as I navigated the socio-political context in both Italy and Sweden in order to build my study. In analysing the interviews, I used Atlas.ti software, which has been developed from grounded theory (Urquhart, 2013).

The empirical material presented in the next three chapters (Chapters 4-6) is the result of a specific qualitative approach that I chose for this study. Namely, I conducted 45 semi-structured interviews. After analysing previous studies of (female) sex work and male sex work, and after some interviews with key informants, I prepared a set of 50 questions. Later in this chapter I will comment on both key informants and the list of queries I made; here, I wish to discuss the use of this particular type of interview.

Is it possible with a set of questions, prepared in advance, to discuss in detail topics such as sex and sexuality? How can a man who sells sex discuss his behaviour when questions are tailored for multiple and different subjects? Compared to other qualitative instruments, the semi-structured interview method can be described as particularly “open” to new and different insights. Indeed, both interviewer and interviewee are free to explore new and different patterns of behaviour and analysis, especially those that were not contemplated at the beginning. For example, in contrast to the “structured interview” technique, even though the set of questions has been prepared, the interviewer can always adapt and adjust the conversation based on what the interviewee is saying. A digression of the interviewee is not seen as a problem, but as a resource. The sex workers I met were always able to talk about other issues, and I was always able to come back to my questions if the content of the discussion strayed excessively from the purpose of the interview. Moreover, it is important to highlight that in-depth interviews require particular abilities in the interviewer, especially human skills that are not easy to learn and which can even be impossible to acquire without a specific competence or quality (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979).

Throughout the data collection phase I managed to create connections with the people I met that allowed them to share their experiences with me. As Cicourel (1964) wrote, the factors that can lead to a successful interview are very similar to those that frame our daily interactions in society and everyday life, thus if a social scientist has enough competence, the interview process should lead to positive outcomes. At the same time, listening and talking are not easy tasks. Listening, especially, is a peculiar action, full of different meanings for the interviewee. The psychological position of the researcher, together with gestures and facial expressivity – not only with the words spoken – can change the direction and outcome of the whole interview. For example, the interviewer should never interrupt the interviewee and

should always let the other person finish a discourse before posing another question since interruptions can be perceived as a sign of poor attention for the interviewee, as if they are saying something wrong or uninteresting. I have noted that some sex workers expressed a true desire to discuss their activities with me; when I spotted this behaviour, I adjusted my “setting” and engaged in a deeper and more profound discussion with them.

I found no hostility in the sex workers I met, and it is worth noting that they almost always answered my questions. It was extremely rare for them to resist replying to some queries. At the same time, even though I was new in the field, they considered me particularly informed about sex-for-sale among men. Sometimes, they asked me questions, especially when they did not know the answers to some of my queries. An example of this is when I asked them about the legislation of the countries where they used to work or where they are currently working. They asked me which websites were the most used among male sex workers and their clients and they also asked me about prices, services, and other issues. My policy was particularly strict: I never answered questions about where to advertise services and how much to charge clients. The Swedish legislation about involvement of a third party in the relation between sex worker and client is extremely difficult to interpret and it is easy to be considered a facilitator, which would be a breach of the law. For this reason, I avoided replying to some of their questions. On the other hand, I always answered other queries, for example when some sex workers were interested in me as a gay person, as a researcher, and as a gay researcher (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2019), something that I will discuss later in this chapter.

### 3.2 Being part of the project. A definition of male sex worker

For the study, I used a broad definition of sex work. To be included in my sample, the (1) male sex workers must (2) sell sex or other types of sexual services to (3) other men, (4) in the past and/or in the present, (5) in Italy or Sweden. First, they must identify themselves as “men”. I did not challenge or discuss their biological sex or their gender identity. Every person who defines as “man” has been included. Second, they must sell sex (penetrative or not) or any type of sexual services. Once again, an open definition: they can sell “sex” ranging from oral and anal sex to other types of sexual interactions where genitals are involved, as well as other types of sexual services such as “boyfriend experience” (or BFE) where sex can occur but it is not always present, or services where they do not meet clients in real life, for example “cam-sex” or selling used underwear, pictures, and hot videos. Third, sex workers’ clients must also identify as men. Therefore, I excluded male sex workers

who sell sex and sexual services only to women, but I left the possibility open that the sex workers I interviewed could sell sex to both women and men. Fourth, I was open to interviewing both men who sold sex in the past and men who are selling sex in the timeframe of the interview. This choice was motivated by two reasons: on the one hand, with a broader temporal frame, more people could be included in the sample; on the other, I thought it would be interesting to have “old” sex workers and their view about this market since they can offer a broader picture about it, also being able to compare past and present characteristics. Fifth, and finally, they must sell sex and sexual services either in Italy or Sweden, the two European countries I am studying. This means that apart from interviewing “stationary” Italian and Swedish sex workers, I also had the chance of meeting sex workers who were in Italy or Sweden just for a short period of time, often for a few days only. These “international” sex workers have been a kind of surprise since previous literature on male sex work has not discussed these international workers. In total, I interviewed 62 men and women, of whom 12 were key informants (including five women). Of the remaining 50 interviews, I excluded five men because, at the end, they did not fit my definition (for example, one sex worker never sold sex in Italy or Sweden, even though he said he did during our email exchange; or another man, in Italy, who presented himself as a sex worker but ended up being only a client).

### 3.3 Getting in touch with male sex workers

Before engaging with the sex workers, I met some key informants. One of the reasons was to get in contact, via these key informants, with male sex workers. Indeed, as Dewey and Zheng argue, the “politically charged environment makes it difficult for researchers to access the sex industry and gather data [...]. I recommend that [...] [the researcher] should use a third party to introduce them into the sex industry [...]. Accessing the sex industry can be difficult due to research participants’ suspicions regarding a researchers’ political agenda that, in turn, stems from broader issues related to anti-sex work laws, policies, and cultural stigma [...]. A third party is usually needed to introduce the researcher into the sex industry, either on the street or indoors. This third party can be a person, an institution, or an organization” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, pp. 46-47). Unfortunately, some of the key informants did not meet many male sex workers, which made it difficult for them to suggest methods of contact. Moreover, some key informants who regularly met male sex workers announced they were not ready to share with me a way to contact them or to ask them to contact me for interviewing. In the end, thanks to a Swedish sex work researcher, I was put in direct contact with two male sex workers in Sweden. I thought that the so-called “snowball sample technique” was the best way to find people to interview. Unfortunately, I found that most of the male sex workers

were not in contact with each other, even when they worked in the same city. Sometimes they talked via chats on the website where they advertise themselves, but they were not interested in real meetings or in becoming friends. So, all the interviews, without exception, in both Italy and Sweden, are the result of one-to-one direct contact between me and each sex worker. The problem was that I had to create my own way to contact, meet, and interview, male sex workers in Sweden (first) and then Italy.

I started by creating my own website ([sites.unimi.it/malesexworkers](http://sites.unimi.it/malesexworkers); still online). Visitors to the website can find brief information about me and my project as well as my contact details (email addresses) and a simple contact form. Not much came from this website, but it served more as a way to verify my identity and the fact that this project was real. Secondly, I went to one of the main international websites containing ads on selling and buying. Here, there was a section about “escort services”, and then “male-to-male”. I paid for advertisements exclusively in two cities “Stockholm” and “Milan”. I attached a presentation of my research, some pictures of me (to show that I am a real person), the link to my website, and a “call for participants”. I received some feedback, although not as many as I hoped for. At the same time, I went to two major worldwide escort websites – for privacy reasons I am not going to name these websites. There, I opened a free account as “client” (the other alternative being as “escort”), where I presented myself and my research, I showed some pictures of me (always the same pictures), and asked for participants. Then, I wrote a message (only in English in Sweden and Italian or English in Italy) to every sex worker online in the area of Stockholm and Milan. Like Walby (2012), I always wrote the same kind of message, presenting myself and my project, with a “call for participation” at the end. These messages and these two websites have been the primary avenue to contact and then meeting male sex workers.

Among the three websites I used, there was a clear difference between Stockholm and Milan. Indeed, the advertisements on the first website, and the number of profiles on the second and third website, diverged consistently between the two cities. While there were always rather few ads and escort profiles in Sweden, in Milan the numbers always exceed the hundreds. For this reason, I can say that I sent a message to every sex worker profile in Stockholm, while in Milan, I sent a message only to several hundreds of profiles – basically to those sex workers who were online when I was sending messages. My response rate has been particularly high, especially in Sweden, while Walby (2012) received less than 10% of positive replies. Pruitt (2008) considered it unlikely that sex workers would respond to messages coming from a self-identified sociologist and suggested hiding, at the beginning, the researcher’s identity in order to receive more positive feedbacks. I did not approach my research in this way. I always made clear my role as a sociologist, even though I paid for ads (as sex workers do) and my profiles were formatted as client profiles.

The challenges of accessing the field and getting in contact with the male sex workers made it impossible to make a selection of the interviewees in advance. I interviewed every male sex worker that was available to meet me in Milan and Stockholm, without selecting them according to their age, social and economic backgrounds, educational credentials, sexual orientation, time in the market, and so on. In the end, the group of people I met and interviewed was extremely diverse and embraced different and multiple characteristics; this is not a research with a homogenous group of participants. Of course, some biases are present. For instance, I could not meet sex workers who were Swedish-only speakers since I do not speak Swedish. However, Sweden is a country where English is extremely widespread among the population, so it probably did not affect my sample. Another bias comes from the fact that only those sex workers who wanted to be interviewed replied to my emails. I do not know if the sex workers who did not reply to my emails are different from those who were willing to meet me.

In order to make the process of finding sex workers to interview easier, I offered interviewees 500 Swedish Crowns (SEK) (equivalent to 50 Euros) in Sweden, and 30 Euros in Italy. The difference was motivated as follows. First, I paid directly with my scholarship funds for all remuneration and did not receive any extra money from either of my two universities. I had to lower the fee in Italy after having interviewed almost 25 sex workers in Sweden. Second, since there were many more escorts in Milan than in Stockholm, I thought that lowering the fee would not affect the numbers of sex workers available for an interview. I was not wrong. Another bias emerged: what about those sex workers who found remuneration for the interview too low? Indeed, sometimes, as experienced by Walby (2012), I received replies to my messages with sex workers saying that they would meet me only if I would pay their standard price – in the range 1,000-1,500 SEK or 100-150 Euros. To these sex workers, I always replied with the truth: that I am a student, without any funding for this research, and that 500 SEK or 30 Euros was what I was able to offer. I convinced some, but not all. In any case, I never changed my remuneration level. At the same time, other sex workers replied saying that they were able to meet me for an hour. I always told them that I cannot guarantee an interview shorter than 1 hour and 30 minutes. Again, I convinced some, but not all. I cannot know if the sex workers who asked for a higher remuneration level are significantly different from those who met me without discussing the level of the remuneration. But I can clearly say that this study lacks a category of sex workers called “luxury escort”.

The fact that I paid my informants was discussed at my mid-term seminar at Lund University, and the general consensus among the participants of this seminar was that it need not be ethically or methodologically problematic to remunerate your informants. Indeed, one colleague pointed out that when research projects were better funded it was customary to pay the informants for their time. The question of paying informants for their time – to commodify the relation between researcher

and research participant – is discussed by Ruedin (2016) and Thompson (1996), who claim that while paying informants may pose problems regarding the free choice to participate or even influence what they say, it is not necessarily ethically wrong to pay people for their time.

### 3.4 The process of interviewing male sex workers

The present study was conducted in accordance with the ethical legislation in both Italy and Sweden, and has received ethical clearance from the Regional Board of Ethical Vetting in Lund, Sweden (Appl. No. 2016/109). At the beginning of the interview process, I always presented myself and my project. I highlighted the confidentiality about our encounter, because due to the criminalized nature of sex work it is very important to guarantee both anonymity and privacy: “confidentiality refers to the protection of the anonymity of research subjects during research and during public dissemination of research results [...]. Precautionary measures can include [...] using pseudonyms for individuals’ names and places, utilizing large sample sizes, and transferring data to a secure email account. It is also critical to not use videotapes or cameras on research subjects or research sites that may compromise subjects’ identities” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 26). In accordance with the decision of the Regional Board of Ethical Vetting in Sweden, I also asked the Swedish participants to sign a form guaranteeing their consent. One of the key requirements for this clearance was the “informed consent”, described by Dewey and Zheng in the following way: “prior to the research, researchers must explain to the participants the purpose, process, and methods of the study, the use of the data, the potential costs and benefits the study has on the participants, the protection of confidentiality not to do any harm, the protection of participants’ rights to voluntarily participate in the study and withdraw at any time” (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, p. 29). The research project and the terms of the interview were clearly presented to all the people I interviewed in Sweden both verbally and on paper, while in Italy they were presented verbally only. It is interesting to note that three times in Milan sex workers asked me for a document or something to prove my identity, the purpose of my research, and even the respect of their privacy with the material I collected during the interviews. It is worth mentioning that I followed the same ethical procedure in both Italy and Sweden, even though it was only formally required in the latter.

Returning to the matter of the interview, before the form was signed I informed sex workers that the interview would be recorded and, subsequently, transcribed into text. No one ever expressed opposition.

The first question I always asked was: “Can you tell me a name you want to use during the interview?” Indeed, I never accepted real names and did not want to use the name they usually utilized when meeting clients. Subsequently, I also renamed all the interviewees according to their country of origin in order to guarantee the maximum level of privacy. Finally, not having an office in Stockholm, I carried out the majority of interviews in Sweden in public places, usually in a café on *Vasagatan*, a street near Stockholm Central Station, or other times hosted at the sex workers’ places. In Italy, almost all the interviews were carried out in my university office in the centre of Milan. Although the level on intimacy was greater in my office in Milan than in a café in Sweden, I do not think that these different locations had any impact on the interviews.

The interviews were particularly long. The standard length was around 1 hour and 45 minutes, with the shortest around 1 hour and 30 minutes, and the longest more than 2 hours and 15 minutes. This is due to multiple reasons, the main three are: I am a long-winded person and I have a strong sense of empathy. These two personal characteristics combined made interviews both long and deep. Interviews were more than just posing questions and listening to answers. In addition, the sex workers I met did not talk about their activities with other people. The great majority put sex work at the margin of their life. Thus, the interview became something more than answering my questions. For many of them, this was the first time they could reflect on what they are doing without the fear of being rejected or judged by someone. In this way, the interview became “therapeutic” for many of them. I will discuss and deepen the analysis of the interaction later in the chapter.

### 3.5 The sample

The final sample of this study is made up of 45 male sex workers: 16 from the “Swedish group”, 20 from the “Italian group”, and nine from the “international group”. All the interviews in Italy were carried out in a single city, Milan, while the interviews in Sweden were conducted in different parts of the country with the majority in Stockholm. For reasons connected to privacy, I do not declare where those interviews took place since Sweden is not as populated as Italy, and to disclose the name of small towns can put sex workers who work there in danger. The nine interviews with “international” sex workers are divided as follows: six in Sweden and three in Milan.

As for the characteristics of the interviewees (for a more detailed picture of the sex workers I met, see Table 3.1), at the time of the interview, the youngest sex worker was 20 and the oldest 57, with the median 30 years old and the mean is above 32 years old, meaning that the sample is largely constituted of younger sex workers;

the average is close to 30 in Sweden, and close to 35 in Italy. The presence in the market is extremely diverse: one sex worker was interviewed in his first and only month of activity, while the sex worker with the longest experience selling sex reported 29 years; the median is 3 years and the mean is a bit above at 6 years; in Sweden the mean is 5 years, while in Italy it is 8 years. These data show that older sex workers have spent more years in the market compared to younger sex workers.

Regarding their self-declared sexual orientation, in contrast to previous studies on male sex workers (Rinaldi 2020), a larger part of my sample was made up of men who defined themselves as gay (24) and bisexual (10), while only five of them declared they were straight. Six of the sex workers adopted other definitions such as “fluid”, “bisexual/gay”, “gay/straight”, or “I do like everything”. Among the 24 gays, there was one sex worker who declared to be in transition from female to male (FTM). I discuss the implication of the sexual orientation of my sample in Chapter 4. Another important aspect of the men I interviewed is that they were largely “out” (23); only a minority were still hidden (12), five preferred not to answer and the remaining five self-identified as straight.

When I asked about their education, in terms of the highest level achieved, the relative majority of the sex workers (17) had a high-school diploma, followed by those who had a master’s degree (14), and those who had an undergraduate degree (7). Six reported a low level of education (middle school or lower) and one held a PhD. All in all, as will be analysed in Chapter 5, the male sex workers I interviewed had a comparably high level of education.

Before I began interviewing sex workers, I met 12 key informants. Specifically, I interviewed nine key informants in Sweden, two in Norway, and one in Finland. The three interviewees outside Sweden were activists with the local national associations working for sex workers’ rights: PION (*Sexarbeidernes Interesseorganisasjon*) in Oslo and *Pro-Tukipiste* in Helsinki. The interviewees in Sweden (four in Stockholm and two in Malmö) were three activists with RFSL (Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights), one activist and two social workers with RFSL *Ungdom* (for people between 15 and 25 years old), one sexologist with RFSU (Swedish Association for Sexuality Education), one social worker at *Mikamottagningen* (now called KST – *Kompetenscentrum Sexuella Tjänster* or Competence Centre for Sexual Services), as well as one counsellor at a Stockholm centre for sexually transmitted diseases that provides services to LGBT people. These preliminary interviews were necessary for two main reasons. First, since it was both my first experience in Sweden and since I had not researched sex work before, I needed to talk with people who, for various reasons, meet male sex workers in their daily activities in order to have a discussion on this topic and, also, to verify if the international literature on male sex workers found consistency in the Swedish environment as well. Second,



since I did not know where to find male sex workers to interview, I thought that talking to these key informants would also be a way to get in contact with people to interview, but as I have mentioned, this was far from being true. However, the key informants were extremely useful (see Bacio, 2021a for a detailed analysis), and they all gave me important information about the situation regarding male sex work in Sweden and its neighbouring countries, especially with regard to the particular legislation that those countries are adopting. I did not replicate this in Italy, where I interviewed sex workers directly. I chose this approach since I am, myself, Italian and have knowledge about the environment in my own country. Moreover, after interviewing 25 sex workers in Sweden, I was confident enough to directly meet a similar number of male sex workers in Milan.

Table 3.1 – The sample

ID	Name	Country of the interview	Group	Age (at the time of the interview)	Years of activity as a sex worker	Years of activity (in months)	Racialized status	Nationality (by passport)	Sexual orientation	Education	Price (in Euros)	Sexual position	Condom use (for anal sex) and HIV status
1	ALESSANDRO	Italy	Italian	34	5	60	White	Italy	Straight	High School	200	Top	Yes
2	ANTONIO	Italy	Italian	51	3	36	White	Italy	I used to be Straight, now I am Gay but now I would like to find a woman	Middle School	60	Versatile, mostly Top	Yes
3	DAVIDE	Italy	Italian	57	19	228	White	Italy	Gay	Master	100	Top	Yes
4	EDOARDO	Italy	Italian	23	1 1/2	18	White	Italy	Bisexual	Undergraduate	100	Top	It depends
5	EMANUELE	Italy	Italian	28	3 weeks	1	White	Italy	Gay	Master	55	Versatile, mostly bottom	Yes
6	ERNESTO	Italy	Italian	25	5 months	5	White	Italy	Gay	High School	100	Versatile, mostly top	It depends, on PrEP
7	FAHIR	Italy	Italian	34	2	24	Arab	Egypt	Gay	Middle School	40	Top	It depends
8	FRANCESCO	Italy	Italian	28	3	36	White	Italy	Bisexual, more gay	Undergraduate	85	Top	Yes
9	LEONARDO	Italy	Italian	24	6	72	White	Italy	Gay	High School	90	Top	Yes
10	LORENZO	Italy	Italian	35	15	180	White	Italy	Gay, attracted by women	Master	50	Top	Yes
11	MATTEO	Italy	Italian	30	1	12	White	Italy	Gay	High School	375	Top, rarely bottom	Yes
12	MATTIA	Italy	Italian	43	3	36	White	Italy	Gay	High School	95	Versatile	Yes, almost
13	MISHA	Italy	Italian	35	17	204	White	Russia	Gay	High School	50	Top	It depends

14	NIKOLAS	Italy	Italian	38	11	132	White	Greece	Straight	Master	85	Top	Yes
15	OTTAVIANO	Italy	Italian	49	5	60	White	Italy	Bisexual	High School	55	Top	Yes
16	RAMIRO	Italy	Italian	30	6, with breaks	72	South-East Asia	Philippines	Gay	Master	80	Bottom	Yes
17	SAMUELE	Italy	Italian	35	16	192	White	Italy	Bisexual	Master	90	Top, rarely bottom	Yes, almost
18	SIMONE	Italy	Italian	42	17	204	White	Italy	Straight	High School	50	Top	No anal sex
19	THIAGO	Italy	Italian	34	5	60	Latino	Brazil	Gay	High School	100	Versatile	Yes
20	TIMOTHEE	Italy	Italian	46	20	240	White	France	Gay	Master	175	Top	Yes
21	BENGT	Sweden	Sweden	22	6 months	6	White	Sweden	Gay	High School	250	Bottom	No
22	BO	Sweden	Sweden	48	29, with breaks, stopped	348	White	Sweden	Straight	PhD	70	Versatile, mostly bottom	It depends (HIV+)
23	FARUH	Denmark	Sweden	26	6	72	South Asia	India	Bisexual	Undergraduate	120	Versatile, mostly bottom	Yes
24	GERARD	Sweden, Skype	Sweden	21	8 months	8	White	France	Gay, fluid though	Undergraduate	100	Bottom	Yes
25	GUNNAR	Sweden	Sweden	25	4, stopped	48	White	Sweden	Bisexual	High School	125	Versatile	Yes
26	HENRYK	Sweden	Sweden	31	6	72	White	Poland	Bisexual	Master	200	Versatile	Yes
27	JAN	Sweden	Sweden	52	5	60	White	Sweden	Gay	Master	50	Bottom	Yes, almost
28	JIN	Sweden	Sweden	34	8 months	8	Chinese	China	Gay	Master	70	N/A	Yes
29	LEV	Sweden	Sweden	20	2	24	White	Sweden, born in Russia	Bisexual	High School	150	Top	Yes
30	LUKASZ	Sweden, Skype	Sweden	25	1	12	White	Poland	Bisexual, Pansexual, Trans* FTM	Master	125	Versatile	Yes
31	MATS	Sweden	Sweden	56	24, with breaks	288	White	Sweden	Gay	Master	50	N/A	Yes

32	MITAR	Sweden	Sweden	27	6 months	6	White	Serbia	Gay	High School	250	Versatile, mostly top	Yes
33	ONOFRIO	Sweden	Sweden	24	2	24	White	Italy	Gay	Undergraduate	70	Top	Yes, almost
34	PETER	Sweden	Sweden	25	11	132	White	Italy and Sweden	Bisexual	High School	150	Versatile	Yes
35	SERKAN	Sweden	Sweden	33	2	24	Arab	Turkey	Gay	Middle School	50	Versatile, mostly top	Yes
36	SVEN	Sweden	Sweden	25	4	48	White	United States and Sweden	Gay	High School	200	Top	Yes
37	DUYGU	Sweden	Sweden	25	3	36	Arab	Turkey and Brazil	Bisexual	Undergraduate	175	Top	No, on PREP
38	ESAD	Italy	Italy	30	7	84	White	Serbia	Gay	Master	150	Top	Yes, almost
39	GUILLERMO	Sweden	Sweden	28	1 1/2	18	Latino	Mexico	Gay	High School	175	Versatile	Yes, almost (HIV+)
40	GUNTHER	Italy	Italy	22	2	24	White	Germany	Straight	Middle School	300	Top	Yes
41	JACOPO	Italy	Italy	38	13	156	White	Italy, British family	I do like everything	Middle School	60	Versatile, mostly top	Yes, almost
42	MARTIN	Sweden	Sweden	27	3	36	White	Sweden	Straight, Bi-curious, I like being Gay	Middle School	400	Versatile	Yes, almost
43	MIGUEL	Sweden	Sweden	25	2	24	Latino	Mexico	Fluid, mainly prefer guys	Undergraduate	200	Versatile	Yes
44	NOAH	Sweden	Sweden	29	1 1/2	18	White	United States	Bisexual	High School plus two year associate degree (US)	200	Top	Yes
45	PHILBERT	Sweden	Sweden	29	6 months, stopped	6	South Asia	France, Sri Lankan family	Gay	Master	110	Bottom, changing through Versatile	Yes (HIV+)

### 3.6 Data analysis and the role of Atlas.ti

After having described the phase of collecting the empirical materials, I turn the attention to how the data have been organised and analysed. As I wrote at the beginning of Chapter 1 and also in this chapter, this research started as a response to the lack of previous research in the field and, also, without following specific theories. My approach recalls the “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006; Urquhart, 2013) because it is inductive and allows me to build theories starting from the words of the sex workers I met.

Having a sample of 45 interviews means there was a lot of empirical material to analyse, thus I needed to employ a computer tool. The software I used to analyse the transcriptions, Atlas.ti, is a qualitative data analysis software (or QDAS) that has been developed specifically from the methodological principles of grounded theory. Starting from the 1980s, different QDAS were developed to extend paper-based techniques for coding, retrieving, and analysing data “beyond the feasible manual limits” (Richards & Richards, 1987, p. 29) and to improve qualitative analysis and interpretation by supporting forms of analyses that “would be impossible to carry out manually” (Richards & Richards, 1991, p. 319). Moreover, the link between the software and grounded theory is made evident from the way the software works and, also, from the name of the different phases of the procedure.

The transcriptions of the interviews are uploaded into the software and they became the “primary documents” of the research. Then, reading through the transcription, I transformed what I considered the important sentences in “quotations” and labelled them into “codes”. These codes became the smallest unit of analysis of my research; the process of coding is at the heart of these QDAS. Atlas.ti has been constructed to allow development of a theoretical model based on the words (but even images and sounds) of the people interviewed. In Atlas.ti, after creating “quotations” of data and assigning a “code”, all quotations with the same code can be retrieved by running a report, or viewed in context by using the “code manager”. In my case, the length of the interviews produced long transcriptions and, together with the high number of interviews carried out, I was overwhelmed by information and codes. For this reason, what is presented in the next three empirical chapters represents most, but not all, of what emerged from my encounters. The richness of the material allowed me to undertake an in-depth analysis, which required a long time to complete.

The great amount of data needed both a thorough analysis and a way to handle all the information, without losing important insights. Of course, the researcher and their capacity to understand phenomenon and interpret the reality is still the most important aspect, but this particular qualitative software made the process more rigorous and reliable. At the same time, it is important to analyse the critical and

reflexive awareness of how the software influences qualitative research practices. For this reason, I applied the work of Woods and colleagues (2016) regarding the use of QDAS in qualitative research analysis: a total of 763 empirical studies using QDAS were published in peer-reviewed journals between 1994 and 2013, while in 2012, there was a 50% increase in the numbers of articles published over the previous year, almost all of them (95.3%) reported using QDAS to support qualitative studies (Woods et al., 2016). Their analysis found that the programs were being used by researchers in a wide range of geographic and disciplinary areas and were primarily being used to analyse textual data from interviews, focus groups, documents, field notes, and open-ended survey responses: “researchers are using QDAS to engage in analytical practices extending beyond the limits of manual/paper-based techniques, most notably to support coding and retrieval of data, differentiate coded data by participant characteristics, and investigate conceptual relationships. We also found some evidence that researchers are using QDAS to make their analytical processes more transparent, primarily by using program outputs to illustrate their coding processes and research outputs” (Woods et al., 2016, p. 610). It is important to highlight that Atlas.ti outputs do not speak for themselves, but always need interpretations from the researcher. At the same time, putting extracts from different interviews, one after the other, does not mean giving an interpretation or explaining a phenomenon. The researcher always needs to understand the mechanism, the meaning, and the relevance of the sentences in the context studied (Poggio, 2004). It is possible to say that Atlas.ti has been a valid instrument for my research.

### 3.7 Ethical considerations and the role of the researcher

As mentioned previously, the entire project was conducted in accordance with existing ethical laws and regulations in both Italy and Sweden and obtained ethical clearance from the Regional Board of Ethical Vetting in Lund (Appl. No. 2016/109). But this does not liberate me from every researcher’s responsibility to make a personal ethical assessment. Could my research in any way be harmful to the research participants? The fact that I paid them for their time has already been touched upon, and the risk that their free choice to participate in the project may be compromised by the economical remuneration is worth consideration. However, the fact that I paid them far below what they would have earned had they spent their time with a client would seem to minimise that risk. Nevertheless, there are other considerations to make when contemplating the relation between researcher and informant. The researchers’ emotions in an encounter with the informants have been discussed thoroughly by Davies (2010), who argues that the emotions involved in fieldwork must be taken into account and analysed.

After the entire interview process was completed, I took time for a reflexive gaze at the interaction between me, as a researcher, and the sex workers. Here, I describe some ethical considerations and my role and position as a researcher conducting a study on a sensitive field such as sex work. In explaining my argument, I employ a recent work of mine where some considerations are presented on what I called “the queer researcher” (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2019).

“What happens when a researcher or a teacher with specific identity characteristics carries out qualitative research within sensitive fields (such as male sex work) or confronts his research objects/subject with sensitive issues? Further, what role do their identity and research topics play in a more general public environment such as the classroom or academic community?” (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2019, p. 29). Indeed, the researcher, “male” implicitly, has always been presented as a figure able to carry out rigorous research playing the role of an inexpressive and emotionless character. The emotions of the researcher were, and most often still are, labelled as something completely unimportant, when not harmful, in the scientific research process. It is also important to add some reference to feminist standpoint theory too (Haraway, 1988). “Moving beyond these representations is not simply a matter of questioning an ideological representation which has become the standard (that of the rigorous (straight) male teacher or researcher) but also in understanding how distant and detached writing and questions of objectivity are found in the social structure of academic writing, research, and teaching” (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2019, p. 29). For example, Walby (2012) highlighted that the encounters he had with the male sex workers he interviewed between the United States and Canada in many ways paralleled the encounters sex workers have with their clients. Thus, this means that the researcher runs the risk of being treated as a client by the sex workers, leading towards the sexualisation of the researcher (Grenz, 2005). Grenz, a female sociologist who studied male clients of female sex workers, wrote extensively about how she was sexualised by the men she interviewed. At the same time, the queer researcher can experience similar behaviour from men who sell sex to other men. But this leads to a different point: while Grenz’s (2005) research experience was negatively affected by the behaviour of the clients she met, the emotional encounters I had with the research participants instead led to positive emotions.

Another consideration is that any kind of sexualisation is linked with gender and power:

This emphasis on reflexivity in social research enables an understanding of how meanings are the result of the interpretative negotiation that occurs between researchers and participating subjects as embodied subjects. Both are knowledge producers whose interactions (both in the field and in textual strategies) are filtered and constructed on the basis of gender, sexuality, nationality, race and ethnicity, social class, age, and physical ability. These complex, polyphonic, multilayered positions call into question and render problematic impartial observation (who is

observing whom? Are they both observing, or is one observing the other?). However, they also present opportunities – even in ethical terms – because they allow the researcher to avoid the risk of objectifying their subjects (often a “desired” risk in quantitative analysis), thereby deconstructing the researcher’s authority and balancing (as much as is possible) power differentials between researcher and participant (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2019, p. 31).

What matters is the interaction between the interviewer and each individual interviewee. To claim neutrality and a constant deconstruction of the interaction between researcher and sex workers, with the aim of obtaining impersonal results, appears completely surpassed by the interactions themselves and by what arose during the encounter. Already Plummer (1995) highlighted that “the notion of gay identity only becomes a possibility once there has been a breakdown in traditional notions of the self. In the past, the possibility to choose to possess a gay identity simply did not exist” (Plummer, 1995, p. 93). Then, Plummer suggested “coming out”: “making explicit the emotional connections between the teacher and the students and between the researcher and the subject of the research, in other words ‘coming out’ can lead to positive and unexpected teaching and research outcomes because objectivity takes many different forms, not only the one that is expected” (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2019, p. 40).

How does my being a gay person influence my research? Do I need to tell them? Can sex workers recognize me as gay? What are the implications for the research? It is important to remember that the majority of people I interviewed self-identified as gay or bisexual and just a tiny minority declared they were straight. There is a widespread belief that gay men and lesbians can recognize each other, something called “gaydar” or “gay radar” (for a discussion about this topic, see Miller, 2018). I am a proud gay person for sure, and I do not hide my identity, neither in public, in my private life nor at my workplace, but I did not introduce myself as a gay person to the people I interviewed. In any case, during the interviews in both Italy and Sweden, the strong majority of interviewees identified me as a gay person, especially those who are gay themselves. Some asked me during the interview if I was gay, which I confirmed. Many more sex workers used phrases such as “you know what I mean!” instead of explicitly discussing some issues. This is a sign of being recognized as a gay person who, as such, knows what it means to be gay, what gay people do in sex, and so on. When this happened, I always asked them to specify their sentences and I never accepted “you know what I mean!” as an answer. Interestingly, the fact we were both gay (at least, not heterosexuals), became a sign of closeness, a clear advantage during the long and sometimes tedious process of the interview. Indeed, often the interviewees and I laughed and made jokes about what they do, how they do it, and about their clients as well. In short, we were able to discuss things in a different and, in my opinion, better way. The reader should remember that doing sex work is a highly stigmatised activity, and it can become



difficult to discuss this and sex and sexuality with a “stranger”, who is also a “researcher”. Some sex workers would need to challenge themselves to be able to discuss all these issues. The fact that I am gay and that I did not hide my sexuality to the people I interviewed has made this whole research project more interesting for me.

There is still one point left to analyse and it is about the power of the researcher over the informant. I will not deny the power that a researcher holds in an interview situation, being the one who sets the conditions for the interview, analyses the material, and publishes the results. But all in all, the men I met for my project were not entirely powerless, neither in relation to their clients nor in relation to me as a researcher. I previously quoted Walby (2012) who discussed the ways sex workers can exercise power over the researcher through sexualisation of the interviewer’s body, but I wish to develop the discussion of this point a little further. Instead of analysing only my own behaviour, I want to indulge in what I consider an ontological problem in sex work research: the belief that people who sell sex must always be at the margin of our society, in precarious conditions (not only from an economic perspective), and above all obliged to engage in sexual economic transactions. It is impossible for me to discuss power relations between researcher and those who are the objects of the research if the starting point is the victimisation of the sex workers. Clearly, they are not victims only because they are sex workers; selling sex is not a quality *per se* that can make a person a victim. The fact that someone sells sex does not automatically make them vulnerable. Of course, there are both women and men who sell sex because they are forced to, or out of material need, but with a few exceptions that was not the situation for the men I met.

There are many articles addressing the problem of doing research on vulnerable populations (e.g., Melrose, 2002; Shaver, 2005), but my sample did not include child prostitutes in the streets, as Melrose’s (2002) did, and, for that reason, I did not face the same kind of issues she faced. The British author highlighted how painful it was to carry out her research, she described the process as stressful, and her feelings were full of anger and despair. This is both understandable and not surprising at all. But, coming back to my point, and as I wrote previously, the interviews I had were not stressful and were not characterised by negative feelings: we laughed, we connected, and we shared emotions and complicity. The male sex workers I met did not consider themselves victims, they had made an active decision to sell sex to other men (sometimes to women too) and this decision alone cannot be used to define them as vulnerable people.

I tried to be as open as possible to all the men I met. Although, as pointed out by Walby (2012) and shared in both our studies, there is a relative lack (not completely though) of “bad stories”, ranging from child abuse and sexual exploitation to poverty and lack of livelihoods. There might be a bias in my research sample that

can explain this but, if this happened, it was only by chance since I never tried to hide a “bad story”, not with my questions during the interviews and not when analysing the collected material. As I wrote, all the interviewees were men who have chosen sex work. They were never obliged to sell sex, and they did not have a pimp, an agency, or anyone else to report to. The primary difference from other studies, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is mostly because I did not meet street-based sex workers who, in theory, are more exposed to difficult situations.

### 3.8 Final remarks

Some final points I wish to mention before presenting the three empirical chapters. First, what can be done with this research? Dewey and Zheng wrote that:

I believe that the dissemination of my research data can potentially help inform and generate public policies and services to improve sex workers’ health, ameliorate sex workers’ rights issues, and challenge discriminating stereotypes and myths about sex work. Although my research results can positively affect sex workers’ lives, my research process in the sex industry was not able to improve the women’s economic livelihood or change their lives. During my fieldwork, I was constantly worried about obtaining more from the participants than they did from my research. The solution, as I came to find out, was to ensure a mutual reciprocity (Dewey & Zheng, 2013, pp. 51-52).

I do share the same hope. I do not know if the people I interviewed can gain anything positive from my research. Most probably not. But for sure, I can say I received a lot of positive feedback from them. I am grateful for the time we spent together, and I hope the reader will feel this in the next chapters.

Second, I am not going to present the sex workers’ stories according to the three groups I divided them into. From the early analysis, it was clear that the sex workers had much in common, no matter in which country the interview took place or if the sex workers were more “international” than others. This does not mean they are all the same. Nothing could be further from the truth. But presenting their stories according to the groups they belong to has no sense. Indeed, the first version of Chapter 5 (the first empirical chapter I wrote) was divided into three sections (as it is today), and each section was sub-divided according to the three groups. This preliminary version was extremely long and redundant because the actions and words of the sex workers were almost identical. Then, approaching what today are Chapters 4 and 6, it was clear that a division by groups was not the best way to present my results since the similarities were much more important than the differences. In any case, the three groups do not disappear here, and the group to which they belong will always be declared when I present each sex worker, and in

the following I will highlight differences and commonalities while presenting my results.

Third, and finally, did sex workers always tell me the truth? Obviously not. I do not know when or how often but rationalisations and outright lies are always behind the corner. This research is not about the truth, but rather it is about its representation in the words of the sex workers I interviewed in Italy and Sweden. Methodologically speaking, the interpretation of my research participants' answers is at the core of my analysis. I state that here because if I do not always challenge their words, it does not mean that I always trust they told me the truth. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that my sample is not necessarily representative of all men who sell sex to other men anywhere and under any circumstances. It is probably representative for men who sell sex to other men, online, in the urban landscape of the Western world, when exploitation and trafficking are not part of the picture. This does not mean, of course, that there are not exploited or trafficked men for the purpose of selling sex online, also in the large cities of the Western world. It is just that I did not meet any of them and this research is not about them.

This chapter concludes the first part of my dissertation (research questions, theoretical foundation, and the methodological discussion) while the next chapter starts the second part, containing the three empirical chapters (Chapters 4-6), one for each research question.

# Chapter 4

## Doing masculinities, doing sex work

In this first empirical chapter, I engage with the concept of masculinity. I try to understand which forms of masculinities the sex workers I met embody. The focus of my study is on their activities and their relations with clients, indulging what they say and how they explain and justify their presence inside the market of sex for sale. As discussed in the previous chapters, much research literature about non-heterosexuals stresses the importance of the dichotomy between masculine and feminine subjects. Thus I investigate the behaviour of heterosexual and homosexual sex workers in order to understand their masculinities and the presence of the dichotomy that has condemned gay people to be divided between “top” and “bottom”, therefore between “true” men and “weak” characters.

The reader knows from the previous chapters that one of the main differences between my research and previous studies on men who sell sex to other men, such as Morse and colleagues (1999), Rebucini (2014), Rinaldi (2020), and Tabet (2004), is the high presence in my sample of men who define themselves as gay (and bisexual). Indeed, these previous studies highlighted the fact that most, if not all the interviewees defined themselves as straight. Instead, out of 45 men in my sample, 23 defined themselves as gay; 10 as bisexual; seven used different definitions (such as “fluid”, “I like everything”, or “FTM”); while only five men defined themselves as straight. After the analysis of the material, I have divided this chapter into three additional sections: an analysis of the behaviour and masculinity of men who define themselves as straight; the behaviour of self-identified gay (and bisexual) men who stress the importance of being active, or “top”, in their activities; and the behaviour of self-identified gay men who do not stress the importance of being active or “top” in their activities. Finally, in order to better contextualize the presence and the cleavage between the dichotomy of top and bottom, in the next section I offer a brief overview of the services that sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden offer to their clients. Indeed, sexual services are one of the key parts of the encounter itself and the following section will be a useful tool to interpret also the other empirical chapters.

We know that street sex workers and those who sell sex in public places need to behave in a specific way. For them it is important to stress their hegemonic

masculinity against the subordinate masculinity of their clients (Rinaldi, 2020). However, sex workers who recruit their clients online – as in my sample – can behave in a more nuanced way since they are not exposed to other people’s views, but only to their clients’. Moreover, men who identify as straight tend to be only active (or “top”) with their clients, even though some of them tend to engage more with clients’ bodies (like with kisses, touching, masturbation, etc.). As stressed by Connell (2005), it is impossible to avoid discussing the body when discussing masculinity: the body is “inescapable” and not fixed. Is it possible to be a man without being masculine? Indeed, according to Holter (2005), we should challenge the dichotomy masculine versus feminine.

In the third section, as outlined above, I move the attention from straight to gay and bisexual sex workers. As mentioned, the majority of my sample is constituted by sex workers who define themselves as gay, but within this wide category there are different ways to express masculinity. In this section, I focus on those sex workers who stress masculinity (and in doing so reject any form of femininity). The old dichotomy between top and bottom, masculine and feminine, man and woman tend to be important in their relations with clients. There seems to be a division between sex workers who are only active, and never passive – at least, never with their clients; and those who tend to vary their sexual position more freely. The latter will be the subject of the fourth section. We know that the previous literature has stressed “the never-ending association of the homosexual with the effeminate” (Edwards, 2005, p. 2). At the same time, Edwards (2005) stressed that gay men can be as masculine as heterosexual men are.

In the fourth and last section, then, I analyse the behaviour of those sex workers who are both active and passive with their clients. This final part is going to challenge previous literature about both gay men and male sex workers; not only re-affirming the importance of the so-called “homosexualisation” of male sex work (Johansson, 1990), but even finding consistency and evidence from the sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden.

## 4.1 Roles of domination: if one is top, the other must be bottom

The aim of this section is twofold: on the one hand, as I wrote in the introduction and as the title suggests, I highlight the importance for gay men in general – and not only for sex workers and their clients in particular – to distinguish between tops and bottoms. On the other hand, this section offers a brief overview of the types of services that are sold to clients, another extremely under-researched aspect of sex for money. Indeed, I did not find any research or publications devoted to the services that are sold to clients by sex workers, although there have been some contributions in this area. An exception is Kulick (1998), who dedicates a long discussion to the services offered by Brazilian transgendered sex workers, but his study concerns an entirely different context compared to mine and I found it difficult to relate the Brazilian sex workers' experiences to the ones I encountered among my research participants. I also discussed this issue with other "sex work researchers" and they all confirmed that there are no studies on the actual services offered by sex workers. I thus decided to refer to the literature of sex among gay men in general due to the absence of specific literature on services among sex workers and their clients.

According to Barbagli and Colombo (2001), the behaviour of gay men differs from that of lesbian women, in that homosexual males generally display an attitude towards specialized sexual roles, the most common being active and passive roles. In some gay subcultures these behaviours may also be stigmatised, like the public display of effeminacy of some gay men. Lock and Kleis (1998), in contrast, highlight that a younger generation of gay men are more likely to suffer shame and embarrassment in displaying their sexual attitude as bottom. They called this phenomenon "gender stress". More specifically, Underwood wrote: "the power scenario involves the complex interplay of dominance and submission where the opposing roles are emphasized, even magnified. Fucking and getting fucked traditionally symbolize opposite poles of the power spectrum: getting fucked is considered the ultimate act of submission while fucking someone is viewed as taking control and dominating them" (Underwood, 2003, p. 9).

I have identified twenty-five different types of services, namely (from the most cited to the least): kissing, massage, oral (also known as blowjob or BJ), anal, feet (and other odours services), pissing, scat, fisting, domination/submission, overnight (stay), sugar-daddy, boyfriend experience (also known as BFE), bondage, couple and couple swapping, orgy, role play, "blood", rimming, swallowing and cum-shot, (selling) underwear, blasphemy, "Jesus stuff", choking, kicking, and sex with animals. Due to limitations regarding the length of this text, I cannot discuss all these services and will only refer to some of them to highlight the importance of the dichotomy of the sexual position.

Another way to characterise these services, instead of using the categories top and bottom, is differentiating between “vanilla” (or standard services) and “kinky” (or fetish services). Vanilla is a synonym of conventional or ordinary and refers to services that are commonly included in gay sex, such as oral and anal sex, as an example. On the other hand, the adjective kinky is a synonym for unusual or strange, and it is used to define those services that are reserved for people who highly appreciate them and are not ordinarily present in sex. The list is long, and it includes almost everything from feet fetishism and domination to fisting and scat (the use of faeces). The main problem of using these words is that today the distinction is very blurred and unclear compared to how the term was used in the past. Indeed, the sex workers I interviewed had widely differing opinions about what is fetish and what is standard, while top and bottom are still widely used and, more importantly, have a clear division, something that cannot be disputed. As an example we can hear from Alessandro, a straight guy in the Italian group:

M: What can you say about the men that get in contact with you?

A: There is the top, the bottom, and the versatile. I work with versatile and bottoms. I do not work with tops because I do not do anal sex [as bottom].

(Alessandro, 34 years old)

To a generic question, about the men who contact him, Alessandro replied dividing them among top, bottom, and versatile. This highlights how important and valid this division is inside and outside sex work (among gay men in general). Alessandro also mentioned the category “versatile”, but this third type does not alter our dichotomy because even though people who define themselves as versatile can be both top and bottom, it does not occur at the same time. For example, when there is anal sex between two people, one needs to be top and the other can only be bottom, although if they are both versatile, they can switch position later on. In any case, the number of people who define as versatile is much lower than those who adopt the definition of top or bottom.

One of the most requested services is oral sex. In my sample, the presence of oral sex varied greatly among sex workers. As an example we can take Nikolas and Francesco. Nikolas says:

M: How many times is there oral sex?

N: About 30% of the time, but when I say that I am straight, some clients did not want to meet me [...]. Now, it is less than 30%, even if I learnt how to do it and I am much better in doing it. Some ask me if I like to do it, I always reply no, it is mechanic, I just learnt the technique.

M: So, there is no pleasure for you, it is just work.

N: It is a paradox, now that I learnt, and my performance is good they ask me less.

(Nikolas, 38 years old)

Nikolas, who is straight, had to learn how to perform a blowjob for his clients. He was not good at it in the beginning but, with time, he learnt the technique. But his clients are not so keen in asking for this service because his focus is on massage with a “happy ending” such as masturbation.

In contrast, there is Francesco:

M: How many times is there oral sex, in percentage?

F: About 80% of the time.

M: And how many times as a bottom?

F: Let's say half of the time.

(Francesco, 28 years old)

It is interesting to note that both Nikolas and Francesco are top with their clients but there are differences between being top on oral sex and on anal sex. Sex workers who are only top in anal sex can sometimes provide oral sex as bottom, for example when clients ask them or when sex workers themselves are excited and want to do it, as Sven describes:

M: What about blowjobs?

S: Blowjobs [...] a few of them I can also suck, but most of them want to suck me or be fucked by me.

M: Why someone has this privilege, to be sucked by you?

S: It is something that you feel, does this person really want it or is someone I am personally turned on by. Most people I am not physically attracted to so I let them do the sucking but if I am also attracted there is no problem.

(Sven, 25 years old)

Sven is another sex worker who is only top, but with certain clients he is bottom with oral sex. However, clients are mainly bottom, and they ask sex workers to suck them (in oral sex, the top (or active) is the subject who has his penis sucked, while



the bottom (or passive) is the subject who sucks the penis of another guy). It is worth noting that Sven is gay and his words are important because they highlight what Rinaldi (2020) wrote about the homosexualisation of male sex work, something I discuss later in this chapter under the heading “Beyond Masculinity”. But there is another important aspect to highlight because even though Sven is a sex worker, he is doing with his clients exactly what he does in his private sex life. He does not want to develop a kinky side because he does not have one. Sven is a “simple” gay man who offers paid sexual pleasure to other “simple” gay men – nothing more than that.

One of the most advertised services is anal sex, a service a bit more complicated to perform compared to oral sex. Indeed, to perform anal sex as a top, a person (sex worker or client) needs to have a full erection in order to easily wear the condom and penetrate the other person. But it is even more complicated for the person who is bottom: being penetrated needs, first of all, preparation before the encounter, such as a “douche” and then the ability to be penetrated. Anal sex as bottom is an action that is learnt through practice: in the beginning it is difficult and not very pleasurable to experience. For all these reasons, anal sex is not performed much during encounters, as some sex workers charge more for this service but also because anal sex requires more time than a simple blowjob. Also, according to Shorter (2005), the practice of anal sex to reach an orgasm has been decreasing in recent years inside the gay community. The same opinion is shared by Barbagli and Colombo (2001) and Barbagli and colleagues (2010), who have analysed data coming from two different surveys on sexual behaviour among gay men in Italy. Indeed, there is a widespread belief that gay men are obsessed with anal sex (Barbagli & Colombo, 2001), but this seems to be a misconception, as exemplified by Peter:

M: Are you top, bottom, or versatile?

P: Everything.

M: Do you have more requests as bottom or as top?

P: Nowadays, they do not ask me for anal sex that much.

M: So, in the past you were doing a lot of anal sex and today it is less frequent?

P: At the beginning, between 14 and 17 years old it was more bottom, then 17 to 21 more top, and after that I do not know, of course I still have anal sex but not all the time.

M: Is it because they cum before anal sex or is it because they do not want to have it?

P: It is because they do not want to do it. Sometimes they want me to use my fingers or that I do a prostatic massage, or that I suck them off, or they want to suck me off. But, you know, even in my private life I did not meet people who always wanted to do anal sex. In my opinion there is a prejudice about gays who do anal sex all the time. I will be totally satisfied to have a boyfriend without having anal sex with him, I can have a relationship without having anal sex.

(Peter, 25 years old)

Like many gay people, Peter (who is now bisexual) has passed through different stages in his life: he started as bottom, and then he became top, now he is more versatile and can perform both positions. In his remarks, it is clear that anal sex is not particularly present in his encounters, both at work and in his private life. He also denounces the prejudice that anal sex is a compulsory activity every time gay people have sex. Peter, like Sven, made a parallel between his private life and sex work and the type of sex he experienced. Indeed, the vanilla services that sex workers discussed with me are widespread, not only in sex work, but also in gay sexual arenas. Again, the main point is that the majority of men who buy sex from the sex workers want to have “standard” sex, the same type of sex that is available among gay men.

Kinky services were less frequent compared to the category of vanilla services. It is interesting that even though they are much more remunerated, as Sanders (2005) showed, these are less frequently performed by the sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden. It is always possible there is a bias in my sample, meaning that for some reason I did not meet those sex workers who engage more frequently in these kinky activities. In any case, I think the main point is that there is a relationship between all these practises and the 45 sex workers I interviewed. Indeed, despite a few exceptions – straight sex workers included – the strong majority of gay male sex workers do the same type of sex as in their private life: this is the connection and the difference between providing or not a particular type of service. This corroborates the thesis of Rinaldi (2020) about both the homosexualisation of sex work and the fact that people who engage in sex for money are just “simple” gay men who offer sexual services to other “simple” men. Moreover, I did not find any difference among the three groups (Italian, Swedish, and international group): the similarities are striking because they all confidently represent the gay scene of the urban landscape of the Western world. This explains which sexual services are sold and requested in male-to-male online sex work. At the same time, throughout this short section, the importance of the division and separation becomes clear between the sexual positions of top and bottom (and versatile) sex workers, from their advertisements to the selection of clients, until the encounter itself, their sexual positions need to match those of the clients in order to achieve pleasure. The problem, as I am going to show in the following three sections, is that this division

takes centre stage in the encounter and, moreover, it becomes the way in which many of the sex workers deploy their masculinity over the (supposed) femininity of their clients.

## 4.2 Heterosexual sex workers: “but I am bisexual now”

A previous study highlights that male sex workers are mostly “heterosexuals” (Rinaldi, 2020). Italian sociologist Rinaldi stresses that the group of men who sell sex and sexual services in a porn cinema in Palermo and others public venues of southern Italy is constituted by men who define themselves as “straight”. As previously mentioned, this identitarian positioning is completely different in my study: only five out of the 45 men I interviewed defined themselves as heterosexuals. The group is so small that in this section I discuss the behaviour of all five heterosexual men.

The main point of Rinaldi (2020) is that amongst male sex workers there are different types of masculinities, and male sex workers use different narratives and negotiations that position themselves inside the masculine spectrum. These strategies, at first, help sex workers justify their presence in the sex-for-sale industry. Rinaldi (2020) calls these strategies “repertoire”. First of all, we learn to become “sexual” (Gagnon & Simon, 1973), and we should look at sex work as a “joint action” (Blumer, 1969): how we do sexual things with other sexual subjects. According to Rinaldi (2020), people do not react to physiological sexual instincts only, but it is the symbolic system of the subject that explains his sexual behaviour. Moreover, in sex work, subjects explain their involvement in this job through the involvement of other subjects, such as clients. According to Shibutani (1986), a social world can be considered a community, not as a physical space, but as a symbolic environment where people share the same type of interests, and its borders are created by the limits of the effective communication. The use of the “social world” is important in my case because the sex workers I met do not share a physical space (such as a cruising area, a sauna, a porn cinema, etc.), but form a (virtual) community with interests that correspond. By contrast, Plummer (2005) stressed that sex is the core of the gay male experience, and that gay sex is revolutionary sex. Indeed, there is a paradox: “gay male sexuality may be the key to heterosexual male sexuality – it may suggest the routes that most men would take if they were not shaped by relations with women. Gay men become the champions of the pleasure principle” (Plummer, 2005, p. 12). Also, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) noted a hybridisation of hegemonic masculinity because some heterosexual men have appropriated aspects of gay masculinities (such as metrosexual identity). The boundaries are blurred. Therefore, we need to see which type of masculinities the sex workers I interviewed support, and if they tend to stress the old dichotomy

between masculine and feminine or if they adopt a more nuanced balance between them. The first man I present is Bo, 48 years old, a Swedish former drug user:

M: Can I ask you what your sexuality is? How do you identify yourself?

B: I identify myself as heterosexual, but I do not mind having sex with men. I do not fall in love with men. There is a Swedish expression [...] “if you get horny you do not care too much”, I guess I live like that. For example, I can have sex with the table, it does not matter. I am heterosexual, but I do not mind having sex with men.

(Bo, 48 years old)

Bo is the only sex worker I met who is also a former drug user who used to sell sex to pay for his drugs. So, he felt “obliged” to have sex with men in order to have money for the drugs. According to Rinaldi (2020), this is part of the repertoire that sex workers use to justify their presence in sex work. Indeed, the men he met always affirmed their heterosexual status outside sex work, as a way to divide between what is work, an obligation, and what is private life, the place where they can express their real identity. But Bo affirms his heterosexuality in a different way: at first, he clearly defines himself as heterosexual, despite the sex he used to have with men; but, at the same time, he states that he does not fall in love with men and that, more importantly, having sex with men is not a problem. In other words, Bo is not trying to distance himself from the “stigma of homosexuality” (Rinaldi, 2020).

B: I did not really like men; you cannot really as a prostitute. Sexuality with men makes you want to get the hell out of here. That is not really about holding hands, it is more just “fuck and forget”. It’s a way to express the feeling to a person you have not met before. I met my clients, but I have not really known much about them [...]. Then, I started again later, I have done it sometimes, but you see [...] I guess I am attracted to men: they pay me, so I did not really mind, that is a sort of advantage.

(Bo, 48 years old)

Bo is not disclaiming what he did when he was young. He does not use any “reasons” or “accounts” to justify his behaviour. Instead, Bo highlights that having sex with men is not “holding hands” or having a relationship fulfilled with emotions, but it is more “fuck and forget”. He does not like what he did, but male clients were attracted by him and he used this as a sort of advantage in what was the real aim: buying drugs. Similarly, in Italy, Alessandro tells us his story:

M: Before this, did you have sex with men?

A: No, I always had sex with women, but I also did couple swapping. But the gay market is broader than the one of women, so I tried to experiment these things with

men, and I saw that I did not have any difficulties and I kept going. At the moment, I am a “gigolo” for women, I work with couple swapping and with trans, and gays [...] I can say that now I am bisexual.

(Alessandro, 34 years old)

Even Alessandro, like Bo, does not try to distance himself from the other men he has sex with, but differently from Bo, his sexual encounters make him change his own definition of his sexual orientation. He is confident about what he is doing and even saying that he is not straight anymore, but bisexual. Again, compared to other research, Alessandro does not need to justify his presence or behaviour. How many heterosexual men in sex work will declare to be bisexual due to the sex they have with men clients? Alessandro, in continuing his story, underlines other important features, and his masculinity emerges:

A: After the first three years when I worked only with women, I found some gay websites. I subscribed and, if I may be honest, I was not very sure. I said “let us try”, “let us see”, “if I can, I will continue sex work with gays”, and I discovered that I do not have any problem in doing sexual acts with men; but I am only active, I never did anal sex [as bottom] [...] so, as top, I can do it, that is it [...]. The gay world is an open book, more than women, there are many types of sex that gay men love. Hard sex, sweet sex, fetishism, SM, fisting [...]. You must be able to do it, but it is more a mental thing, the psychological part is the hardest. You must be able to do it with everyone. As a top, I do not have problems because I work with my imagination. But it is not a job for everyone [...] my friends think it is easy, but I have tried to explain them that it is not.

(Alessandro, 34 years old)

At first glance, Alessandro seems to continue on the previous line, of being open and comfortable in his behaviour. When he goes on to talk about his activities with men and gives a more in-depth account, Alessandro points out that he is only top with his clients, also saying that he cannot work with top clients since he does not perform anal sex as bottom. Finally, he admits that doing sex work is not easy, it is not a job that everyone can do. These are two important points of discussion that go in the same direction: Alessandro is affirming his masculinity. According to Connell (2005), masculinity is situational, it is something that a man does, more than something that a man is: “masculinity is not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity. It is also extended in the world, merged in organized social relations” (Connell, 2005, p. 29). In order to affirm his masculinity, Alessandro employs the very old, but still widely used, cleavage between active and passive (or top and bottom) men: the former can remain “men” and, in certain cases, they can even remain heterosexuals. The latter, in contrast, by being receptive is assuming the role of the woman, losing all the male traits. Indeed, Connell (2005) called one of the

chapters of her book “A very straight gay”: stressing that even gay men can experience hegemonic masculinity in their path to achieve the acceptable “compulsory heterosexuality” (Connell, 2005, p. 148). The most employed characteristic is to reject effeminate gays, always considered as bottom. Even though Alessandro is not gay, he knows perfectly the rule that equates top and straight and bottom and gay and, strategically, he uses it in describing his activities. Finally, Alessandro says that doing sex work is not easy, “not a job for everyone”. In this way, he transmits that having sex with men is an effort, it is something easy for him, but not so easy that everyone can do it. Paradoxically, only “true” men can have sex with other men, without being gay.

Indeed, as Lasén and García point out, “masculinity is a homo-social enactment grounded in a compulsive demonstration of male attitudes and manners by men for other men’s gaze. Any failure in following cultural stereotypes of manhood runs the risk of being read as a breaking of one’s own masculinity. By denying other men’s virility and by pointing to their flaws, men can reach a position of legitimacy for their own male embodiments” (Lasén & García, 2015, p. 725). Alessandro, then, talking to a man researcher, needs to affirm his masculinity (as top), denying the masculinity of his clients, labelled as bottom, implicitly feminine. But the story of Alessandro takes an interesting turn at the very end of the interview:

A: No, I never experienced bad things. I must say that I work a lot with passive guys, because passive guys like men. The others [sex workers] are almost all effeminate, I have noticed this, even colleagues that I know are very much effeminate. Clients identify me as straight not as gay. I am very requested also for this reason. When I go to their places, clients see that I am strong, and it is difficult that they decide not to pay me.

M: You are very masculine.

A: Yes, I am only top and for me being bottom and taking it in the anus is really against nature. I tried myself once with my former girlfriend with a finger, but [...].

(Alessandro, 34 years old)

These final sentences confirm what I wrote about the cleavage between top and bottom gays and the fact that even straight guys are aware of these differences and employ them when needed, to affirm their masculinity. More importantly, Alessandro calls being bottom as something “against nature”. The hardest thing he said against his clients throughout the whole interview. This turn, at the end of the interview, I think, was something he needed because he wanted to reaffirm his virility that has been widely challenged, even attacked, during our encounter. Anal virginity is the proof of his manhood.

Along the same line of thought, there is Gunther, 22 years old, a member of the international group:

G: I do not know, I just started to need money after a while, so I sometimes do this, it is not a big thing.

(Gunther, 22 years old)

At the beginning of the interview, Gunther says that doing sex work “is not a big thing”, diminishing what he is doing. This is a strategy to “save his face”, according to Rinaldi (2020), who heard the same words from the sex workers he met in Palermo and Naples. In order to “do it” (to have sex with another man without being homosexual) Rinaldi (2020) affirms, the subject needs (1) to justify to himself and to others why he thought to do it, why he is doing it, why he will do it, and why he will stop doing it; (2) to understand what it means to do it and what to feel; (3) to manipulate his interactions with clients and other actors involved in sex for sale in order to provide plausible justifications for their actions. These subjects (who define themselves as heterosexual men) conform to the norm (the hegemonic masculinity of heterosexual men) even though they deviate from it (since they have sex with other men), but they follow the norm even when they deviate from it because they represent themselves as heterosexuals, they act as “male” even though they deviate from the traditional norm. This is what happens with Gunther, who continues his story:

M: Do you remember any differences of what you did with men and what you did with women?

G: It is the same: gay men that use these services want to be treated like a woman half of the time, they want a man and they want to be dominated, it is not a problem for me if you just close your eyes and think of something else; it is something you push away in your memory and walk out the door.

(Gunther, 22 years old)

Like Alessandro, also Gunther is aware of the difference between top and bottom guys. Gunther goes even further and defines his clients as people who “want to be treated like a woman” and “want to be dominated”. Like the previous interviewee, he describes what he does as something that does not characterise him, because he is able to close his eyes during the sexual act, and then to push this memory away when everything is done. This behaviour falls under the concept of repertoire. Indeed, Rinaldi (2020) focalises his attention on the so-called “alignment actions” (Hewitt, 1998): every subject tries to make coherent their actions, to justify their behaviour, and the idea of themselves. This, especially in sex work, is much needed

for those men who are afraid of being stigmatised as “deviant”. These alignment actions are a way to speak and to communicate with others in order to avoid stigma and negative judgments from other members of the society. Rinaldi (2020) highlights two types of alignment actions: “reasons” and “accounts”. The reasons are public explanations that we give in order to explain to others and to ourselves why we did what we did and why we are going to do what we are going to do (Hewitt, 1998). In the case of Gunther, the main reason he employs is the need of money and the unavailability of finding other ways to earn money (I discuss why men enter sex for pay in the next chapter). These accounts are used to neutralise the sexuality of the men who sell sex to other men. So, the accounts are a sort of excuse that sex workers provide. The excuses that male sex workers provide are a clear message that men who sell sex to other men give legitimacy to the gender and sexual norms of our society. In doing so, they try to neutralise the effects of their actions. Indeed, the social world of sex workers shares the same normative and gender and sexual values of society at large. Gunther gives us an example of reason in the following extract:

G: When I really need, when there is just the last saving: “Ok, I can sell my body”. It is better than losing your health because you are on the street, and you cannot eat. I would rather do it for an hour and I can feed myself, wash myself, clothe myself and everything [...]. I consider myself a person in this situation and I will do whatever to keep myself fed and alive because I do not have any other people in my life that take care of me, so this is my way out. You know, some people start to deal drugs. Instead of doing something which may put me in prison I do something I can make the same amount of money, but I am not doing no one wrong except maybe for myself [...], it is a joke, these men, this whole action, the whole fucking society, it is all a joke. The way people behave, it is just one of the little symptoms in our society.

(Gunther, 22 years old)

In these sentences, Gunther gives us many “reasons” to explain his presence in sex work. To justify what he is doing, he compares sex work to illegal activities, such as selling drugs, in order to show that he is doing the right thing or, at least, that he is not doing a bad thing like selling drugs. The only one who he harms in so doing is himself, he says. Then, in his view, the problem is not himself or the activity of selling sex, but it is the fact he is alone, and that society is unjust and pushed him into this situation. He is not to be blamed; he is to be admired for doing what he is doing without “losing face”. Finally, Gunther provides an example of accounts:

M: You said that sometimes it is difficult to have an erection.

G: A bit at first but then [...] I think about women.

M: And usually you do not have an orgasm.



G: No, never cum with a guy!

M: So, you are straight, but you do not have problems to be with a gay guy, you do not hate them.

G: I find it unnatural and a little bit annoying and I do not understand it, but I am fine with it as long as they pay me.

M: What is unnatural?

G: That is a very, very unnatural thing. The fact that our human instinct is about wanting to reproduce [...]. I find them a bit pathetic, weak people. That is all. When I was a kid I would not be able to resist my urges when I saw a pair of tits in my face and I would pay for it, now that I am an adult I have to do that and even if I would be an ugly person or whatever why would I have to do that, I can resist my urges now and I find that if a person who is 39 still cannot resist his urges or thinks he can buy everything and everyone in the world with just a bit of money, I find it weak and pathetic.

(Gunther, 22 years old)

Gunther, similar to Alessandro, defines sex between men as “unnatural”, highlighting that sex should be done in order to reproduce the human species. But, contrary to the Italian sex workers, Gunther affirms his heterosexuality not by being only active but through not sharing an orgasm with his clients. His masculinity is saved through a paradox: he can barely achieve erection and he never ejaculates during his encounter. While Alessandro is proud of his ability of having an erection and warns his friends that this is a difficult job to perform, Gunther employs a different account, he is able to have sex with men because he wants it, but he is also unable to achieve an erection and, paradoxically, this is a sign of his masculinity, which is further confirmed by the fact that he does not reach an orgasm with his clients. What should be a sign of weakness, in Gunther, is a sign of virility, his heterosexual virility that confronts the homosexual femininity of his clients. Indeed, “doing” masculinity can be tough and it is marked with “anxieties and perceived psychological and physical inadequacies produced by insecurities concerning [...] stature and [...] health’ (Alldred & Fox, 2015, p. 912).

Yet another approach comes from Nikolas who is, like Alessandro, a member of the Italian group:

N: I am straight, but let us say uninhibited at this point, it has been a few years now that I do this, but the majority of the time are mechanical movements, there are no emotions involved [...] I would rather have some homosexual desire in that hour, so I can have an erection, but it does not happen all the time [...]. I am honest, I am not gay, and I cannot fuck them “as a gay”, so, I said to him “if you want to try, let us

try”. [...] About 30% of my clients used to ask me my sexual orientation, and when I said that I am straight, I lost some of them, it is a paradox because now I have learned how to do it [blowjob], but it is not that I like it, it is just mechanical, you just learn the technique.

(Nikolas, 38 years old)

In these few excerpts, another different approach to sex work emerges. Nikolas defines himself as straight but also “uninhibited” since he has been in the market in the last eleven years. He both acknowledges his past inability and his present ability to get an erection. He stresses, contrary to the previous sex workers, that clients he has met do not like to meet heterosexual sex workers and that he used to lose some of them for this reason. Finally, since he is straight, he cannot “fuck as a gay”. It is interesting to stress that with this definition, Nikolas tries to distance himself from the homosexuality of his clients. He is not gay, he cannot have sex as a gay man can, and the actions are just mechanical, something that you learn to do, not something that you like. Nikolas affirms his dominant masculinity in a more nuanced and subtle way.

The fifth and last heterosexual sex worker is Simone, 42 years old, part of the Italian group. He also identifies as straight and only top, like Alessandro, Gunther, and Nikolas. Another important point for Rinaldi (2020) is to look at the type of masculinity that sex workers embody. In theory, they should aim for a hegemonic masculinity, but this is difficult to achieve, especially if their main activity is to sell sex to other men. In order to explain the behaviour of the sex workers, he defines a type called “threatening masculinity”. It is important to stress that male sex workers do not present excuses or employ a “neutralisation mechanism” only after they meet their clients to mitigate the shame or the guilty feeling, but also before, as a tool to justify their (homosexual) behaviours (Rinaldi, 2020). In doing so, these sex workers neutralise every emotional pulse or pleasure in what they do with other men. Simone falls within this type of masculinity.

M: I did not understand something, I am sorry – when you talked about the guys that come here, both young and old, since you are heterosexual is there any difference between a guy of 35-40 years old, a muscled man, and 60 years old maybe not fat but a bit overweight? Do you experience any difference in excitement?

S: No, since I am straight, there is not any difference or preference at the level of sexual pleasure like you said. There is a personal difference, I would prefer to give a massage to the body of a nice, young guy, especially if he is defined and shaved. But as I said, it is just a preference not at the sexual level, but at the professional level. I do not know how to explain – it is like a chef that prefers risotto or cooking meat [...]. If you asked me instead: “do you prefer a young or old woman?” Of course, I prefer a young woman!

(Simone, 42 years old)

Throughout the interview, Simone strongly affirmed his sexuality. The fact he has multiple encounters with men is evidently a source of discomfort. Even expressing a preference for young guys with a defined body is a source of stress. From my questions, he obviously feels that his masculinity is under attack. But the conversation continues:

M: You talked about oral sex. Is it something that you do or something they do to you? How does it work?

S: It is something they do. But it is something that happens rarely – I need to like the person, and then, here you are right, I make distinctions. If the client is old, I do not let them suck me. But it is something they did not even ask, because they know their own limits. Then, these people come here to have an erotic massage because since they are old, they also have problems in getting an erection, so the erotic masseur, the real masseur, is giving them enough excitement with the massage alone. I have enough experience in “handling” that I am able to get them an orgasm. I am able to get them an excitement. No, they do not ask me [for oral sex]. It is more some young guys – if I must answer your question in an objective and specific way – that do oral sex to me. OK? I do not do it! It is extremely rare that they asked me if I want to suck them, and I always said no.

(Simone, 42 years old)

Even here, Simone wants to separate the activity of giving a massage with the sexual part of giving a handjob or receiving a blowjob. Once again, the main distinction is between young and old clients: the former rarely ask for a blowjob, the latter cannot even ask for these services because their conditions of being old and with erection problems prevent them from accessing these services. For Simone the line that keeps him heterosexual is the refusal of being sucked by a man. Probably, as written by Reynolds: “the culture surrounding ‘straight’ MSM sex distinguishes itself explicitly from a culture of homosexuality” (Reynolds, 2015, p. 225), and sex workers need to ensure that their heterosexual masculinity is always validated. Indeed, it is here that the “accounts” emerge.

S: When I entered this massage environment, I understood how it worked. The majority of clients want something more than a massage, and I am talking about sexual services. I had to adapt myself to this “market law”, if I did not do that, I would lose my clients.

(Simone, 42 years old)

Simone has been obliged to develop a sexual ending in his activity because clients want something more, something sexual. He had to adapt to this “market law”, he had no choice but to offer sexual services to his clients.

S: No, I do not get any excitement. I do not like men. I pretend even when they touch me. Maybe, when they touch me – as I said, I offer a mutual engagement, I can touch them and they can touch me, and if they continue to touch my penis, I can have an erection [...]. But it is not a real erection, it is just because they touch me there and it reacts [laughing] [...]. I do not have problems in giving a massage to a client where the final engagement is just masturbation [...]. It is something very easy, because I interpret masturbation as the massage of a muscle. It is a muscle, a particular one, but masturbation is a cleaner thing than receiving oral sex.

(Simone, 42 years old)

In his closing sentences, Simone, in order to affirm his masculinity, says that he does not like men, and he needs to pretend when clients touch him. The problem emerged since giving a massage is “mutual engagement” of bodies and receiving a sexual stimulation cannot be forbidden. Simone is not confident; indeed, he also had a nervous laugh at the end. He is feeling that his position as a heterosexual man is difficult to maintain and that the normative representation of masculinity is under attack. Simone employs the mechanism of “neutralisation” that Rinaldi (2020) found in his sample: Simone does not have a problem giving a massage and masturbation at the end, because the penis of the client is a muscle like any other (neutralisation) and that masturbation, after all, is better than oral sex (repudiation of the sexual act).

All the research participants draw their own lines when it comes to the services they offer, but in the group of self-identified heterosexual sex workers the reluctance to do some things is more accentuated. It is also in this group that we find the highest instance of social and economical challenges. These men seem to find less pleasure in selling sex and have more often chosen their job out of an economic need. As Davies and Feldman (1997) and Marques (2011) have pointed out, some male sex workers report that economic need or previous experiences of abuse were the reasons that they began selling sex, but that this does not automatically make them victims. Quoting Browne and Minichiello, Marques contends that “[c]ontrary to beliefs posited by early accounts focusing on the supposed pathologies and deficiencies sex workers demonstrate remarkable resilience and fortitude in maintaining emotional stability given the social aspects of their work environment” (Marques, 2011, p. 167; Browne & Minichiello, 1996, p. 36; Simon et al., 1993).

In the next section, I engage with the behaviour of those sex workers who define themselves as gay and, like heterosexual sex workers, stress the importance of masculinity.

### 4.3 Behaving like men. Gay and bisexual sex workers doing masculinities

In this second empirical section, we move a step forward to analyse the behaviour of those sex workers who define themselves as gay and bisexual. There are no previous studies about self-identified gay sex workers and their masculinities. The reason for this is that the majority of research in the field has been on male street sex workers or on men who sell sex in public places, such as outdoor cruising areas, or in saunas, dark rooms, video clubs, etc. As pointed out before, the visibility of these arenas enhances the sex workers' need to affirm their masculinities over their clients, while sex workers who sell sex online can take advantage of this situation and release the stress related to their masculinities. Once again, I employ the research of Rinaldi (2020) to understand if the behaviour of gay and bisexual sex workers is similar to what we saw in the previous section about sex workers who identified as straight, or if they tend to what has been called "homosexualisation" of male sex work (Johansson, 1990). The group of sex workers who identify as gay consists of 23 men while 10 men identify as bisexual. I am aware that we should not equate bisexuality to homosexuality as if they were the same thing: the opposite to "standard" heterosexuality. Indeed, bisexuality deserves its own attention, as it is too often relegated as a "grey" area between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Certainly, I do not want to reinforce the stereotype that being bisexual is a transition between being straight and gay (or vice versa). In spite of this, I decided to put both gay and bisexual sex workers together since their behaviour as sex workers is very similar. In the following pages, I present six cases (four gays and two bisexuals), the most representative for this category. The first is Esad, member of the international group:

M: So, you said that people with big dicks should do it.

E: Not should, but I think many of them, they would. I do this because it makes some money and you do not work a lot and you have fun and you can travel, but probably if I did not have this big dick, I would never do this. [...] Average dick escorts cannot make more than 1,000 euros a month, while if I am in Paris, I can make 6,000 a month, and then you can save money.

(Esad, 30 years old)

The "reason" that Esad uses to explain his presence in sex work is related to the dimension of his penis. He "would never do this", it is his penis that dragged him into this market. As I will present later, Logan (2014) stresses the importance of specific masculine traits (such as the dimension of the penis) as a factor that explains not only their presence in sex work but also the ability to make more money. Having

a big dick is highly rewarded by clients. Esad seems to know this rule. At the same time, Logan (2014) also highlights that being top is another way to make more money, even in this case Esad follows the American author:

M: What is your sexual position?

E: I am active, only.

M: Does this mean that you do not suck?

E: I do sometimes.

M: When do you decide to suck, or is it when the client asks you?

E: When I decide. I do not do everything and anything.

M: So, you just sometimes suck. Do you kiss the clients?

E: Yes, not always but yes. My clients are younger always.

(Esad, 30 years old)

As we saw in Simone, even Esad specifies that he only has clients that are younger than him. In the previous pages, we did not find evidence that this is always the case. It is, however, possible to assume that having young clients is a way to save face, in Goffman's (1961) terms. The stigma consists in that sex workers meet clients who are older and less attractive: saying that the clients are always younger than the sex workers (as with Esad) or that they do not allow old clients to give oral sex (as with Simone) is a way to distance themselves from the stigma, and provide a valid account, in Rinaldi's (2020) sense of the word, in order to present a consistent image of the self to others (Goffman, 1961). Indeed, it is more than unlikely that Esad is able to only meet clients who are younger than him, especially because he himself is so young.

Also, other kinds of behaviour of sex workers who define themselves as straight are replicated in the sex workers who define as gay or bisexual, blurring the boundaries between the three categories. What also happens is that clients, especially "straight" clients but also those who are gay, are sometimes looking for sex workers who resemble the idea of masculinity and virility. Two examples come from Lorenzo and Ottaviano from the Italian group:

M: How long did you wait before doing it a second time?

L: Well, about a month. This guy wanted to share something with me, and it was a good way to make contact with other people. Anyway, I always had success with

clients because I am out of gay stereotypes. Here, you can find a lot of attraction for what does not belong to the gay world.

M: Do you mean that you are masculine?

L: Yes. I think to have a particular sensibility to recognize and to be recognized as a certain type of person. For sure, I have never been a regular in gay clubs.

(Lorenzo, 35 years old)

Lorenzo stresses the dichotomy between gay and straight, active and passive, masculine and feminine. He resembles the idea of a masculine man; gay clients, acknowledged that and his success in sex work comes from this.

A very typical idiom in the Italian gay scene is to be “*fuori dai giri*” (“outside the circles” – something that stresses that some gay guys prefer to stay out, outside, far away, from stereotypical gay behaviour). And the expression “I have never been a regular in gay clubs” goes exactly in that direction. Connell (2005) has stressed that gay men are in a position to adopt, negotiate, or reject a particular gay identity. To be noted here is that Lorenzo, in rejecting the stereotypical gay identity, is reinforcing the dichotomy between masculine and feminine gays. The former does not participate in the gay scene, while the latter are part of it. In recent years, we have witnessed the multiplication of sexual subcultures and sexual identities in the gay world. The meaning of masculinity, the varieties of masculinities, the difficulty of reproducing masculinity, the nature of gender and the extent of gender inequality all come into question and are furiously debated (Connell, 2005). Moreover, the power structure that shapes masculinity depends on “the subordination of women to men” and “a general symbolism of difference (the opposition of femininity and masculinity)” (Connell, 2005, p. 223). In our case, the structure of power is produced by the subordination of gays to heterosexuals, between effeminate men and masculine men. In order to uphold this structure of power it is important to maintain the symbolism of difference, i.e. the opposition of gay and straight. This dichotomy is particularly toxic, not only because it puts gay men in a position of subordination to heterosexuals, but also because it divides gay men between good and bad, between those who can resemble straight men, and those who display feminine traits. Ottaviano, who self-identifies as bisexual, shares the same line of thinking as Lorenzo:

M: Were you never the bottom?

O: No, I do not suck, and I do not let them fuck me, I always told them clearly. It is another reason of my success: it is my overestimated masculinity. Everyone, even gays, looks for me because I do not resemble one of them. The majority of gays are

attracted by heterosexual guys, it is difficult to find a gay that wants to go with a gay who is effeminate in prostitution, I do not know in the normal world [...].

M: Did you ever experience any problems with your clients?

O: No, and if they try to do something strange, I immediately react. I think that since I am masculine, they are prevented from doing anything wrong. Clients who come here are people that want to be submissive. How can someone who wants to be submissive try to do something bad to me?

(Ottaviano, 49 years old)

Ottaviano confirms Lorenzo's opinion that clients are looking for masculine guys to have sex with. He also stresses that this masculinity goes beyond the sexual activities, because clients want to be submissive not only in sex but during the whole time they spend together during the encounter. Even in their life, Ottaviano thinks, these clients tend to assume traits and characteristics that can be labelled feminine. Instead of subverting and refusing the dichotomy between masculine and feminine gays, the last two sex workers find a source of income and success in the confirmation of the standard stereotypes about the gay world. Indeed, Ottaviano describes his masculinity as "overestimated". He is what he is, but in the eyes of his clients he is masculine enough to be associated with heterosexual men, even though he is bisexual and does not hide his sexual orientation.

Finally, I compare two sex workers, Samuele and Emanuele, both from the Italian group, who have important differences: Samuele is bisexual and active, while Emanuele is gay and passive. Can the fact that they belong to two opposite sexual positions change their masculinity?

M: Officially, are you bisexual?

S: Yes, more bisexual than gay, even though with men is getting easier [...]. It is easier to fuck men; with women I have to work with my imagination, then women need to be really feminine to excite me. If I found a masculine woman it would be difficult. I need to have a gun to my head to be able to fuck a "tomboy". It is almost impossible.

(Samuele, 35 years old)

Although he is bisexual, Samuele highlights that having sex with men is getting easier with time, and that he prefers having sex with male clients rather than women clients, especially because he has a problem in having sex with women who are not feminine enough. We find here something that has not been described in any other study about male sex workers: a sex worker who prefers men to women clients and



at the same time stresses his preference for feminine women. Yet, the gender dichotomy continues to follow male sex workers, as Samuele later explains:

S: Last June, a guy came from [a city in the north-east of Italy] and he was looking for a masculine man, he saw one of the videos I have online, and he got excited by that. Then, I sent a private video to him, and he did not reply anymore, maybe he thought I was not masculine enough. While, another time, with this young guy from [a city in the centre of Italy] that I know, I asked him if he would be interested to have a threesome with one of my clients; so, we did it. While there, we were touching each other because I really like him and I wanted intimacy, and the client got angry and left us, I mean, I said to him “why you did not take two Romanian guys instead, they even do not touch each other!?” What a terrible masculinity!

(Samuele, 35 years old)

With these two stories, Samuele tells us what clients are looking for in him and other sex workers. In the first case, he suspects that the client did not find him masculine enough after having seen a video of him naked. While in the second case, the client got angry and left because the threesome he wanted became too masculine, and Samuele suggested Romanian guys instead who he claimed are not gay enough to even touch each other. Both stories are linked and indicate two main points: first, there is not a fixed type of client with just one type of request, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 6; second, sex workers need to address and adjust their identity and masculinity throughout their work in order to satisfy their clients' requests. If masculinity is an action more than a condition, as Connell (2005) claims, the art of sex workers is to find the balance between the masculinity requested by clients and what they can practically achieve. In this context, Samuele discusses the different arenas of his city, Rome:

S: Rome is the city with the most submissive slaves in Italy, and [the clients] look for the Roman “*coatto*”.

M: What does *coatto* mean?

S: It is a vulgar and rough person, opposite to the Neapolitan “*sciantoso*”. You can be it only if you are born and grew up there. [...] In Rome, at the moment, Romanian guys are the most requested.

M: Are they gay?

S: If they are, they are repressed, or maybe bisexual. Anyway, they have this gigantic anger. They spit, they fight, and they are good at robbery. One of my clients told me that they have devastated many clients' houses.

(Samuele, 35 years old)

Following the dichotomy and stereotype about masculine sex workers as being more requested by clients, Samuele depicted the image of *coatto*, a typical Roman iconography. A man above the standard level of virility, a guy who is vulgar and rough: the way he looks, the way he speaks, the way he behaves. But this picture, which is attractive for gay clients, is difficult to find in sex work, because *coatto* is intrinsically heterosexual. Thus, clients need to find what is available in the gay scene and also in the sex work arena. Here, young Romanian guys emerged. We do not know their sexual orientation, and Samuele doubted they can be defined as gay. For sure, Samuele depicted them as hypermasculine. Clients are aware of the risks of having them at their houses, but they are the only sex workers who are able to resemble what the clients are looking for, the Roman *coatto*.

In contrast, there is the story of Emanuele, who is versatile but more passive and recalls how he started:

E: I will be honest with you: for a period, I was also cross-dressing. During that period, I met extremely beautiful clients – they were really defined and muscled, they were personal trainers. These are people that are not interested in meeting gay guys [...]. I met 3 or 4 personal trainers in a few weeks [...]. These are clients that are looking for transgression, being borderline, they have the fantasy of meeting an androgynous person. It is a guilty pleasure for them. In the gay world, there is the myth of the Alpha-man. In the bisexual world [...] the myth of androgyny is widespread, more than everyone thinks. They are looking for creatures that are in between male and female. I must tell you, these personal trainers, if you see them, you would never suspect anything, but they asked me to have anal sex as passive, I mean, I had to fuck them while dressing like a woman!

M: So, you were in shock because you thought that in dressing like a woman you would have more masculine clients, but it happened the opposite.

E: Exactly, the opposite!

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

It seems clear that Emanuele is impressed by personal trainers. This category resembles the stereotypical images of a young, strong, fit, dashing, muscled, and good-looking man, something that many gay people would fantasize about. The surprise in the story, which is also interesting for this discussion, is that the stereotype does not match the reality. Indeed, Emanuele's dream becomes a nightmare, when they ask to be penetrated by him. Once again, this story confirms both the heterogeneity of the audience of clients and the importance of the dichotomy masculine and feminine. Previous research on straight male clients (Huysamen, 2019; 2020) looking for sex with men and trans women stress that having sex with a trans woman means that clients can continue to define themselves

as heterosexual or, at worst, bisexual, avoiding the label of being gay. Specifically, Huysamen wrote

The paid sexual encounter provides some men with an opportunity to have their non-heteronormative sexual and emotional needs met in a context that insulates them from the undesirable threats to their heterosexual social identities that would result from realizing these desires elsewhere. The boundedness of the paid sexual encounter allowed these men to compartmentalize their sexual identities [...]. Consequently, it can be argued that, while paid sex allows men a space in which they can deviate from the straight line of heterosexuality, it is also the very thing that allows them to maintain the illusion that this straight line exists in the first place (Huysamen, 2019, p. 527).

In the last chapter of this text I will discuss more in detail what clients want when looking for paid sex. For now, Emanuele continues to tell us more about his activities:

M: How did you fix the price?

E: Well, I did a market analysis based on the prices on the website. I saw that the most expensive prices were the ones of those who are active. Obviously, active guys are more requested than passive [...]. Usually, passive guys are also transgender, or they are people with an addiction to sex, and then they decide to do this. This is my impression. [...] Passive clients are different, in my opinion, even though I never met them. They want to be used. Like fucked and then throw away. They do not want to talk with you. Active guys are different, you must treat them like kings. You must dedicate yourself to them and to their pleasures.

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

Once again, the dichotomy between top and bottom and masculine and feminine becomes central. It is clear, from Emanuele's words, that clients are not the same and that the main difference among them is whether they are active or passive. From here, very different behaviour occurs. It is not just the service or the position. It is the whole picture that changes. Masculine clients, those who are top, need to be venerated. They deserve your full attention. Effeminate clients, those who are bottom, can be used as an object; they want to be treated as an object. As we saw before, even Emanuele confirms what Logan (2014) found in his study, about the economic benefits of being active in sex work. Finally, Emanuele provides us with more details about sex work and the dichotomy masculine/feminine:

E: It all depends on the segment of the market. There are active guys that want a masculine partner, even though you are passive. Then, if you have a more defined body is a plus in that segment. But there are also active guys that ask you to be feminine. Some want me to dress like a woman, like wearing underwear or

something, because they want a feminine body, like androgyny, as I said [...]. Then, your body needs to be smooth, shaved, and wonderful! [...] If you go to some places, like [the name of a gay sauna in Milan] you find these young foreigners that sell their bodies. There are a lot of them [...]. They are young, nice, black, and they have a huge dick, it is more than enough.

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

Emanuele, with his own words, confirms what the previous sex workers said about the importance of the dichotomy masculine/feminine. But he also opens up the possibility for resistance. Clients want different types of sex workers, it is not just top and bottom, because inside this there are multiple possibilities; the next section will highlight this space for resistance. At the same time, Emanuele also stresses what Rinaldi (2020) found in his research and that I have illustrated in the first section of this chapter. In public places, like a gay sauna, there are young, non-white and foreign sex workers. For them, it is enough to have a big penis and the willingness to have quick encounters with male customers. As previous literature has convincingly shown, having the role of the active (or being top) gives to sex workers more respect and power in the eyes of a majority of clients that tend to be receptive (or passive, or bottom). At the same time, as Logan (2014) pointed out, other characteristics such as race produced different types of requests from clients. As we saw in Connell (2005), specific traits such as a muscled body are awarded as masculine, while being skinny or fat are associated with femininity.

If we compare this section and the previous one, we find more similarities than differences. Gay and bisexual sex workers tend to stress the importance of the dichotomy masculine/feminine as much as straight sex workers do, and the encounter itself is constructed to observe this pattern. Meanwhile, the next section will highlight a different behaviour by some of the sex workers that define themselves as gay. This, not only to illustrate that a different behaviour is possible and that resistance can occur, but also adding a new perspective to the literature of male sex work and masculinities.

#### 4.4 Beyond masculinities. Gay escorts and the “homosexualisation” of male sex work

In this last section, I analyse the behaviour of those sex workers who define themselves as gay and who, in my opinion, do not stress masculinity for both themselves and their clients. It is important to remember that for Rinaldi (2020) online escorting is more emancipated, organised, and stratified in terms of race, sexual orientation, identity construction, and sexual practices; but also, in terms of

age, appearances, and ways to perform it. Rinaldi developed the concept of “homosexualisation” of sex work. Walby’s (2012) research on male-to-male internet escorting illustrates, without using the word, how digitalised sex work has contributed to a higher number of men who identify as gay in the escort industry. But Rinaldi can be said to be the first to define the concept. As previously noted, Rinaldi (2020) discussed how the strengthening of previously “stigmatised identities” led to the marginalisation of “normative identities” in male-to-male sex work. Since the 1970s, the role of straight hustlers has been contested, while new technologies with chats and apps facilitated contact-seeking between gay men. All in all, these changes blurred the boundaries between work and pleasure, which went hand in hand with the de-pathologisation and de-criminalisation of homosexuality (Rinaldi, 2020).

In this section, I present the case of three sex workers – one for each group – who go in the direction of marginalising, when not completely refusing, the idea of proving one’s masculinity and related dated dichotomies. The first sex worker in this group is Guillermo, 28 years old, a member of the international group:

G: The purpose was starting to make money. And I can say that I am a horny boy and sometimes if there is chemistry [...]. There are some guys that are so sexy, and I do not want to let them go after the massage. Some of them are not my type and I am doing the massage anyway [...]. I think they ask me to cum. And I also do not feel like satisfied whether they ask or not, I like also to have an orgasm.

M: So, do you always enjoy your meetings?

G: Yes.

M: Are you top or bottom?

G: Both of them.

M: Do you have preferences?

G: Well, it is 50-50.

M: And for clients?

G: Still 50-50.

(Guillermo, 28 years old)

There are three important points in this extract. First, Guillermo underlines the importance of having chemistry with his clients and the fact that he is a “horny boy”. Second, he likes to ejaculate, reaching an orgasm, even if his clients do not require

him to perform this service. Finally, Guillermo defines himself as fully versatile, as his clients are. These three characteristics go in the direction of the “homosexualisation” of male sex work. Indeed, compared to the previous sex workers I quoted, Guillermo does not talk about his clients in terms of age – being younger or older than him. The focus is on having fun together, something that heterosexual sex workers will never aim for, while homosexual sex workers will not always consider this important. Moreover, reaching an orgasm is a sign of deep involvement with his clients: it is not like defining the penis as “a muscle like any other” as Simone declared; but a way to recognize what is pleasurable in the encounter and indulge in it. Moreover, the fact that Guillermo defines himself as versatile is another important sign of going beyond the dichotomy active/passive. Indeed, if the top guy is masculine, and the bottom guy is feminine, what does the versatile guy resemble? A mix of the two previous identities or a third hybrid one? I argue that versatile sex workers, especially but not exclusively, are those who are able to go beyond the dichotomy and, in doing so, they are also able to subvert the preconstructed masculinity of the related gay subculture. Another example comes from Sven, a member of the Swedish group:

S: I think I met him one more time, so we met a total of two times. Yeah. And me as an escort, I have a pretty big dick and, it is not super big but it is like above average and a lot of people only want that but what I do as an escort is that I show them me as a person and with that I mean, I talk with them, I ask them questions, they ask me questions and I am a very good listener so most of my clients that I meet regularly, they want just to meet me as a person. On the other hand, I have a friend who is black and has a really big dick, and customers just want that, they just want his dick. So, he barely talks with them at all. He just fucks them and just leaves; I do not really do that, I am more about connecting with people [...]. I prefer regular clients because they know what to expect, I know what to expect and they mostly want to meet me as a person, not meet me as a person with a cock. So, it is very, much more intimate, and sometimes I can ask them for more money if I am struggling. They usually provide, you know [...]. I do not think they are rude but like the black guy I know with the big dick, he does not talk to anybody, and he does not kiss. But he is not rude, because that is what the customers want. It is what they expect. They just want a big black dick, you know.

(Sven, 25 years old)

At the beginning, Sven explains why he is doing sex work: his penis, even though it is “not super big”, it is “above the average” and this is the “reason” (Rinaldi, 2020) of his presence in the market. So, like Esad, he is aware that having a large-sized penis is positively evaluated by clients. At the same time, Sven affirms that what he offers to clients goes beyond this: “they mostly want to meet me as a person, not meet me as a person with a cock”. Also, he compares his activities with one of his friends who is a sex worker as well. This black guy “has a really big dick and

customers just want that, they just want his dick” and ‘he does not talk to anybody [...] but he is not rude, because that is what the customers want, it is what they expect’. These observations combined, according to Sven, highlight the fact that those who are ultimately responsible for this behaviour are the clients and their idea of masculinity: a black guy who is top, masculine, and with a big penis. The black guy is not rude, he just adapts his behaviour to clients’ tastes. This is an important feature for the “homosexualisation” of male sex work. In order to subvert the dichotomy, clients must change their expectations of what sex workers can offer, not only in terms of services, but especially in terms of masculinities. At the same time, sex workers can challenge these expectations by offering something more than “just sex”. Indeed, Sven, who entered sex work for the dimension of his penis, also stressed that when he started offering more to his clients, they reacted positively: not only did they continue to ask for his services, but they built a relationship that went beyond sex. Sven, at this point, is also allowed to ask his clients for money when he is struggling, without providing them sexual services.

The last example is Ernesto, a member of the Italian group:

M: Do you like to talk with them?

E: Almost all the time, I received good feedback from them, for example in terms of talking. I also slept together with one of my fixed clients, sometimes we slept together.

M: Is it like: “it is 3 a.m., do not go home, stay here with me” or it is something planned in advance, and they pay you for an “overnight” stay?

E: No, we smoked weed, after that I was so dizzy that it was me asking him if I can sleep with him, but other times it was him asking me to stay.

(Ernesto, 25 years old)

It is worth noting that these three sex workers are young, between 25 and 28 years old. This “new” generation of sex workers seems to have a different approach to what they do compared with the older ones. Ernesto, for example, does not have a problem in sleeping with clients, without asking them the price of an overnight. For Guillermo, what matters is the right chemistry. As for Sven, what Ernesto is offering is something more than sex. Another interesting feature of Ernesto comes from one of the services he offers: domination:

M: If oral sex is not that complicated, why did you not do more?

E: Because most of my clients prefer to do oral sex as bottom, so I just let them suck me. Also, they like to be dominated.

M: So, you wrote in your profile that you are versatile, but you also wrote that you do domination, as a master.

E: No, I have been dominated as well [...].

M: Do you spit?

E: Yes, I do but only during domination, it has happened with a client, he is very kinky and rough, he liked to be spat at and he also spat at me.

(Ernesto, 25 years old)

Ernesto, like Guillermo, declares to be fully versatile. But Ernesto goes beyond that because he also offers domination services. Indeed, the dichotomy masculine/feminine is fundamental in domination, where one takes the role of the master, and the other the role of the slave. Ernesto, however, continues to be versatile even here. A real exception compared to both the other sex workers I interviewed and to previous literature on male sex work.

Finally, Ernesto is using PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis, which implies the use of a typical HIV antiviral drugs in order to reduce the risk of acquiring HIV himself), in an ongoing research study in Italy, with almost zero possibility of contracting HIV, and he does not require condom use even from clients who are HIV positive if the client is a regular with a viral load equal to zero. This way, he does not embrace the common stereotypes about condoms and sex work (Rinaldi & Bacio, 2022a). Therefore, the point is that Ernesto reflects the “homosexualisation” of sex work first theorised by Johansson (1990), indirectly quoted in Walby (2012), discussed without proof by Rinaldi (2020), and finally demonstrated here in my research. Guillermo, Sven, and Ernesto go beyond the stigma associated to their activities and they behave freely against the stereotypes and the dichotomies of sex among men. These three sex workers are not masculine, nor feminine, are not top, nor bottom, are not hegemonic, nor show signs of subordinated, marginalised, or complicit masculinity.

The fact that in over 45 interviews, only three embrace this type of masculinity, a sort of “neutral” form, shows that the path and journey towards the “homosexualisation” of sex work is still long, but possible. It is not going to be easy to subvert the hegemonic norms behind the current dominated dichotomies, as the second and third sections of this chapter showed. But there is resistance, and where we find resistance, we also find possibilities for change.



## 4.5 Conclusions

Both Connell (2005) and Plummer (2005) discussed the presence of multiple forms of gay subcultures. They both stated that in these multiple ways of being gay it is possible to find resistance and subversions of hegemonic forms of masculinity. Plummer, specifically, wrote:

Past thinking on sexual identities has depended on a rather crude binary system, but this is starting to change. At the very least, in the modern Western world, new identities may be starting to appear: the “S&M”, the fetishist (e.g., foot fetishist, underwear fetishist, armpit fetishist), the macho gay, the passive gay, the chubby gay, the “buff gay”, the queer, the vanilla gay, the hypersexual, the man who is not really interested in sex, the sex crazed, the “chicken hawk”, the “bear”, the jock, the good husband, the voyeur, the heavy pornography user, the masturbator, sugar daddies, rent boys, the polyamorous – to name only a few. Start to put adjectives in front – sexy, unsexy, attractive, unattractive, rough, tender, philandering, serial killer, aging, married – and a further world of proliferating sexual identities opens up. Use the word “sexual” to identify the kind of body you have – beautiful, macho, thin, sick, fragile – and whole new embodied sexual identities appear. Put them alongside other categories – man, woman, Asian, Chicano, African American, Japanese – and another world of “hyphenated” sexual identities starts to appear. New dialogues work to splinter and fragment any one unitary model of the male sexuality (Plummer, 2005, p. 18).

Indeed, sex in the gay world – as some sex workers have said – is an “open book” with infinite possibilities of pleasure. At the same time, both straight and gay sex workers tend to simplify this world using the dichotomy masculine and feminine to explain all types of activities.

In the first section, I briefly engaged with the sexual services that are at the core of the encounter between sex workers and clients. I have mentioned a total of twenty-five different services, and I discussed two of the most cited: oral and anal sex. Moreover, in the section, I highlighted the presence and the clear division between top sex workers and bottom clients, and how this cleavage is cunningly used by the sex workers to deploy their masculinity over the (supposed) femininity of their clients, the object of analysis of this first empirical chapter.

In the second section, I analysed the behaviour of the sex workers who define themselves as straight. I compared my sample with the one of Rinaldi (2020) who met almost exclusively self-identified straight sex workers in a porn cinema in Palermo and other public places in southern Italy, where sex workers need to affirm their masculinity and tend to position themselves inside hegemonic and normative gender rules in order to avoid stigmatisation (Rinaldi, 2020). On the contrary, online sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden do not experience the same stigma since they can easily hide themselves behind the websites they use to advertise their services.

Even though they ended up meeting clients physically, these encounters were less stressful than for the sex workers that Rinaldi met (2020). In our case, the interview with me became the place where to justify their behaviour. According to Rinaldi: “since some male sex workers are not able to compete with other men in the conventional world (for reasons attached to economic, class, and ethnic inequalities) and their masculinity is emptied of hegemonic characters, in doing sex work, their activities become a value, one of the few values they can spend in the society at large, they can be male and, in this way, dominate their clients” (Rinaldi, 2020, pp. 257-258, my translation). The five straight sex workers I met during my study express the same need of affirming their masculinity and of overcoming their clients. However, what they said and the way they said it is different, blurred, and nuanced. Among these five straight sex workers it was possible to identify different “heterosexual lines”: it can be to make an effort for reaching an erection, or not having an erection as a sign of virility; it can be to do a handjob, to try to avoid sucking, or to let clients do a blowjob on them. These sex workers employed different ways to affirm their masculinities, but their behaviours led to the same result.

At the same time, the majority of gay sex workers – the object of the third section together with bisexual sex workers – share the behaviour of their heterosexual colleagues: they stress the importance of masculinity, and the services they offer are tailored by the dichotomy active and passive, which resembles the dichotomy masculine and feminine. We can explain this common behaviour by stressing that the hegemonic character is so widespread that minority groups, such as gay, tend to adapt and seek to obtain the same type of hegemony instead of trying to subvert it. The gay and bisexual sex workers I presented are more market-oriented and more ready to adapt their activities to what clients desire.

Finally, I presented three male sex workers who define themselves as gay but display a different behaviour. They all tend toward what has been called “homosexualisation” of male sex work, in other words the subversion of dichotomies in sex, sexual practices, and sexual behaviours. Even though exploratory, compared to the previous two sections that were sustained by wide research on this subject, in the final section I was able to demonstrate that there is a space for resistance: the possibility of going beyond pre-constituted forms of masculinity (and femininity) in both sex work and sex among gays. The hope is that future research will continue in this direction, starting from a different representation and disposition of both clients and sex workers and going beyond the “old” dichotomy about sex and sexual behaviour. An astonishing result was the lack of difference between Italy in Sweden. The truth is that there are no systematic differences regarding how sex workers in these two countries behave and think about their occupation. Even though there are cultural, institutional, and legal differences between northern and southern Europe regarding both homosexuality

and sex work, these distinctions are not present in my sample. Instead, a pattern of similarities clearly emerges, even if we add the “international” group to this analysis.

In the next chapter, I will analyse the main characteristics of the 45 men I met in Italy and Sweden. I will begin by engaging with the motivation behind their decisions to start selling sex and sexual services, then shift to the working conditions of their activities. Finally, I present sex work as a form of “bodywork”.

# Chapter 5

## Economy of pleasure and economy of the body

This chapter is divided into three distinct sections, although with the same aim to provide an answer to the research question of the economic constraints of the sex workers I interviewed. As I mentioned in the methodology chapter, the interviews highlight an important aspect: the sex workers have comparatively high educational credentials. Out of 45 sex workers, 22 have a university degree: seven have an undergraduate diploma, 14 a Master, and one a PhD; moreover 17 have completed high school and only six, equal to 13%, did not go further than middle school. For this reason, as I stated in previous chapters, it is of interest to understand the reasons that led the sex workers I interviewed to engage in sex for money, even though their class position (given from both their family of origin and educational credentials) could have allowed them access to the job market without unexpected difficulties (Bernstein, 2007).

The second section is devoted to the “working conditions”. This is an umbrella term for many aspects of the work they perform with clients. Following Sanders and colleagues (2016), I will focus on their job status as being self-employed and what this means for their work. The attention will then be on the encounter itself, on the type of interactions they have with their clients, and on the expectations and outcomes of these interactions. I will also analyse the level of control sex workers have by looking at their possibilities for refusing a client or a particular service, and finally their job satisfaction as well as bad experiences and strategies for violence prevention.

In the third and last section of this chapter, I analyse the dimension of “bodywork”. I will start off by employing the concept of bodywork as presented by Wolkowitz (2006) and as used by Walby (2012) to understand what type of bodywork the male sex workers perform with their clients. Indeed, I will use the concept of “touch” and “touching encounters” of Walby (2012) to understand the effect created by the interaction between sex workers and their clients. Then, again from Walby (2012), I will apply his concept of “body trouble” to my sample.

## 5.1 Doing class, doing sex work

Nowadays, it is difficult to not be associated with the so-called “middle class”. Indeed, almost all the population seems (and feels) to fall in this category. In this regard, Connell wrote: “class is rarely mentioned [in policy statements or politicians’ speeches] except in vague appeals to a ‘middle class’ that we are all supposed to belong to” (Connell, 2011, p. 58). The men I met share the same thoughts and expectations: when I asked them about their family of origin, they all replied that they come from a middle-class family. There were some distinctions, but just in terms of coming from an upper-middle class or a lower-middle class family. Only two sex workers clearly define themselves as coming from a “working class” background. As an example, we can consider Guillermo from the international group:

M: Is your family still in Mexico?

G: Yes.

M: Is it a big family? What type of family? What type of class?

G: Yes, 4 brothers and 4 sisters. I am the youngest. My family is a working-class one. My father is a farmer and my mother is a housekeeper. What can I say? A country like Mexico where 50% of the population lives on the streets and in poverty. We are in the middle-low-class.

(Guillermo, 28 years old)

Even if he first defined his family as a working-class one, in the end he switched to a middle-low-class definition. Probably, he compared his family with the general situation in his country of origin but also, he clearly preferred to be associated with the middle-class definition. In my research, I define class as a result of the self-declared class position of the sex workers’ family of origin and of the educational credentials they achieved, or are in the process of achieving. I am aware that this is not a clear-cut definition, but it is a useful one as it enables us to understand why men coming from a generally positive economic situation at home and holding different types of diplomas decide to engage in sex for money instead of trying to find other jobs offered in the labour markets.

First, I want to analyse my sample and compare the following numbers with a more general picture of the data available for our two countries in terms of education. The Italian group is made up of 20 men: two did not go beyond middle school, nine have a high-school diploma, two have an undergraduate degree, and seven a Master’s degree. The Swedish group, formed of 16 men, have somewhat higher educational

performances: only one did not go beyond middle school, six have a high-school diploma, three an undergraduate degree, five a Master's degree, and one a PhD. The international group is more heterogeneous: three did not go beyond middle school (or the equivalent in their countries of origin), two have a high-school diploma, two an undergraduate degree, and two a Master's. If we compare these numbers with the OECD's "Education at a glance" numbers for 2021 we see that in Italy 38% of the population did not go beyond middle-school (18% for Sweden), 43% have a high-school diploma (38% for Sweden), 19% have a tertiary education degree (45% for Sweden), and less than 1% of the population has a PhD (2% for Sweden) (OECD, 2022, p. 45). Even if my sample is quite small, it can be interesting to compare the percentages of the OECD study with the population of my sample.

**Table 5.1 – Educational credentials of the sample compared to OECD 2021 statistics**

Type of degree	IT, my sample	IT, OECD	SW, my sample	SW, OECD	Int, my sample	OECD countries, average
Middle-school or lower	10%	38%	6%	18%	33%	20%
High-school	45%	43%	38%	38%	22%	42%
Tertiary education	45%	19%	50%	45%	45%	33%
PhD	0%	1%	6%	2%	0%	1%

If we compare the numbers, in the case of Italy, we see that my sample has a better qualification than the country as a whole, especially regarding tertiary education, which makes Italy one of the lowest ranked in this category among EU and OECD countries (OECD, 2022). For Sweden, we see the same kind of pattern with more than half of my sample with at least a tertiary education (undergraduate, Master's, or PhD). The same result is also applicable for the international group compared to all OECD countries: despite the absence of PhD students and graduates, the majority hold a university degree. If we look at the above table, the question of why people with higher educational credentials decide to engage with sex work rather than find jobs that require the qualification they achieved in school appears even more important.

As presented in Chapter 2, according to Bernstein (2007), new technologies have influenced both the ways in which sex is sold and also who sells sex. Sex work, in her view, has gained "new respectability" and displays a high presence of middle-class professionals. She poses the following questions: "What were the underlying connections between the new 'respectability' of sexual commerce and the new classes of individuals who were participating in commercial sexual transactions? What was the relationship between the overwhelmingly white, native-born and class-privileged women (and men) who were finding their way into sex work and more generalized patterns of economic restructuring? How did the emergence of new

communications technologies transform the meaning and experience of sexual commerce for sex workers and their customers?” (Bernstein, 2007, p. 474). I will answer the same questions and try to understand if the paths she found for women are applicable, and how, to the men I interviewed in Italy and Sweden (for a more detailed analysis, I suggest consulting Bacio, 2021b).

Why did they start selling sex and sexual services? The majority of the men I interviewed (24 out of 45) declared they started selling sex because they were in need of money. This prevalence does not vary between the three groups, but there are of course nuances to take into consideration. What does ‘in need of money’ mean? Why do they decide to sell sex instead of finding other types of jobs? An example comes from the Italian group, from Francesco:

M: When and how did you start?

F: I started three years ago, when I started working on my Master’s thesis; my parents are dead, and I needed money to survive. Before, I worked for McDonald’s, Blockbuster, I worked in cinemas, different things [...]. But then, with this experimental project, you must be at the laboratory in university all day and I was not able to work anymore. I have to pay rent, bills, university taxes and all the rest [...].

(Francesco, 28 years old)

Francesco is already in a precarious situation because his parents are deceased and he has only one brother, which means he cannot find help in his family as many other Italians at his age can and do. Moreover, he had a “standard job” that became incompatible with the schedules of his university studies in engineering. For these reasons, he decided to engage in sex work. Also in Sweden, the majority of respondents declared they started selling sex because they were in need of money. As with the Italian group, being “in need of money” can take different meanings. Gerard provides an example:

M: Can you tell me how you first got involved in this work?

G: It was last year, when I decided to prepare my [study] exchange to Sweden and I said, “Ok, I am going to need money” and I did not have time to have a full-time job because I have a lot of hours in class. It is full time, I am there from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. I was like, “Ok, I need to find something that will take me less time” and I am like, “Why not sex?” because I do not mind having sex with people [...] I saw it was quite effective and I said, “Why would I stop?”.

(Gerard, 21 years old)

Gerard, a young Master’s student from France doing an exchange program in Sweden, like Francesco in Italy, is busy during the day with classes but at the same

time needs money to survive. Engaging in sex work is easy because he “do(es) not mind having sex with people”. Like other interviewees, some of these men decided to engage in sex work to support their path to achieve a better education and get a degree. The flexibility of sex work, in terms of time schedule (see the second section of this chapter), gives them the opportunity to study, to be in class during the day, and to work in the evenings or during the weekend. At the same time, they are having sex, they are having fun, and they are doing a job that allows them to continue with their education.

The international group seems more heterogeneous: four men (Philibert, Miguel, Duygu, and Gunther) declared they were in “need of money”. Within this group there was one man (Gunther) who also said he engaged in sex for money due to an absence of documents; Jacopo and Esad decided to engage with this market following the “ethic of fun” (Bernstein, 2007); while Guillermo and Martin were already doing massage and subsequently developed a more sexually-oriented approach; finally, Noah said he used to be a friend of a sex worker who helped him become an escort himself. As an example of the men in need of money, we can take Miguel:

M: [...] also because I felt lonely in the place and also because [...], I forgot to say something, the first time I did it in Denmark it was because I did not have money. If I'd had enough money in that moment I would never do it.

(Miguel, 25 years old)

Miguel is a young, good-looking guy from Mexico with an undergraduate degree, who moved to Europe seeking better economic conditions. He was a babysitter for a Danish family when problems arose, and he was abruptly left without a job and money. Due to this unforeseen situation, he started selling sex. He recovered from this situation and went back home, but he did not stop selling sex: instead, he began travelling around the globe selling sex. When I met him, he was travelling across Europe in good spirits and with plans of enrolling in a Master's program in the following fall semester.

Linked to this first category of men who began selling sex because they were in need of money there are two men who started selling sex due to a bad experience in their life: Alessandro and Mattia. Alessandro (34 years old) used to have a betting parlour with his girlfriend, but after seven years of working together and 14 years of their relationship she ran away, taking more than 250,000 euros. She left him without money and with debts to pay (he had to pay the Italian state more than 100,000 euros in taxes). Mattia (43 years old) is a civil servant who was incarcerated for a crime connected to his job, a crime that he claimed he never committed and from which he was later fully exonerated. A simple mistake with many consequences in his life: he was immediately suspended from his job and only



partially reintegrated after the trials. Moreover, he had to pay the costs of the trial and for the lawyers. In the end, he was alone and without money. In sex work, both Alessandro and Mattia found a way to recover, not only the money, but also their good spirits:

M: This is my aim: I must earn all the legal expenses I had to pay and everything I lost from this situation [...]. I used to be full of anger but then I elaborated this in my favour. This situation pushed me into this [sex work].

(Mattia, 43 years old)

More attention should be devoted to two extreme cases like the one of Bo and Peter, both from the Swedish group. Bo, 48 years old at the time of the interview, used to be an escort when he was young. He started engaging with sex for money when he was 17 years old, mainly to have money to buy drugs:

M: Why did you start?

B: My own case was mainly that I had a quite early drug addiction, at about 17 years of age, and in the small town where I came from there was a network. It was a restricted small town and it was easy to get in touch with these men and I [...] at that point I smoked cannabis, but it is an expensive habit. I thought to myself, "There is a possibility". It was not about real mental barriers. I started to sell, and it did not feel so wrong, so horrible. I did not feel ashamed. I guess, I did not really care about what I did at that time. I do not feel ashamed about it now.

(Bo, 48 years old)

Then he moved to Stockholm and graduated from university, achieving a PhD, but things soon went bad again and he became addicted to both alcohol and heavy drugs. Despite being a heterosexual, he continued to engage in sex with men to have money to buy drugs. He mainly sold sex in the streets, in places where it was easy to find gay men. A small number of informants reported about social problems, of drug abuse, criminality, or poverty as the main reason for choosing to sell sex. They are exceptional cases in my sample, but at the time I made the interviews they strongly argued that selling sex was not a problem in itself, rather it had solved other problems.

Other men started engaging in sex work because they considered it a kind of excitement, or because they liked doing sex in general or because they considered sex work a fetish and they liked to be paid for doing it; or because they had friends already in this market; or, lastly, because they immigrated to Italy or Sweden and were without documents and could not be in the official labour market. The majority of the interviewees, though, seemed to follow what Bernstein (2007) called "an ethic

of fun”. In defining this category, she started from Bourdieu’s definition of the “new petite bourgeoisie”:

Whereas the old morality of duty, based on the opposition between pleasure and good, induces a [...] fear of pleasure and a relation to the body made up of “reserve”, “modesty” and “restraint”, and associates every satisfaction of the forbidden impulses with guilt, the ethical avant-garde urges a morality of pleasure as a duty. This doctrine makes it a failure, a threat to self-esteem, not to “have fun” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 367).

In this regard, we can take Matteo from the Italian group as an example:

M: When, how, and why did you start selling sex?

M: This activity started one year ago like a fun thing. I have always been economically self-sufficient, I never asked for money from anybody nor from my family [...]. Then, I was not able to find a job and I was using these gay apps, where many people wrote to me and offered me to have sex with them, everybody between 20 and 60 years old. So, sometimes, just to provoke the oldest men, I wrote them “I can do it for money” but then they replied to me with a “yes” to my request of money and I started to think about it more and more until I started [...]. It is fun!

(Matteo, 30 years old)

Matteo, a young, white guy with a high-school diploma and a wealthy family of origin, thinks that selling sex is a fun thing to do, an easy way to earn money. He, too, was already using gay chats and apps (for a better understanding of these “gay apps”, I suggest Bacio & Peruzzi, 2017; Bacio & Rinaldi, 2021) so the step to enter this market was a short one. He is a member of what Florida (2004) defined a “creative class”, a social formation typical of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century technologically advanced urban economies. He is “creative” in the sense that he is able to perform any kind of job that requires a minimum of technological competence and that he has the willingness to do. Matteo – but also Lorenzo, Edoardo, Jacopo, and Timothee in Italy, Lev in Sweden, Jacopo and Esad of the international group – decided to engage in sex work as excitement, because they liked having sex, or because they wanted to experiment sex with other men and found it appealing to be paid for doing it. According to Bernstein (2007), the women in her studies decided to provide lap dances as a more reliable source of revenue compared to the jobs available in the service sector. Since these women were aware of the discriminations they faced in the new economy, they decided to switch to sex work as a way to avoid exclusion and to earn money. Following Bernstein’s thoughts, men, on the contrary, should not face the same discriminations and should therefore be able to achieve better economic conditions than women. But if we analyse more in detail Bourdieu’s (1984) description of the new petite bourgeoisie, we can find reasons that would also push men into sex work. Bourdieu describes the new petite bourgeoisie as

composed of individuals with two primary trajectories: 1) “those who have not obtained from the educational system the qualifications that would have enabled them to claim the establishment positions their original social position promised them” and 2) “those who have not obtained from their qualifications all they felt entitled to” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 357). So, according to his theories, it is a fault within the educational system, in terms of qualifications provided, that creates a class of people that does not match the employment market requests. Most of the men in my sample would belong to the second group discussed by Bourdieu, those who have some education but are not satisfied with what the regulated work market can offer. In this respect, for Bernstein (2007), women and men engage in sex for money to claim their space in society. Of course, it is possible to agree with her view only if we understand sex work as a legitimate form of work, a profession chosen among the many jobs available in the market economy.

In the Swedish group, we find Lev, who describes sex work as an exciting thing to do and labelled it as fetish:

M: When did you start and how?

L: I was 18. I do not know actually: I just wanted some excitement and I have always been very successful in school and everything I do. I do not know, it is some kind of fetish maybe. This is a very small part of my income, it is like my secret fetish.

(Lev, 20 years old)

Once again, we find here the “ethic of fun” described by Bernstein (2007). Lev is a young entrepreneur who left school after his high-school graduation to start his own business. The majority of his income, he declared, comes from another activity, so he started engaging in sex work not for the money but in order to bring some fun into his working life. Moreover, Lev described himself as bisexual, having sex with men for money and with women in his private life, also because he found it difficult to have women clients. Lev fits exactly the description that Bernstein gives us:

Middle-class sex workers’ frequent embrace of an ethic of sexual experimentation and freedom must thus be seen not only in ideological terms, but as a particular strategy of class differentiation as well. Not incidentally, many of the middle-class sex workers that I interviewed were unpartnered and without children, and the majority described themselves as non-monogamous, bisexual, and experimental [...], the new petite bourgeoisie regards fun, pleasure, and freedom as ethical ideals worthy of strenuous pursuit (Bernstein, 2007, p. 477).

Finally, in the international group, there is Esad, an east-European citizen, based in Switzerland, who is an architect but engages in sex for money as a side-job. He travels across Europe to sell sex but these two activities, travelling and selling sex,

cannot be separated. He has a “travel plan” and wants to discover new countries, and to do so he sells sex. This travel plan is entirely paid for with the money he earns selling sexual services, an activity he likes doing and that he does not regret.

Other men told me they engaged in sex work because they were friends of men, women, or transsexual men or women already active in this market. In Italy, Davide is exemplary:

M: How did you start?

D: I started at the end of ‘90s, it was 1999, I was living in [a city in the centre of Italy] and I was working in a disco club. I cannot label it as “gay”, it was more “transgressive”. There, I met some transsexuals that, honestly, I’d never met before in my life. I became friends with some of them and they introduced me to this world.

(Davide, 57 years old)

Knowing people who sell sex is an advantage not only because you can receive tips and suggestions but mainly because people who are already engaging in sex work demonstrate the legitimacy of this job and challenge the stereotypes and stigma usually attached to it. Indeed, in the international group, there is Noah, who became a sex worker thanks to the help of a friend who he described as a “mentor”:

M: Why did you decide to start? How?

N: How is, I met someone who gave me a rough explanation because he had done it and put me toward a website that was quite self-explanatory, and then why, I was always very sexually open so to speak and so it did not sound very far from what I was doing, which is having brief sexual encounters for recreational purposes.

(Noah, 29 years old)

Noah already engaged in sexual encounters with men for “recreational purposes” and after he received advice from another sex worker, he decided to start selling sex. According to his narration, selling sex was kind of an evolution of what he was already doing for free.

Of course, not all men who engage in sex work are happy or proud of it, and sometimes, it is the only way to earn money in a situation of exclusion, poverty, and illegality. In Italy, Thiago and Fahir fall into this category. The case of Fahir is as clear as it is dramatic: he arrived in Italy from a north African country to change his life and to live openly as a gay man. Unfortunately, he did not find a job and with some compatriots he started selling drugs. He was caught by police and sentenced to two years in prison. When he got out, he applied for an asylum-seeker permit and,

in the meantime, he was back in the same situation as when he arrived in Italy: no documents, no job, and no money. This time, he decided to engage in sex for money:

M: So, in 2016, you came out of prison, and when did you start selling sex?

F: Not before.

M: When?

F: I started when I got out [of prison] to survive. I started with a man. I had sex with him, and he gave me money to pay the rent and to eat.

M: Why did you start selling sex? Why did you not think to do another type of job?

F: I did not find any job, I do not have any documents, I cannot do anything about that [...]. I pay 200 euros per month for a bed in a shelter and we are four people living there.

(Fahir, 34 years old)

Fahir does not have many opportunities in front of him. He cannot commit another crime, otherwise he will be expelled from the country and obliged to go back home where his life is at risk since he is openly gay. At the same time, he needs to earn money to survive. Sex work became the only available option, according to him. It is not illegal, and it gives him the opportunity to survive. Also in Sweden, it was possible to find two men who engaged in sex for money due to the absence of documents: Faruh and Mitar. The first, Faruh, was born in India and moved to Copenhagen to start a Master's programme. He regularly sells sex in the south and south-west of Sweden. This is why he started:

M: When did you start selling sex?

F: I started around 2011.

M: So, did you arrive here in June/July 2011?

F: In August. Then I applied for some jobs, but it was difficult to get a job for a non-EU citizen, and because of the language, and when I came here there was a 5.1% unemployment rate in Denmark. Right now, it is 7.2%.

M: So, first you tried to get a job, but you did not have the chance to find one. And you started selling sex because you lacked money?

A: Yeah, expenses are really high.

(Faruh, 26 years old)

Faruh said that he never thought to engage in sex work when he was in India, at home with his family, but when he moved to Scandinavia he faced some discrimination due to his lack of EU citizenship and language skills. Starting to sell sex was easy, especially in Denmark where buying sex is legal, so he started a business that would allow him to continue his studies. Mitar has a different story, more similar with Fahir's in Italy. Mitar came to Sweden as a refugee since he was openly gay in a country where homosexuality can put one in serious risk. Unlike Fahir, he did not commit any crime, but he still needed money to live even if the Swedish state provided him with accommodation and food in a refugee camp.

M: When did you start selling sexual services?

M: Actually, when I came here.

M: So, nothing in [your country of origin]?

M: No, no. I came here, and I needed the money and I tried to find a job and it is really, really, hard, even for washing dishes in restaurants. And if you do not know the basic Swedish it is really hard. There was this guy who came to me and said, "Want to meet me?" and so everything is really expensive and he said, "I can cover your travel expenses" and we had some good times [...] drinking, watching funny videos and it just happened actually. I told my boyfriend that this is an opportunity to earn some money. At the beginning he was not [...] you know [...], but unfortunately money is something everybody needs.

(Mitar, 27 years old)

Mitar has a boyfriend who is himself an asylum seeker. Mitar tried to convince him to do the same, to sell sex, but he decided not to do it. Mitar explained his engagement in selling sex with the combination of his lack of language skills and the need for money in order to be able to live a decent life outside the refugee camp. Selling sex was available as a way of making money, but he is not "proud" of what he is doing:

M: I am not proud of this, of course, and I do not want to do that, but [...] I am not judging of course, I do not have the right to judge anyone, but for me it is the only way to get some money and buy the things that I need.

(Mitar, 27 years old)

For Mitar, Fahir, and Faruh, selling sex is a necessity because of a precarious situation related to their status as migrants, even if their problems did not arise because they were selling sex. But there are other examples. I present now Guillermo and Martin, both from the international group. They were both already

engaged in a sort of massage activity but decided to develop the “sexual part”. This is the story of Guillermo:

G: So, five years ago I came back from living on the beach, I met this French man, that I was in love with, a masseur. He does a very, very good massage. He does massage professionally without becoming involved erotically. And then I was working in Mexico City in a call centre with a horrible payment, so I thought to try to do something for more extra money and I remembered about [name of the website] that I got to know when I was living in Seattle. In Seattle, I got to know the website because I worked with my friend doing advertising for apartments for rent. Anyway, so I published my first post on the website while in Mexico City, that was “*Massage to die for*”. It is an expression in English like “to be irresistible”.

(Guillermo, 28 years old)

Guillermo is a young, Latino guy who travels a lot, mostly across the American continent before he began travelling also in Europe and based himself in Paris. He is mainly a masseur, but he also offers sexual services.

Overall, the men I interviewed follow Bernstein’s (2007) description of middle-class sex work as a “recreational model of sexual intimacy”. The same observation is available in Walby’s (2012) study of male sex workers in different Anglophone countries. It is important to underline, as described in the previous chapter, the use of what Rinaldi (2020) called “repertoire” to present and describe the worlds of the sex workers he met. Inside this repertoire, there are two types of alignment actions: “reasons” and “accounts”, as I previously described. Of course, it is possible to use again Rinaldi’s theories even for this section, but it is important to remember that there are many differences between our two samples. The sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden are very different from the sex workers Rinaldi interviewed in a porn cinema in the south of Italy. They did not come from a “middle class” background and we do not know much about their life outside the cruising area. For this reason, I preferred to use other theories (such as Bernstein’s) that, in my opinion, fit better with my sample. At the same time, as I wrote in Chapter 3, it is important to remember that this study is not about the truth but it is about what the sex workers told me about themselves. I do not know when and where they lied to me, but they did, obviously. This, to remind the reader that if I do not always challenge their words, it does not mean I believed everything they said.

## 5.2 “Way better than other jobs”: the working conditions of male sex workers

In this second section, I focus on the “working conditions” of men who sell sex and sexual services in Italy and Sweden. As the concept of working conditions is very broad and diverse, I will divide the analysis into the following five subsections, inspired by the work of Sanders and colleagues (2016): 1) employment status; 2) the encounter and interactions with clients; 3) the level of control given by a) the right to refuse a client and b) the right to refuse a service; 4) job satisfaction given by a) the financial rewards and b) the flexibility of the working hours; 5) bad experiences and violence prevention. As before, for each of these points, I will analyse and compare the behaviour of the three different groups and, for the sake of brevity, I analyse the three groups inside each subsection.

### 5.2.1 Employment status

All the men I met, without exception, were self-employed. This is different compared to previous research. For example, the survey conducted by Sanders and colleagues (2016) of about 240 online sex workers highlights that “many respondents had also worked in other sex markets before doing independent escorting: 35% had engaged in webcamming; 30% had worked for an escorting agency; 24% in brothels, parlours or saunas; and 8% of respondents had worked in the street sex market prior to independent escorting. This points to independent escorting being part of a longer trajectory within sex industry, with sex workers moving between, and overlapping, different sex markets over time” (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 6). The same variability emerged in Walby’s (2012) qualitative study where, out of 30 respondents, two began in the sex trade via street-level prostitution, a few worked in escort agencies and massage parlours, two others worked in the porn industry. In my sample all 45 sex workers were self-employed, no managers, no agencies, just freedom to do what they wanted when they wanted. The older sex workers, the ones who started before the internet was used for the purpose of advertising sex for money, experienced a different approach to this profession, as in the previously mentioned cases of Bo (in Sweden) and Davide (in Italy). The latter recalls how he started:

M: You never worked in the streets [...].

D: I never worked in the streets!



M: What about saunas or *battuage*<sup>1</sup>?

D: No, never been in a gay sauna, it is not something that I like, disco yes, I have always been a “disco guy”. If my friends organize a good night out, I will join them, but they are more interested in organizing “botox matinée”<sup>2</sup> [...] there are people who set the alarm to go to a botox matinée.

(Davide, 57 years old)

When Davide started, internet was not an option, but this was not a problem for him because he found clients during his nights at different discos. Other sex workers, younger than him, also used the sauna as a place to meet clients, as for example Thiago in Italy:

M: How did you start?

T: I started in a gay sauna, it was easier than paying for advertisements, because it was more direct.

M: How many clients did you have?

T: Usually, two or three every day.

M: Were you there every day?

T: Yes, even Saturdays and Sundays, I was earning quite a lot.

(Thiago, 34 years old)

Even if illegal, another five sex workers in Italy recalled that they used to sell sex in gay saunas, and Leonardo even in a cruising place. The Swedish group is more homogeneous. Apart from Bo and Peter, none of the others had ever sold sex in places open to the public. It is important to stress that in Sweden, to control the spread of HIV/AIDS, gay saunas were forbidden until recently, and there was only one, “Viking Sauna” in Stockholm, before the ban started. In Sweden, those who were interested in finding men to have sex with could use both cruising places and “video clubs”, a Swedish peculiarity. Nevertheless, Peter is one of the few, if not

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<sup>1</sup> A French word widely used in Italy to refer to gay cruising areas.

<sup>2</sup> With the expression “botox matinée” Davide means a closed event where people, under the supervision of a doctor, pay to receive face Botox injections. Matinée is a common word in the Spanish and Italian gay communities to refer to an event that takes place in the early morning, usually after a night of party and without sleeping.

the only one, who can really compare on-street sex work and the internet. Perhaps surprisingly, he recalled his street activities as safer than today's internet work:

P: I am not a very nervous person but of course when I am about to meet somebody new, I am always [...] I want to find out who he is. That is also why sometimes I prefer the streets because I could get the intuition directly, from the internet I can see the way they write messages, but a message could be completely different from the live person. But in the streets they would roll down the windows, they would just walk up to you. It was very easy.

M: So, do you think it is safer to meet people in the street than online? Because of the direct contact.

P: Yes, because I think I have a good intuition and I feel it helps me a lot in saying "no" to some people. I feel like the customers in the street, because there are not so many guys who go on the street. There are a lot of girls; you still see girls today even though the internet has developed. You go to the centre and you see the girls and I can tell exactly who is working and who is not working. I think many of the guys they were going to pick up girls, many of these customers. They saw us, we were so slim, we were beautiful.

(Peter, 25 years old)

The international group is the most attached to the internet, due to their great level of mobility through different places. But two of them (Miguel and Martin) used to contact their clients in real life, Miguel in a sauna in Switzerland, and Martin in a sex club in the Czech Republic. These places were both specifically for people who sold sex for money. Even though there are some sex workers who sometimes sold sex in public places, however, the internet remains the main or exclusive way to sell sex to their clients. In their stories, the internet appears to be the most reliable and safest way to seek clients. Since there were no sex workers in my sample who previously worked in an agency or under the supervision of a manager, it is extremely difficult to make any sort of comparison. On the one hand, it corroborates the literature that stresses that today the largest cohort of male sex workers are those who work online (Minichiello et al., 2013). The same is also true for women: it has been estimated that 93% of independent female sex workers are located online (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011). On the other hand, I agree with the literature that indicates that male sex workers who work online differ substantially from those working in the streets, in terms of better education, older age, more likely to identify as homosexual, lower rates of drug use, and higher rates of HIV/STDs testing (Bimbi, 2007; Leary McCouns & Minichiello, 2007; Logan, 2010; Minichiello et al., 2013, Parsons et al., 2004).

## 5.2.2 The encounter and its interactions

Here I compare two different theories about what happens during the encounter between a sex worker and his client. As pointed out in previous chapters, there are two main theories about how sex workers interact with their clients: the one highlighted by Sanders (2005) considers how sex workers develop “emotion management strategies” and a “manufactured identity” mainly to protect themselves and as a business strategy; while according to Bernstein (2007) sex workers develop a “bounded authenticity” where emotions and pleasure are not banned from sex work as such but, only from parts of the work they perform. These two theories are opposed to each other. So, which strategy is prevalent for the male sex workers who live and work via the internet in Italy, Sweden, or across countries and continents?

Sanders (2005) used four different concepts to measure the “emotion management strategies”: 1) body exclusion zones, particularly kisses; 2) condom as a barrier; 3) a prevalence of or at least a preference for domination services; 4) manufacturing identity measured as protecting the self, performing a business strategy, and as separation with sex workers’ private life and sex. In the following subsections, I will analyse each of these four strategies.

According to Sanders, “previous research has established that certain sex acts are not generally sold as they are (1) too time-consuming, (2) too painful, or (3) simply reserved for private activities” (Sanders, 2005, p. 326). Of course, even though time is always remunerated, for some sex workers having quick encounters is better than long and time-consuming meetings. Indeed, some sex workers are also students, or they have other jobs to attend to that prevent them from spending too much time with their clients. Painful activities were avoided by all the sex workers I interviewed. Indeed, the sex workers I met did not want to experience pain for any reason, for example they do not perform sex as bottom if they are not feeling confident of being able to do it. But “pain” can be a service that clients ask for, as Francesco tell us:

M: What about domination or BDSM [bondage domination sadism masochism]?

F: Yes, I do something. But without exaggerating: punches, slaps, kicks, pissing. I put pissing in this BDSM services, something like that, there are some clients who asked me. Anyway, I do this only as a top, never as a bottom.

M: So, nothing extremely strong, you do not want to cause pain?

F: No, I do not have a problem with that, if they want strong or very strong, I can do it without problems.

(Francesco, 28 years old)

The third point is the most interesting here. According to Sanders (2005) sex workers put a wall between actions reserved for private life and the sex offered to clients. Among them, kissing is the most common. Do the sex workers avoid kissing clients as much as they can? Is it something reserved for their private life? Apparently kissing was not a problem for most of those I interviewed. Among the Italian group only four out of 20 did not kiss (Davide, Antonio, Nikolas, and Fahir), and only one of those (Nikolas) declared to be straight. There were the same number of “kissers” in the Swedish group where only three out of 16 did not offer this service (Onofrio, Gunnar, and Bengt). In the international group of six, only Gunther and Jacopo did not kiss their clients, and only Gunther declared to be straight. Why did they not offer this service? Davide and Gunther said that kissing is an intimate thing, and they did not do that with clients, as Sanders (2005) found in her study. Fahir said that not all clients are “clean” including the freshness of their mouths, so he tried to avoid kissing “the dirty” clients. It is very interesting that a large majority of these men did not have a problem kissing their clients. Ramiro, for example, said that he really loved kissing his clients:

M: Do you kiss your client?

R: Always. I like to close my eyes and kiss them.

(Ramiro, 30 years old)

At the same time, condoms (which will be further discussed in the third section, under “body trouble”) were used only with the purpose of protecting sex workers and their clients from STDs and not as a physical and psychological barrier. The only exception is the case of Gunther. He is a straight German guy, 22 years old, who had been selling sex for the last two years. He had a troubled experience in his past as he served four years in a juvenile prison and did not have any contact with his family. He started selling sex in the United States, but now he travels across different countries, mainly on the European continent and selling sex is his only source of income. He has only one, but very strict, rule:

M: Do you kiss?

G: No.

M: Both men and women or just men?

G: Both, that is private time, it is personal. The only thing that they touch is my dick with a condom around it.

M: That is all.

G: Yes.

(Gunther, 22 years old)

Gunther was one of the few sex workers who required the use of a condom for oral sex. But this is not the main point: first of all, Gunther is straight; second, he is not proud of what he is doing. He copes with these two facts by limiting the contact with his clients as much as he can. This is the only case where I found the use of “condom as a psychological barrier” as noted by Sanders (2005).

According to Sanders (2005) there are three reasons that explain why the female sex workers she met had a preference for domination services: “Firstly, there is a simple economic calculation here, because domination services are a specialist market, and so reap higher remuneration than ordinary sexual services. Secondly, there is a direct reduction of body contact and penetration is rarely involved [...]. Finally, the fantasy of domination rests on the client’s subordination to the female” (Sanders, 2005, p. 327). It is true that domination services are a specialist market that calls for higher remuneration. This is what I and the sex workers I met defined as “fetish” during our interviews. Indeed, fetish services are always paid at least as much as the other “standard services” (like oral sex), but most of the time they are paid more. In spite of this, some sex workers did not like to provide this kind of fetish services, as Mitar pointed out:

M: So, not BDSM?

M: No.

M: So, no pissing and fisting?

M: No, no, that is really [...] actually about BDSM I will try this. But, no one ever asked me, but [...].

M: Sorry, what did they ask you and you said no?

M: They did not ask me. No one asked me for dirty. Pissing never, because I really find it [...] disgusting [...].

M: So, you never received fetishism requests?

M: No. I have contact with some people and I say to them at a certain point that I have some limits and that I do not want to do some things. Some of them are like “ah ok [...] I would not ask you for that”.

(Mitar, 27 years old)

Some sex workers highlighted in their advertisements that they did not provide fetish services. This way, clients who preferred these kinds of services would contact other sex workers who did not have a problem to perform them. According to Sanders (2005), domination services reduced body penetration, but this does not seem to be the case for male sex workers. Of course, there is less penis-to-anal penetration when performing these fetish types of services and the same is true for pissing, for example. But there are other services that require actual anal penetration, like for example fisting. Fisting is a peculiar service that needs preparation from both sides (sex worker and client) and that not all sex workers are willing to perform. Some of them, to quote again Mitar, found it “disgusting”. For others it is just too difficult or too complicated. However, among those who did provide it, sex workers were always top, and clients always bottom. So, for the men I met, domination or fetish services did not always involve a reduction of body contact or diminish the penetration compared to “standard” services as Sanders (2005) wrote. Finally, it is true that providing domination services is also a way for sex workers to exercise power over their clients since in my sample clients are always submissive when involved in these kinds of fetish services. However, none of the sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden stressed that they needed to exercise power over clients during the encounters.

There are more differences than similarities between the sample of female sex workers studied by Sanders (2005) and my sample of male sex workers. I think this is the case especially, if not exclusively, because the relation between sex workers and clients is highly gendered. The gender of the participants of these interactions matters a lot. I will explore this further in the next subsection, where I discuss the core part of Sander’s study, the so-called “manufacturing identity” and will contrast it to Bernstein’s (2007) “bounded authenticity”.

According to Sanders (2005), following the so-called “script theory” of Simon and Gagnon (1986), the majority of women she met performed a pre-constituted set of behaviours during the encounters with their clients. Sanders called this “it is just acting”, to emphasise both the connection with the script theory and that the outcome of the encounters is “closed” to quote Walby (2012), in the sense that what happens between sex workers and clients is easily predictable in advance. The reason for this similar and repetitive behaviour has, for Sanders (2005), two main reasons: to protect the sex worker’s self and to perform a business strategy that increases the earnings without damaging the sex workers’ ability to have sex and offer sexual services. For example, sex workers tend to use pseudonyms “which is universal in the sex industry, is an important stage prop that sex workers adopt in order to act their role and maintain a barrier between the character exposed to the client and what the women consider to be their ‘real’ personality” (Sanders, 2005, p. 330). Another example is faking orgasm and sexual excitement, which “is a

female skill that is learnt through sharing stories, imitation and dramatic performance” (Sanders, 2005, p. 330). The same argument is sustained by O’Neill:

Emotional labour is a central aspect of the women’s relationship with the client and involves them in manipulating, suppressing and falsifying their own feeling life in order to do the intimate work (O’Neill, 2001, p. 89).

Bernstein (2007) found a different behaviour. Even though she acknowledges the same “emotional labour” as well as “physical labour” in the clients’ transactions mentioned by both O’Neill and Sanders, she also stresses that

[i]n my own research, evidence of middle-class sex workers’ effort to manufacture authenticity resided in their descriptions of trying to stimulate – or even produce – genuine desire, pleasure and erotic interest for their clients (Bernstein, 2007, p. 484).

Moreover Bernstein (2007) found “authentic libidinal and emotional ties with clients” when sex workers experience pleasure in doing and providing sex and sexual services, something that, according to previous studies like Sanders’, would be strongly avoided. The great majority of sex workers I interviewed seemed instead to correspond to Bernstein’s description. For the Italian group, we can take Ramiro’s view as illustrative:

R: When you speak over the phone, there is the guy with an acute voice, and you imagine him like that, and you laugh. For me being an escort is not a humiliating job, it is a work that gives you pleasure, and it is not easy to do [...] doing things, make them relaxed, so they are at ease [...] it is like a standard massage but with a happy part. Then, I like to make new friends. For example, when I needed a computer, a client came the day after with his old pc to help me out.

M: So, did you meet nice people?

R: Yes.

(Ramiro, 30 years old)

Ramiro experienced pleasure with his clients, sexual but also non-sexual, because doing this activity allowed him to meet nice people who could help him when he needed. It is possible to find the same kind of experience in the story of Timothee, also from the Italian group:

M: You said before: “I do not want to stop, but if I want to do it, I will do it”. Do you think it will be easy to stop?

T: I do not know. I do not think it will be easy because it is a pleasure [...] It is a pleasure to give pleasure to another person and also being paid for this. I do not know

how to explain it in another way. I mean, I have pleasure also in being paid. It is something really, really positive. I really like what I am doing. So, I do not think it will be easy to stop, because I know some of the clients very well, there is a relationship [...] it is not friendship but more complicity, on this sexual aspect. So, stopping it will mean also stop seeing them, stop having pleasure with them. Maybe I can stop with some of them but with others it is different [...]. I do not love them, and it is not the same emotions with all of them, but I really like to see them every time.

(Timothee, 46 years old)

Even if the relationship is clear, and the sex workers are always remunerated for their activities, many of the informants are emotionally attached to their clients. It is possible to find the same kind of attitude in the Swedish group, for example when I asked Lukasz, 25 years old, if he was doing it only to make more money he replied “Yes, but I also get a lot of pleasure from that”. We also find a more “customer-service” oriented approach in Sven’s account. To help me better understand his job as a sex worker, he decided to compare it to one of his previous jobs as a waiter in a café:

S: And I say customer service because there are a lot of people that work with that and I did work with that before I started to escort, and I draw a lot of parallels between those jobs because they both deal with people. And actually, one of them is better for me, because as an escort I never met a bad customer, never once. I have always met people who are kind, who are willing to open themselves to me. And at customer service I get a lot of people that are just angry, that are just so demanding and so try to belittle you. So, if I were to choose, I would choose escorting every day. Because you know you connect with people, it is more lucrative, and it just gives me more as a person.

(Sven, 25 years old)

Once again, even Sven highlights that this is a job, a lucrative one and even more lucrative if compared to other jobs in the service sector. Also, according to his story, doing sex work is better than being a waiter not only because he has never met a bad client but also because sex work gives him the chance to connect with people and to share moments with them. The same is true for the international group. We can take Martin (27 years old) as an example. He stressed that compared to the other sex workers he knew, he spent more time with clients, even more than the time he was effectively paid for, and this happened because he wanted that, and because he tried “to build a relationship” with them. So, most sex workers I talked to wanted both to have pleasure and give pleasure. To them, the sexual act was not meaningless or devoid of emotions. However, the pleasure they had with clients was different from the pleasure they experienced in their private life. Francesco, from the Italian



group, said, like Martin, that he really wanted to build a relationship with his clients, but this did not mean that the pleasure he felt was “real”:

M: So, did you cum during the encounter?

F: No, I cum but I do not feel satisfied, you cum without the pleasure of cumming, you still have the desire to cum.

M: Is this a good or bad thing?

F: It is not good or bad because even if you have another client you still have the desire to cum that will not be satisfied. [laughs] I know, it is complicated.

(Francesco, 28 years old)

Sven from the Swedish group also claimed that the pleasure of doing sex in private life is different from the sex and the pleasure with clients:

M: Do you find any difference between these two? Apart from the fact that there are no money exchanges.

S: Well, it is usually what they expect and, as I said, in private I am versatile, while as an escort I am just top. But the customers meet me for me, like to get the boyfriend experience.

M: Other differences?

S: No, not really, like I am more relaxed in private, but that is just because I am in private. As an escort, I try to be professional.

M: Maybe that is why you cannot concentrate on your personal pleasure, when you are working you have to concentrate on the pleasure of the other person.

S: Absolutely.

(Sven, 25 years old)

The sex workers I interviewed followed what Bernstein (2007) called “bounded authenticity” when they were with their clients, they did not pretend to be somewhere else. They shared emotions with them and they were also open to both giving and receiving pleasure from them. The pleasure might not be of the same quality as the one they experience in private life, but the sex workers I talked to were “open” and not “closed” in their meetings. It is again important to stress the differences between male and female sex workers. As I wrote above, Sanders (2005) highlighted that very often female sex workers pretend to have an orgasm. That is a

bit more complicated for men because an erection is visible, and a female orgasm is different from an ejaculation. Even though Francesco taught us that, for him, cumming does not mean feeling real pleasure, the other sex workers stressed that the emotions they have with clients are real and authentic. Once again, I did not find significant differences among the three groups.

### 5.2.3 Being in control

In this section, I analyse two other aspects of the sex workers' working conditions, namely the possibility for sex workers to refuse a client or a service. According to Sanders and colleagues (2016), being in control of their working activities is a key element in determining the quality of the job also in terms of physical and psychological wellbeing. Since my sample consists of sex workers who are not coerced to sell sex and, as I highlighted in the first subsection of this second section, are self-employed and without managers or agencies, I decided to measure this "control" with the two variables of being able to refuse a client or to refuse a service. Indeed, to have the freedom to say "no" to a client who appears dangerous or who behaves in strange ways can be tricky especially for those who are doing this job because they are in need of money. To say no to a client means that an encounter will not be concluded, and it implies a loss of money for the sex worker. Similarly, to refuse a particular type of service can reduce the earnings of the sex workers. What was the attitude of the men I met? Were they able to refuse something they did not want to do?

Among the 45 sex workers I met, only seven reported not being willing or able to refuse a client, these are: Davide, Simone, and Misha in Italy; Lukasz and Peter in Sweden; and Philibert and Gunther in the international group. Peter also reported that in the beginning he did not refuse clients, but that nowadays he has a different policy. Among the remaining six (I exclude Peter because now he is able to refuse clients), only four reported they were in need of money, and two of those are in the so-called international group. Gunther said he could not refuse a client because he was in desperate need of money, and so he developed a coping strategy, a "trick" to survive each uncomfortable situation:

M: So, you never refused a contact with someone who wants to pay you?

G: No, I close my eyes and think of Beyoncé.

(Gunther, 22 years old)

Irony is strategic in life, especially when you are "obliged" to do a thing you do not want to do, such as selling sex for Gunther. In order to cope with this unwanted situation, he "closes his eyes" and thinks of something better. Sanders (2004a) also

wrote about irony and humour as a strategy while doing this activity. More seriously, in the Italian group there were different views that motivated the decision not to refuse a client. Davide said:

D: On [a particular website] not everyone has profile pictures, but I do not ask clients to send me their pictures.

M: You never asked them for a picture?

D: No, because [...] I do not refuse a client. If a client contacts me, I must be available because he pays me.

M: You never refused anyone?

D: No, the client pays, the “client has the right”. When someone contacts me, it means that he likes me and I must offer him the service I provide, it is not that I let them pay me if I like them, otherwise it becomes crazy!

(Davide, 57 years old)

Even if Davide was not in need of money and his participation in the sex market was a kind of hobby, an excitement, a side-job, he still had the same attitude as when he started selling sex: a client cannot be refused because he pays you and, for this reason, he has more rights than the sex worker, who, in the moment he decides to engage in sex for money, is obliged to accept all the clients who request him. The outcome is the same, but the reason Misha does not refuse a client is different:

M: So, you never refused a client?

M: Why shall I humiliate someone? I am also destined to become old; we are all going to become old. Yes, some of them are smelly, and I immediately tell them to shower, but only this can bother me.

(Misha, 35 years old)

Misha compares his activity to a visit to the doctor. In his own words, a doctor cannot refuse to meet a patient and, similarly, he cannot refuse to meet a client. He even compared the act of refusing a client to a humiliation, something that he cannot do to another person. Misha shows a vein of compassion, understanding the needs of physical closeness of elder men. This compassionate gaze enables him to be very direct – and for example demand hygiene – without humiliating the person who is looking for sex.

The other sex workers, who did not have a problem refusing clients, stated the physical appearance of the clients (if in their view they were unattractive), if they

acted weirdly (for example during the exchange of messages), if the sex workers feared dangerous situations (such as appointments in the middle of the night), or feared STDs transmission (for example when clients asked to do “bareback” sex, i.e. anal sex without a condom) as a reason.

Regarding the refusal of services, I already mentioned that the services most often mentioned revolved around kissing and some fetishisms. In general, the sex workers I interviewed have strict policies about which services to offer to clients and which services to avoid. Apparently, their clients always accepted their policy and did not ask for services that the sex workers did not want to do. If sex workers did not want to kiss, they did not kiss. If sex workers did not agree to sex without a condom, clients did not ask for the contrary. If sex workers did not like fetishism, clients would instead contact those who were specialized in these kinds of services. Clients’ behaviour, as reported for example in Sanders (2005), did not find consistency in my sample. As I highlighted in the previous pages, I think the fact that the sex workers I interviewed and their clients were of the same gender explains much of the positive attitude that the sex workers had towards clients and their ability to refuse particular services even if they were more remunerating, such as the services that fell into the “fetish” category. The crucial factor of sex workers and clients sharing the same gender will be addressed in the next chapter.

To summarize, the sex workers I interviewed seemed to be in control of their work. Most of them were able to refuse clients who did not fit their physical tastes, who behaved awkwardly or asked for unwanted services like unprotected sex. A minority of the sex workers had a different policy. Some of them were in such need of money that they could not refuse any clients who offered to pay for sexual services, others developed specific strategies in order to deal with bodies and behaviours they did not like. Again, it is important to stress that my sample is different from what can be found in other studies on male sex workers (for example, Rinaldi, 2020). Among my research participants, I did not find signs of exploitation or trafficking; there were no managers or pimps to satisfy. The male sex workers I met had a large amount of freedom in their activities but this does not mean, of course, they are representative of all men in the industry. As other literature shows (Gaffney & Beverley, 2001) the outcomes for men who engage in sex for sale are multiple and different.

#### **5.2.4 Job satisfaction**

Sanders and colleagues (2016) discussed the job satisfaction of UK-based online sex workers in terms of remuneration and flexibility of working hours. Job satisfaction has been examined in the broader feminist debates around sex work. Sanders and Hardy (2015) measured the job satisfaction among women in the strip industry and found that the levels of job satisfaction were high amongst the survey

sample of internet-based sex workers. Sanders and colleagues (2016) reiterated the same questions in their online survey where “respondents typically selected positive or neutral words. Out of the top seven characteristics chosen to describe their work, six of the characteristics were positive: 91% of sex workers described their work as ‘flexible’ and 66% described it as ‘fun’; over half of the respondents (56%) found their job ‘rewarding’, ‘skilful’, ‘sociable’ and ‘empowering’” (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 7). Moreover, the authors allowed the respondents to comment further on their working conditions: “the most common responses were 1) financial rewards; 2) flexible working hours; 3) the choice and freedom they have in their decision around when, where, and how to sell sex” (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 7). I already discussed the choice and freedom to refuse a client and a service so, in this section, I will focus on the first two most common responses among internet-based sex workers: the financial rewards and the flexibility involved in selling sex.

How much can a sex worker earn selling sex and sexual services? In the previous pages I quoted Logan (2014) and his quantitative study on the price that online sex workers advertise. According to the American author, US sex workers fixed their prices according to their physical characteristics (like muscles, body hair, and height) as well as their ethnicity and, finally, their sexual position. In order to better compare the three groups of sex workers, I converted all the prices into a single currency, namely euros, and, to avoid problems of exchange rate fluctuation, I applied a fixed exchange rate of 1 USD, 1 GBP, 10 SEK equal to 1 Euro. Moreover, as a reference price I take only “standard” services (like oral and anal sex) and not “fetish” services because, as already mentioned, not all sex workers perform those services and the price is higher than normal. On average, the 45 sex workers I met charged 130 Euros per hour, the minimum fee being 40 Euros and the maximum 400 Euros per hour; the median amounted to 100 Euros. The sex workers in my sample had different experiences with the length of the encounter. The majority stressed that usually a meeting with clients lasted for less than sixty minutes, in some occasions very excited clients would have an orgasm even within ten to twenty minutes. Of course, sex workers are always paid for the full hour, no matter the actually length of the encounter.

Not surprisingly, members of the Italian group were the ones who charged less, while those who belonged to the international charged more. As I wrote in the methodology chapter, in Italy the number of men who advertise sex in return for money is much higher than the number of men who do the same in Sweden. Thus, the high level of competition lowers the general price as many Italian sex workers also stressed in the interviews, like the only couple I met, Thiago and Ramiro:

R: In Italy the fee used to be 100/150 euros, then there was the economic crisis and there is a lot of competition [...].

T: Too many sex workers and few clients [...], when I was working as a hairdresser, I heard many transsexual sex workers saying that they used to earn 1,000 euros per day, now to do the same you must work double of the time.

(Ramiro, 30 years old and Thiago, 34 years old)

Ramiro and Thiago remembered “the good old days” before the economic crisis of 2008 when the number of sex workers was lower. In Italy, sex workers charged on average 102 Euros per hour, 28 Euros less than the whole sample. The minimum was 40 Euros, the maximum 375 Euros, and the median 88 Euros. On the other hand, in Sweden sex workers’ fee was 127 Euros per hour on average, 3 Euros less than the whole sample but 25 Euros more than the Italian group. The minimum was 50 Euros, the maximum 250, and the median 123 Euros. It is interesting to highlight that the maximum requested in Italy is higher than the maximum asked for in Sweden; about 125 Euros more. The reason for this is that there is a higher-class sex worker in my Italian sample that I did not manage to include in Sweden. The international group was the most expensive: on average they charged 197 Euros per hour, 67 Euros more than the standard average, 95 Euros more than Italians and 70 more than Swedes. Moreover, the minimum was 60 Euros, the maximum 400, and the median 175 Euros. Indeed, international sex workers had a premium: they sound “exotic” because they are always foreigners in the country they visit, and this is translated into a higher fee. Indeed, in their advertisements, they stressed that they were available for a short period of time that could last from a few days to a week. In this way, they become what economists called “a scarce good” that changed the relation between supply and demand. Clients wanted to hire them because they were available only for a short period of time and, in a sense, quite exclusive. Even though the fee was higher, the earnings of an international sex worker were not necessarily higher than the remuneration of “local” sex workers, because international sex workers have higher costs like transportation and accommodation which are immaterial among sex workers who live in the same city where they work.

Is there any relation with their sexual position as found by Logan (2014)? Apparently not. As I noted earlier, 21 sex workers are “top”, five are “versatile but mostly top”, nine are fully “versatile”, three are “versatile but mostly bottom”, five are “bottom”, and two did not answer this question. When I compared price and sexual position, it was not possible to find any kind of correlation between sex workers’ sexual positions and the price they charged clients. Indeed, there were sex workers in the former category who charged as little as 50 Euros, like Misha and Ottaviano in Italy or Serkan in Sweden. Conversely, there were sex workers in the latter category who charged 250 Euros, such as Bengt in Sweden. Also, the “ethnic” preference cannot be applied here: on the one hand only 10 sex workers are “non-white” so to make a “methodologically valid” comparison is difficult due to the

small size of the sub-sample, but on the other hand there was not a real price difference between different ethnicities.

Some sex workers earned as little as 750 Euros per month (but Ottaviano was doing it as a part-time work), while others can earn as much as 6,000 euros per month (like Gunther, Edoardo, Ramiro, or Matteo). They all stressed that the profits are not equal every month, there are different factors such as the number of regular clients, the luck to meet a rich client, or the time they can dedicate to this activity. It is difficult to speculate about how much a sex worker can earn every year. Sanders and colleagues (2018) found that 63.9% of their sample earned less than 30,000 British pounds per year (before any deductions, taxes included), which equates sex work to a “standard” job in the service sector. Finally, it is interesting to note that only the Italian group stressed that the money they earned was “black money”, money outside of the system: they did not make any receipt or invoice for their activity and, consequently, they did not pay any taxes to the state. In the Swedish and international groups, this was never touched upon in our conversations. Nobody reported any problem with tax authorities and, probably for this reason, no one was scared of possible problems in the near future. The interesting part is that the majority of men who sell sex in Italy reported that they would like to pay taxes and, especially, pension contributions. As an example, we can take Francesco:

M: Is it a problem that everything you earn is “black money”?

F: I would like to pay pension-scheme contributions; in this way I would already have a lot of contributions! If selling sex will become legal and I can pay contributions on that money I will be the first to do receipts. Like immediately. As I said, I would have a lot of contributions to pay [laughs].

(Francesco, 28 years old)

About the second measure of sex workers’ job satisfaction, the flexibility of their schedule, they reported different situations. Of course, those who sold sex as a side-job, usually because they had another full-time job or were university students, could meet clients only in the evening or during weekends, as Jan illustrates:

M: Usually, when do you meet them? Because you have to work.

J: Mostly in the weekends but I am home quite early in the week, at 4 p.m. I can meet them after I finish work.

(Jan, 52 years old)

Jan must prioritise his full-time job as a restaurant manager, since he sells sex as a hobby, a fun thing to do, meeting clients only when he is free from work. Full-time sex workers, like Nikolas, have a different time schedule:

M: When do you work?

N: Do you mean like working hours? Usually, in the evenings. When I used to host at my place, even in the mornings, during lunch break, but always more in the evening. Non-sexual massage during the day and erotic massage in the evening [...], when I was available to sell sex between 12 noon and 6 a.m. I used to work a lot, but you cannot stay awake all the time. Clients write you when they are horny, if someone writes me at 1 a.m. it becomes too late for me because I usually switch off the phone around 12.30 a.m..

(Nikolas, 38 years old)

Even if Nikolas relies on what he earns from this activity, he does not want to stay awake in front of the computer screen and with his phone in his hand all the time. He prefers to not meet clients late at night (an anticipation to the next section) but he is available during the day between noon and early evening. The same schedule is shared with other sex workers, like Simone. This contrasts to the behaviour of Jacopo, a member of the international group:

M: Since you work from home, are you always available?

J: Actually [...]. It is funny, because I am always free. So, if I want to work today, I work, if I do not want to work I do not [...]. But the truth is different, because I work more than people with a fixed schedule!

M: So, would you like to have a more fixed schedule?

J: I would but there is not such a thing [...]. For example: a man sent me a message "I am at Piazza Cavour, can you come now?" and it was 7 a.m. There is not a specific period when clients call you [...]. They can call you at any time!

M: So, are you available 24/7?

J: Yes, I am.

(Jacopo, 38 years old)

Jacopo has a different behaviour than Nikolas because he is always available for his clients, regardless of the time of day or the day of the week. The majority of sex workers I interviewed dedicated a small amount of their time to sex work, usually only evenings and weekends; the same was found in Sanders and colleagues (2018)



where the majority of female and male sex workers they met worked less than ten hours per week. In any case, there is a minority of male sex workers in my sample, usually full-time sex workers, who have a more open schedule and are available also during the day, like mornings, lunch breaks, and afternoons. It is worth mentioning that sex workers do not prioritize this activity over others. For example, all the sex workers I met who are also undergraduate or Master's students never missed a class to meet a client. Their studies come first, even though they have the possibility of studying thanks to sex work, as Gunnar describes:

M: From the first time they contact you, how long does it take before meeting them?

G: It depends. It is not every day that I am able to meet people or I do want to meet, I always do it on my own terms, I am not depending on the money per se [...], if I have expenses that month I could use the money [...], it is not every day that I meet people, it is like once a month [...], my priority is studying, it is not that I need the money desperately. Usually, from when they contacted me it is easier on the weekends.

M: So, did it happen that someone contacted you, but you were busy, so you did not reply?

G: Yes, I wrote on the ad "if I do not answer, I am not available, and I will answer as soon as I can".

(Gunnar, 25 years old)

Overall, the job satisfaction of the 45 sex workers I met was high. They were generally well remunerated for their activity, and the sex workers who wanted to earn more were usually able to do so by increasing their fees or the time they spent online to find new clients. Moreover, they were able to adjust their timetable as they wished, prioritizing their "standard" job or their university courses over sex work. What I found is corroborated by Sanders and colleagues, as they wrote that "overall responses indicate that respondents revealed a great deal of choice in their decision making" (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 7), and that "these results indicate that for this sample of independent escorts there was a high level of control and autonomy over their working patterns and daily decision in their sex work" (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 8).

### **5.2.5 Bad experiences and violence prevention**

This last subsection is devoted to what Sanders and colleagues (2016) called the "experience of crimes" toward sex workers. According to Campbell (2014), sex workers fear a wide range of hate crimes motivated by "whorephobic", homophobic,

and racist attitudes as well as other crimes (robbery, violence, and rape). Recent studies regarding indoor sex markets highlighted that this market is safer compared to on-street sex work (Kinnel, 2008; Sanders & Campbell, 2007). Even though Boff (2012) and O'Doherty (2011) claim that indoor sex workers are increasingly experiencing violence, especially migrant sex workers who have been defined as the most vulnerable group of sex workers (Brown & Sanders, 2016). In their quantitative study, Sanders and colleagues (2016) found that “about half of respondents had been victims of crime during the course of their sex work. Most commonly these manifest in the form of threatening or harassing texts, calls and emails and verbal abuse” (Sanders et al., 2016, p. 9). Other crimes experienced by sex workers were the removal of condoms, robbery, stalking, physical assault, fraud, attempted robbery, rape, sexual assault and attempted sexual assault, attempted physical assault, threats with knife, physical assault with weapon, and threats with guns (Sanders et al., 2016). This is a very long and detailed list of crimes that mainly female sex workers have directly experienced in the UK. What can we say about the male sex workers I interviewed in Italy and Sweden? Did they experience any crimes? What did they do in order to prevent clients' violence?

The sex workers I met did not tell me about any severe crimes, such as physical violence, rape, sexual assault, or the use of arms against them. But even the other crimes listed by Sanders and colleagues (2016) did not find any confirmation in my sample. Generally, they said the behaviour of clients towards them was good or very good. Even though “no horror stories” are reported, as 25-year-old Gunnar noted, some sex workers feel lucky that nothing bad happened to them. We can take Samuele as an example:

M: Did you ever had bad experiences? For example, cases where you felt in danger.

S: Never. I have been lucky, and I always trusted a lot my clients [...] it even could be a risk! Some clients brought me to [a city near Milan] in “love nest places” [...]. I trusted them too much, maybe. At the beginning, I even gave to some friends the address of the place where I was going to and the telephone numbers of my clients, then I stopped.

(Samuele, 35 years old)

Samuele is an extremely experienced sex worker with 16 years in the market. He felt lucky because he never experienced any bad situations, even if he was involved in many risky encounters. Other sex workers, like Sven in Sweden or Timothee and Ottaviano in Italy, told me that if something bad happened, they could just leave the client and the dangerous situation. There are mainly two types of bad experiences that the sex workers report: the most common regards money, when clients try to pay less than the agreed price, and the second deals with so-called “ghosting”, when

clients suddenly disappear or they bother the sex workers with messages and requests even if they do not want to really meet them. Probably, the most awful experience regarding the first type of problem comes from Miguel:

M: One day I was horny and there was this guy on [a gay date app] and he proposed me to have sex, to make a blowjob and he would give me some money, 200 Crowns. So, I decided to meet up with him. When we saw each other, he picked me up in his car and we went to the forest and he made me the blowjob but he wanted to do something else and I asked him for more money and at the beginning he lied, he said “Yes, I will give it to you” and we did it, we had anal sex and after, when he was driving me back home, and he gave me the money and it was just the 200. He lied, he did not want to give me more. I started to discuss with him, and he started to be very loud and very rude. We had kind of a fight just with words and at the end I had to calm down and apologize and just accept the 200. So, I went back home with just the 200 and I said to myself “I will never do this again”.

(Miguel, 25 years old)

In the majority of situations, clients paid what was agreed without problems, but it happened that some of them tried to pay less or to have “extra services” for free. The most common remedy that sex workers employed to avoid this kind of situation was to ask for the money in advance, before getting naked or starting the service. This is particularly true for new clients, while with fixed clients there is more trust and fewer unwanted situations, like the one reported by Miguel. Regarding the “ghosting” situation, we can take the words of Sven as an example:

M: So, now it is three/four years that you sell sex, did you have any problems in this period? With clients for example, something wrong that happened?

S: Nothing. The worst thing that has happened to me is that a client does not show up or that he stops talking which is basically [...] what happens on every app, it is called “ghosting”. That is the worst thing that has happened.

(Sven, 25 years old)

It is important to remember that previous research reporting high levels of bad experiences or crimes towards sex workers were studies addressing the situation of female sex workers. Gender matters. Indeed, women and men experience different risks of violence when they deal with male clients. I think the fact that two men participate in these encounters considered in my sample can explain much of this general level of safety. For example, Gunnar and Gunther told me they always felt in control of the encounter. Gunther also highlighted that he felt stronger than his clients, while Alessandro and Simone clearly told me that due to their physical appearance clients were scared of them:

M: Did you face any problems with your clients?

S: No. Also, I am “big and strong”. Now, you see me with a t-shirt and maybe you think that I have a standard body, but I have a good body, did you see my pictures naked?

M: Well, I do not remember now [...].

S: I am as tall as you, 183 cm, and when clients see me [...] because when a client comes to my place, I do not wear the t-shirt, you understand? They see my muscles [...]. Do you think that a client wants to be beaten for not giving me 50 Euros?

(Simone, 42 years old)

The “muscles”, according to Simone, together with the low fee he asks from his clients make him feel safe. He does not have to worry about possible bad experiences. In order to keep safe, sex workers adopt difference methods. For example, Leonardo and Nikolas do not want to meet two clients (for example a couple) together, because they are scared of being in a situation where there could be two against one. Matteo preferred to meet clients in their hotel rooms when he could because he saw this as a safer place than the clients’ own apartments. Other sex workers, especially those in the Italian group, complained that many clients were drug users or, at least, that they engaged in so-called “chemsex” (sex under the effects of drugs) so their policy was not to meet clients at night. Edoardo, Fahir, and Simone were in this group. An extreme case is that of Timothee:

T: Some of them want to come directly to my house but I always refuse to let strangers enter my private apartment. Especially, if they are clients who pay. So, we first meet outside, close to where I live. We see each other, we say “hello”, if there is feeling we decide what to do together.

(Timothee, 46 years old)

Timothee’s policy is quite extreme. In order to prevent possible problems coming from unknown clients, he meets them outside, even in caf  s, before he lets them enter his apartment. I consider it extreme because he is the only sex worker who reported this and because many clients do not have time to meet someone in a caf   before having sex with them. It is even possible that Timothee is lying. But even if unusual or maybe false, this rule keeps him safe and away from violence. Another way to prevent violence comes from Lukasz:

L: I sell sex part-time but when I meet someone and they do not know me well, I do not say I am a sex worker; I think it is very risky when there is violence against sex workers. Most of the friends I am comfortable with, they know. I consider myself a sex worker and I am also linked to older sex workers.

(Lukasz, 25 years old)

Lukasz is another sex worker who did not experience any crime or severe bad experiences, but he thinks that sharing with other people that he is a part-time sex worker (since he is also a student) can put him at risk of threats because “there is violence against sex workers”. Certainly, this is true and the literature on sex work highlights the presence of crimes and violence coming from male clients against women sex workers. But in man-to-man relations, at least in terms of what my sample experienced, the situation is different. Even though some problems are present, like when clients try to pay less or “ghosting”, in general the sex workers I met reported no experiences of crime or abusive behaviour. Apparently, male sex workers working in Italy and Sweden know how to protect themselves and how to behave with clients in order to avoid unpleasant situations.

## 5.3 Bodywork: when money comes from the body

The third and final section of this chapter is devoted to so-called “bodywork”. This section is divided into two parts: first, I use the concept of bodywork as employed by Wolkowitz (2006) in order to understand what it means to use one’s own body to perform work and to consider how to conceptualize the sex worker’s body. I begin by using Walby’s (2012) research on Anglophone male sex workers to better understand the interaction between them and their clients, what Walby called “touching encounters”. Then, again from Walby (2012), I will employ the concept of “body trouble” to understand a highly studied aspect of male sex work: the use of condoms and the level of safe sex practices among male sex workers. Those who are familiar with the work of the Canadian author will notice that in this section I am not engaging in what Walby (2012) called “body capital”. I decided not to include this concept for two main reasons: at the end of his analysis, Walby discharged the hypothesis of the existence of a “body capital” for the sex workers he met and the same is applicable in my sample; in addition, I have already discussed many of the arguments of the “body capital” theory, directly or indirectly, throughout this chapter.

### 5.3.1 Bodywork

In the previous chapters, I presented the work of Wolkowitz (2006) on the conceptualization of “bodywork”. According to her, there is a lack of attention among sociologists regarding workers’ health and safety. Wolkowitz (2006) has a postmodernist approach to the body, stressing the individual agency of the worker to use her or his own body to work. In her chapter dedicated to the “prostitute body”, she defines sex work as “the most embodied form of work” and highlights the relation between “the body and the self” of those who engage in these activities.

Moreover, Wolkowitz (2006) acknowledges that most feminist debates on sex work regard female prostitutes, arguing that it is time to extend these debates to also include men. Some years later, Walby (2012) took on the task of incorporating Wolkowitz's definition of bodywork in his sample of male escorts because "when scholars have studied working bodies, they have assumed that these bodies are heterosexual male bodies, so they have neglected queer bodies and women's bodies at work. Male-for-male internet escorting represents a form of body work that requires body reflexive practices generated out of concern for and touching with other men's bodies" (Walby, 2012, p. 142). Indeed, for him, because of the physical touch, every contact between sex workers and their clients is a form of bodywork. For this reason, sex workers need to work on their own bodies. Walby (2012) operationalises bodywork into different categories of "touching", such as: waxing and shaving, gym training, douche, erection, management of body fluids, smelly clients, muscled bodies, penis size, disgusting things, Viagra, different types of gay bodies, and ugliness of clients and their bodies. In this section, I compare my sample with Walby's in order to understand differences and similarities of "touching encounters". For the sake of brevity, I focus only on some aspects, namely: shaving, training, having a muscled body, erection, ejaculation, Viagra, and drugs.

Sex workers use their own bodies as an instrument, meaning that their bodies must perform different tasks. For this reason, sex workers shape their bodies to attract clients. Clients choose sex workers and their bodies to receive sexual services through contact. According to Walby (2012), sex workers body-reflexive practices involve "plucking, cutting, trimming, preening, waxing, pumping, and shaving" (Walby, 2012, p. 145). Only Peter and Faruh told me they shave for their clients, while Emanuele has always shaved his body to match other people's stereotypes:

E: The only thing that I do, and I do it for me, is shaving. But I have always shaved my body.

M: Did you always shave your body?

E: Yes, of course. Especially if you are more androgynous like I am, top guys want you smooth, shaved, and wonderful.

M: Do you mean, like a woman?

E: Indeed. But there are also tops who want a nice butt, like a bubble butt, with big thighs, and maybe some hair. I mean, it depends on their stereotypes.

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

Many sex workers are aware that inside the "gay world" there are many types of acceptable bodies. Of course, there is a "mainstream body", typically a tall, muscled,

and shaved body, but many other types of bodies have the same legitimacy, like the sturdy “bears” or the lean “twinks”<sup>3</sup>, just to mention two extreme cases (for a more detailed “list” of gay bodies, see Bacio & Peruzzi, 2017 and Bacio & Rinaldi, 2021). For this reason, the majority of sex workers I interviewed did not try to change their bodies through shaving or gym training, like Francesco:

M: Do you go to gym?

F: I usually run in the park.

M: Is it for you or for your clients?

F: It is just for me; I do not care about them. I am this way, and so my body, if they do not like it, they can look for somebody else.

(Francesco, 28 years old)

In the Swedish group, there was the same attitude, as expressed in Peter’s words:

M: Did you do this for you or for your clients?

P: The gym is for me, mostly. It was not a problem before but since I grew my hair and built bigger muscles there is a different request when I am on the internet.

M: Just different or is it actually better?

P: Just different, not so much better, not so much more money.

(Peter, 25 years old)

Peter has sold sex since he was 14 years old, so his body has changed since the early years. He notices that since hair started growing on his body and the gym made him stronger, different types of clients started requesting him. When he was younger and “twink”, clients who like young guys and hairless bodies wrote to him, but nowadays when he has hair and muscles, he is requested by different clients. In his own words, this is not better, it is just different. The international group is a bit different because they constantly travel from country to country, so it is difficult for

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<sup>3</sup> “Bears” in male gay culture, as the reference to the animal world suggest, are represented by larger or obese men who need to be hairy or extremely hairy. If a man is not fat but keeps the excessive hairs on face and body, it is possible to refer to him as an “otter”. “Twinks”, on the other hand, are young gay guys – from late teens to early twenties – without face and body hair, with the appearance of a teenager.

them to go to the gym or to follow a training schedule. They are nevertheless aware that body shape matters:

M: I want to ask you something about your body and how important the shape of your body is in your work.

M: Yes, it is very hard to go to the gym. When I was in Denmark, I was training a lot, I used to be 70 kilos at the end of my period in Denmark but then I went back to Mexico for Christmas and I was 64. Then, I did my trip to Europe and my trip in Asia and I came back [home, from all my other trips] and I was 67.

M: So, is it difficult to go to the gym?

M: It is difficult and now I start a routine with weights, and I have a diet.

M: But is it for you or for your work?

M: It is for me, but I know that if I have a better body it is more attractive for the clients but first I do it for myself.

M: So, do you think that your clients want specific things, like muscles?

M: Yes, they want a fit body. Some guys, they like muscles, but I am not a big guy, but I think I am quite fit that is why they want it. Somebody likes fit. But if you are ugly you have to be very muscular.

(Miguel, 25 years old)

Miguel knows that clients want a fit body, and he thinks he has what they are looking for. But he is also aware that not all clients are satisfied with a muscular body. A minority of sex workers, namely Alessandro, Mattia, Edoardo, and Nikolas in Italy; Faruh and Bengt in Sweden; and Guillermo and Martin in the international group, exercise their body in order to fit their clients' requests. For example, Edoardo, another fit sex worker, told me that he was obliged to start training due to clients complaining about his body:

M: Do you go to gym?

E: No, I train at home with weights.

M: Do you do it for you or for your clients?

E: I started for myself but then they told me that I was getting worse aesthetically, if two clients say that it means that 20 think the same.



M: What do you mean with “worse”?

E: A client told me that I used to have larger shoulders, more breast, gluteus, and less belly.

(Edoardo, 23 years old)

In the Swedish group, Bengt told me that a fit body can earn you more money and the same idea is shared by Guillermo (a member of the international group). According to him, clients have a clear hierarchy:

M: Do you shape your body? Do you think clients look for something in particular?

G: Yes, of course. I mean [...] they look for somebody with a dick or ass and after that I think they are looking for someone muscled and in shape. I have been doing exercises to get in shape. I go to the gym.

(Guillermo, 28 years old)

According to Guillermo, penis size or, in case of a bottom sex worker, the “butt” is the most important thing. Then, a muscled and shaped body can make the difference between being booked or not, especially when the competition is high. Overall, there is a clear difference between my sample and Walby’s (2012). The majority of sex workers he met routinely engaged in body practices such as shaving or training to shape their bodies. On the contrary, in my sample the majority of sex workers reported they were engaging in sport or fitness activities for their own pleasure and not to accommodate clients’ tastes or requests.

According to Walby (2012), “talk about sex tends to emphasize the genital zone [...] the penis becomes simply another body part to be managed” (Walby, 2012, p. 146). For this reason, having an erection becomes crucial for the sex workers. For some of them having an erection is easy and simple because they are young and easily excitable, as Onofrio and Sven reported. On the other hand, Davide (57 years old) connects the possibility of being a sex worker with the ability of continuing to have an erection. In order to continue to do this job, Davide is aware that he needs to get an erection but he does not want to take Viagra, so he relies only on his body. In contrast, two other sex workers, Faruh and Noah (the latter is part of the international group), told me that having an erection is not so important:

M: Then, you need to have an erection all the time.

N: It is not difficult for me, but you do not necessarily need to maintain one. You just need to be able to get one if that is necessary. It is absolutely necessary to be able to have one because if you are soft and you should not be because someone is touching you, then I can see that being a problem.

(Noah, 29 years old)

Sex workers do not need to be excited and have an erection for one full hour, the length of a standard encounter; they are requested to have one only when necessary like, as Noah said, when clients are touching your body or when they are performing oral sex or when the client wants anal sex with a top. On other occasions, such as fetish performances, sex workers do not need to have an erection: it is not necessary or needed to complete the service. Other sex workers, like Peter and Martin (the latter is part of the international group), described having an erection like a challenge. Finally, other sex workers know their limits and, in some situations, know they cannot have an erection, for example when they are too tired or when a particular client is too far away from their physical tastes. In these cases they just refuse to meet clients or they take pills, the most popular being Viagra.

Viagra, the most widely sold drug for male erectile dysfunction, is used by six of the sex workers in my sample: Alessandro, Mattia, Thiago, Edoardo, and Samuele in Italy, and Peter in Sweden. Nobody in the international group reported the use of this medication. Mattia, in particular, developed an addiction to Viagra:

M: I used to take Viagra. If a client called me to say “I am bottom” then I used to take one. I went to the doctor [...], he told me “do not be scared for your heart, the only problem of Viagra is that gives you addiction”. So, with bottom clients I used to take Viagra. After one year, I met a guy in my private life and I was going to have sex with him but I completely failed [...]. I said to myself, “this is the Viagra”. I used to take three pills per week but this thing to rely completely on Viagra has created a situation where I did not have any stimulation. So, I started to reduce it.

(Mattia, 43 years old)

In order to have an erection, in particular with bottom clients and among those he defined as “the ugly clients”, Mattia started relying exclusively on the drug until he was unable to have sex without it. In any case, the majority of sex workers in my sample did not take Viagra or similar drugs and, judging from their stories, they did not have a problem getting an erection.

Ejaculation is linked to both erection and Viagra. In previous pages, we heard the story of Francesco and his ability to cum during the encounter without feeling pleasure for it. Ejaculation, in general, did not seem to be an important part of the encounter. Sex workers are not “obliged” to cum or to have an orgasm, as Ernesto told me:

M: With your clients, did you always have an erection and then an orgasm?

E: Almost always.

M: Did they have an orgasm?

E: Yes, they always cum before me. The important thing is that they need to reach a sexual gratification, not me, for me it is a matter of profit.

M: Do you want to ejaculate with them, or you do not care?

E: Yes, I mean, if I cum is better, but for me is quite difficult to reach an orgasm. I need time so I usually say "Sorry, I cannot cum". My aim is to let them cum, then of course if I can cum too is better, and sometimes is actually happened that I had an orgasm with them. Anyway, the fact I do not have an orgasm never created a problem for my client.

(Ernesto, 25 years old)

When clients contact sex workers, it is in order to receive sexual gratification, an orgasm, so what happens to sex workers is not really important to them. Of course, there are different situations to consider. If sex workers are bottom, clients usually have an orgasm, and the sooner they reach it the quicker the encounter. But if the sex worker is top and clients are bottom, the orgasm relies more on the sex workers because bottom clients are difficult to satisfy, as Alessandro highlights:

A: Bottom clients have two orgasms: one in their anus and one with their penis so you must let them cum almost at the same time [...]. It is very difficult!

(Alessandro, 34 years old)

Of course, to reach an orgasm and to ejaculate is also a way that sex workers employ to terminate the encounter.

Finally, in this first subsection, there is the question of drug use. So-called "chemsex" is nowadays increasingly widespread, especially in the gay community where the term was "invented". The sex workers I talked to reported the use of the following drugs (from the most cited to the least): Poppers, cocaine, weed/marijuana/hashish, GHB (also called G), methamphetamine (also called Crystal Meth, Crystal, Tina, or T), ecstasy (also called MDMA), heroin, ketamine, and crack<sup>4</sup>. Poppers deserves a special mention. Indeed, it is the most widespread

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<sup>4</sup> Poppers is a generic term for alkyl nitrite chemical compounds. It is taken through inhalation, since poppers has a liquid form, and the effect – called "rush" – lasts for about a minute. Poppers has a practical use in gay anal sex since it increases blood flow and relaxes sphincter muscles. Cocaine is one of the most used recreational drugs; usually snorted, it can also be smoked, or injected into the veins. It can create addiction quite easily and has adverse effects on sexual performance. Weed (or any of the other names) is a psychoactive drug from the cannabis plant. It is largely smoked, and its main effect is to make people relaxed. GHB (short for gamma-Hydroxybutyric acid) is a chemical compound primarily used to treat narcolepsy. It is used as a recreational drug since it makes its users euphoric. At the same time, it is also called "rape drug": taking a high level of GHB makes people unconscious with a higher risk of being raped. Moreover, since GHB is both colourless and odourless it can be easily added to drinks. Methamphetamine is a stimulant of the central nervous system. It

“drug” in the gay community. I use inverted commas because it is legal in many European countries and can be bought (legally) in some sex shops in Sweden and (illegally) in gay clubs in Italy. The majority of users buy it online and they receive it via home delivery within a couple of days from the best-known express services.

In total, eight of the sex workers reported that some of their clients are drug users: Bo in Sweden; Alessandro, Leonardo, Thiago and Ramiro, Davide, and Nikolas in Italy; and Philibert and Duygu in the international group. Their policies in this area are different: some sex workers explicitly refuse to meet them and, as I wrote in previous pages, some of them do not meet clients in the middle of the night because it is when most drug-addicted people look for sexual encounters. In general, they regarded drug-using clients as dangerous. Other sex workers refer to clients who use drugs as weaker than standard clients and easy to manage, so they do not refuse to meet them. There is also the case of Esad (in the international group) who does not use drugs but sells to his clients who make a request. He told me that he did not make any profit but did it to make his clients happy. Finally, there are also sex workers who reported an addiction to drugs: I already described the story of Bo, but also Bengt and Duygu have been in the same situation for some time (the first two are part of the Swedish group, the latter of the international group):

M: Which drug did you use?

B: Amphetamine and heroin. Together with my friends.

M: And then you stopped?

B: Yes, because I almost died.

M: Did you have an overdose?

B: Yes, but then my heart started to beat again [...].

M: Did your family discover that? When did it happen?

B: Yes, of course. I was 16. It was during high school and then I left in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

(Bengt, 22 years old)

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makes people euphoric and is also used for its aphrodisiac effects, especially on ejaculation. “Meth” is a heavy drug full of adverse effects in the short- and mid-term. Ecstasy is another chemical compound largely used as a recreational drug. Again, it makes people euphoric with a sense of well-being and happiness. Heroin is an opioid used as a recreational drug for its euphoric effects. It is taken through injection, but nowadays is more commonly smoked. Ketamine is a medication primarily used during anaesthesia but has a second-market as a recreational drug for its sedative effects. Finally, crack, another chemical compound largely smoked, is known for its euphoric effects.

Bengt started selling sex later, but he still uses drugs sometimes even if, in his words, the two things are not attached to each other. A few other sex workers reported sporadic use of drugs for recreational purposes, without being addicted to them.

### 5.3.2 Body trouble

It is difficult to shift into a discussion of HIV/AIDS because of the trauma it has exacted in so many people's lives, especially those of men who have sex with men [...]. The term "body trouble" suggests how bodies can be problematized by public health agencies, the law, our sexual partners, and other regulatory agents (Walby, 2012, p. 157).

Indeed, the level of stigmatisation has always been extremely high for men who have sex with men and, as the chapter on previous research revealed, men who sell sex to other men have been the centre of an even more severe stigmatisation (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2018). In this subsection, I engage with the use of condoms during sexual intercourse between sex workers and clients. Moreover, I discuss the so-called "bareback sex" (or BB, i.e. anal sex without a condom) and how sex workers manage "risky behaviour". Finally, I briefly touch upon the new medicament PrEP (or Pre-exposure prophylaxis) and its effects on sexual practice (for a more detailed analysis of male sex workers having sex with their clients with or without a condom, see Rinaldi & Bacio, 2022a).

Among the 45 sex workers I interviewed, three of them told me they were HIV positive, but under medical treatment and, for this reason, "undetectable". While two sex workers were using PrEP. 37 of them declared they used a condom during anal sex, of which eight used the protection offered by latex "almost always"; five used condoms irregularly, depending on the clients or the situation in which they were involved; two told me they did not use condoms during anal sex with clients with one of those under PrEP; and one sex worker did not reply to this question. The behaviour is completely opposite for oral sex where 30 sex workers do not use a condom during the intercourse; four said it depends; five use condoms always or almost always; and six did not answer this question. First of all, there is a clear pattern towards protection and consciousness regarding safe sex among the sex workers. Secondly, as both Dean (2009) and Walby (2012) wrote, "I do not endorse one form of sex as more ethical than others" (Walby, 2012, p. 158). I rather prefer to understand why, for example, a condom is not used during oral sex and why some clients or in some situations sex workers do not require the use of a condom for anal sex, instead of judging them for their behaviours:

M: I have done only oral stuff and there is no condom.

M: Because do you feel that oral is fine without or?

M: In the first place because oral sex with the condoms is not sex for most people, I think. So, with the condom it would not happen, that is not what people want.

M: So, is there no other discussion about this?

M: No, of course there could be a discussion or not, but I have personally tried to find out really the risks of pure oral sex. Of course, it is difficult to estimate definitely, but there are studies that trust to do it.

(Mats, 56 years old)

Mats' opinion about oral sex is important because he is one of the few sex workers who passed through the HIV epidemic. On the one hand, he does not think oral sex with a condom can be defined as sex at all and, on the other, research on this subject highlighted that the risk of HIV infection during oral intercourse is low (as long as some precautions are in place, such as avoiding ejaculation into the mouth). From the stories of the sex workers, oral sex without a condom seems to be as automatic as anal sex with it. If a client wants oral sex with a condom, he must require this "particular" service. Of course, sex workers do not have problems wearing a condom in order to be sucked by their clients. But many sex workers do not perform oral sex as bottom with a client's penis wearing a condom. They claimed that sucking with a condom is like sucking a plastic bag or that they found it disgusting and difficult to perform.

As pointed out by Walby: "stories about HIV/AIDS and health do not figure centrally in male-for-male escorts' talk about work or sexuality" (Walby, 2012, p. 159). Indeed, especially among the younger generation, sex is not problematised as something dirty or dangerous but as an act that gives pleasure. As I wrote previously, the sex workers in my sample used a condom during anal sex but sometimes they decided to avoid it. It must be underlined that sex workers rarely advertise that they provide bareback sex, but sometimes clients would ask the sex workers not to use a condom during anal penetration and, usually, they would also offer more money:

M: You said that you use a condom. Every time?

F: Yes.

M: Do they ask you to do it without a condom?

F: Some clients ask me to do it without and for that they pay 200 more Euros, but I do not do that.

(Faruh, 26 years old)

Many sex workers among those who used a condom regularly for anal sex decided to not meet a client if he proposed to have sex without because "it is like a red flag", using Gunnar's words, a signal that they can be dangerous clients with STDs. As I

wrote in previous pages, however, some sex workers decided to not use condoms with some of their clients. These are regular clients. As an example, we can take Fahir's words:

M: When you have sex with your clients, do you use a condom?

F: Yes, mostly; a few times I do not. When I know a person very well I do not use condoms, of course if he asked me to use it, I would do it. But I am scared of some clients, for example tourists. I always use a condom with them.

(Fahir, 34 years old)

Similarly, and even more interestingly, there is Ernesto's story. Like Fahir, he has made a choice to not use a condom with very regular clients even if one of those is HIV positive:

E: Yes, I do not use condom with a client who is HIV positive, but it is very safe with him because he has the viral load equal to zero. He is undetectable, so with him I have sex without condom.

M: Why did you do that?

E: It is my job. He asked me to not use it and I said, "Oh well..." and I was even doing the bottom with him! But he is one of my regular clients.

M: When did he say that he is HIV positive?

E: He told me after the third time, when we met for the fourth time.

M: How did you react?

E: I used to have a boyfriend who is HIV positive so I am very open minded about that.

(Ernesto, 25 years old)

There are many interesting aspects to analyse here. First of all, Ernesto is aware that undetectable people living with HIV cannot transmit the disease; secondly, Ernesto is one of the two sex workers I interviewed who told me he is taking PrEP. Using PrEP, according to the scientific studies (e.g., McCormack et al., 2016), makes it impossible to be infected with HIV and the condom, in this particular situation, would not add to security. Moreover, Ernesto used to have an HIV-positive boyfriend and did not get infected by him. For these reasons, Ernesto decided to not use a condom with some of his regular clients. Bengt, in Sweden, selects clients with whom he can have sex without a condom in a different way:

B: Because a man who has a wife does not have any trouble or something. I have and I always say, “it is up to you [to use a condom]”.

M: Why do you think that people who have wives and children do not have a disease?

B: Because he is only having sex with his wife. And I do not think the wife is going out anywhere.

M: But maybe the client has other encounters. Apart from you, with other people?

B: No.

M: Why are you so sure? Sorry, did you ask them?

B: No, I do not ask, but [...].

(Bengt, 22 years old)

Bengt considers clients who are “officially” heterosexual and have a wife and children are “clean” (i.e. without diseases). Even when questioned, he maintains his position. It is difficult for me to categorize this as risky. I suggest that other factors should be taken into consideration. First of all, as Walby wrote “sex, however, is biographical. Men who did not live through the 1980s, who did not see their friends dying, may not experience the same visceral defensive response” (Walby, 2012, p. 160). Young generations are taught to use a condom both to prevent unwanted pregnancies and to avoid STDs transmission; for gay men, only the latter is applicable. But these same young generations accept the risk of sex without condoms because it gives more pleasure and, without using it, a rule is broken. Bengt, who is 22 years old, is part of these young generations and he takes the risk of avoiding condom use with all his clients.

Despite some cases where a condom is not used, all the sex workers I met are aware of STDs and they test themselves very often, more than the general health recommendations for STD testing every six months (Workowski, 2015). There are sex workers who test themselves every month or every second month. There were no sex workers in my sample who had been infected with HIV during their job experience. Two of the three sex workers who are HIV positive were infected before they started selling sex and sexual services, the third was not sure when he was infected. They reported that they were all under medical treatment and undetectable at the time of the interview. None of the three sex workers told their clients they were HIV positive. Some sex workers got infected with some of the most common sexually transmitted diseases, such as (from the most listed to the least): syphilis, gonorrhoea, Chlamydia, pubic louse, HPV, and Candida. All the sex workers



declared they got infected with one or more of these STDs during their private life and not during sex work.

Barebacking, (anal) sex without a condom, is a sexual practice labelled by health agencies as “risky”, although it is widespread in the gay community. It is not difficult to find people on gay apps who clearly write in their profiles that they practice anal sex without a condom. In order to protect one’s body, however, the use of a condom during anal and oral sex is fundamental. Nonetheless, engagement in these sexual practices is growing year after year. Bengt, once again, tells us how an approach with clients can end up with bareback sex:

M: Is it clearly written on your profile that you do not use a condom, or is it something that your clients discover when they write to you?

B: Hhm [...] they discover it [...] but the people I meet do not use condom.

M: Give me an example: someone contacts you and then you say, “No, I do not use a condom”.

B: But I can use it, of course I do not have a problem with it.

M: But you prefer not to use it.

B: Yeah, and I think the most people prefer not to use it.

(Bengt, 22 years old)

Bengt, saying that “most people prefer not to use it”, indicates that both his clients and people in the gay community prefer to avoid condoms, when they can, because bareback sex gives more pleasure. But bareback sex is not risky in itself, as I wrote earlier, but rather depends on the circumstances, as Jacopo describes to us:

J: I am much more relaxed in Germany where bareback sex is widespread. Indeed, at the beginning, all the people I know were very scared, “be careful to have sex in Germany”, but since there are more sexual intercourses without condoms, people there are much more checked than elsewhere. In Italy for example, there are still people who do gay sex secretly, and there is where they get the diseases. Then they do not test themselves until they get symptoms. So, in Italy, there is no control, a huge lack of control. These people, infected and not checked, become “loose cannons” and diseases spread inside the community.

(Jacopo, 38 years old)

Paradoxically, according to Jacopo (who is part of the international group since he sells sex in different European cities), bareback sex is not dangerous per se because

people who regularly practice it also check themselves more often than people who do sex with a condom. For this reason, he is more frightened of having sex in Italy where people pretend to have sex only with condoms but then engage in sex without one and do not test themselves until symptoms have appeared, allowing the disease to spread within the gay community. As Walby concluded, “despite public health literature’s claims about barebacking, male-for-male internet escorts do not seek transcendence through unsafe sex, partly because they want to continue with their work and partly because they are all well educated about HIV/AIDS” (Walby, 2012, p. 161).

This leads us to PrEP, I am aware that PrEP deserves a specific discussion that I cannot offer here, so I will limit this paragraph to a few sentences. There are two sex workers in the present investigation, one in the Italian group and the other in the international group, who are under PrEP treatment. The former is part of a clinical study conducted by an Italian university hospital while the latter is buying PrEP on his own. Taking PrEP daily relieves their fear of being infected with HIV since it reduces the risk of getting HIV from sex by 99%, and by 74% among people who inject drugs (CDC, 2021). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the United States Department of Health and Human Services specifically recommends this drug for “people at very high risk for HIV”. Are sex workers among those people? Since PrEP is expensive, would sex workers have the right to claim such medicines for free from health agencies? I am not going to answer these questions but it is a paradox that sex workers, who have been so stigmatised since the HIV epidemic began, and even today, are not directly targeted as “people at very high risk for HIV” when a medicine that protects people from getting infected from it has been made available. They lose twice.

Finally, there is the so-called private sex or the sex that sex workers have in their private life, without being paid for it. Indeed, in my sample I found the same result as Walby (2012): sex workers do not have much sex outside their job. Almost all the men I interviewed were single, but the majority of them were looking for a partner. Moreover, as many other gay men do, they used gay apps to find people to have sex with, and sometimes, they did it on their own:

M: Let us talk about your private sexual life.

H: Actually, it is very poor right now.

M: Why?

H: I have no time. It is strange but for me the biggest pleasure is to chat with somebody and look for their films on the websites and jerk off alone and after a half an hour I am ready for the next part of my life.

(Henryk, 31 years old)

Especially sex workers who sell sex as a side job seem to have difficulties finding time also for a private sexual life. Looking for casual sex on these gay apps can be long and exhausting (Bacio & Peruzzi, 2017) and sex workers who have already had sex, for example the same day, are generally not interested in finding other people to have sex with because they are satisfied with the sex they have with their clients and do not need more, at least not for that day.

## 5.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I analysed the so called “economic constraints” of the sex workers, namely I engaged with their class position and their educational credentials and why they started selling sex and sexual services. Then, I analysed some aspects of their working conditions and, finally, the body of the sex workers was the focus of my discussion. Overall, the similarities among the three groups (Italian, Swedish, and international) are more than the differences.

As the research of Bernstein (2007) highlighted, sex work has gained a new respectability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mainly thanks to the development of the internet. People of the so called “middle class” in technologically advanced societies have started engaging more and more with sex work. Women and men with high educational credentials, as I found in my sample, increasingly decide to sell sex and sexual services instead of trying to find a “standard” job in the labour market. Of course, there are many reasons to explain why this happens. The majority of the men I interviewed in the two countries sell sex because they are “in need of money”. There are nuances in this definition but the men I met have clearly favoured sex work over other jobs. Moreover, there are also university students who engage in sex work in order to achieve a better education. Other sex workers decided to sell sex because they follow what Bernstein (2007) called “the ethic of fun”. Taking her inspiration from the work of Bourdieu (1984) on the “new petite bourgeoisie”, she claims that sex workers sell sex also because it gives them excitement and fun. A minority of sex workers engage in this profession because they were friends of other sex workers or to overcome bad situations or because they lack formal documents that would allow them to find a work in the formal sector. From the analysis, it is possible to say that there are no significant differences between the three groups. All the sex workers I met consider sex work a legitimate profession and most of them see sex work as a rewarding activity for which you need to develop professional skills. In this sense, my analysis corroborates the results of Bernstein (2007) on female sex workers and of Walby (2012) on male-to-male internet escorting.

The section of this chapter that examines working conditions demonstrates that men who sell sex in Italy and Sweden are all self-employed; they do not have agencies or managers and they can sell sex on their own terms. Between the theory of Sanders (2005) of the “manufacturing identity” and “it is just acting” and Bernstein’s (2007) “bounded authenticity”, I found in my sample more congruence for the second, which also correspond to Walby’s (2012) results. Indeed, the encounters my informants describe are always “open” and most of them were willing to feel pleasure with their clients. Likewise, most of them do not have a problem kissing their clients and share with them an intense moment of “touching” and emotions. Moreover, the sex workers I met always felt they were in control of what they did, and were always ready to refuse a client if the situation appears dangerous or if the client acts oddly. There are, however, a few exceptions to take into consideration. It seems that refusing an unwanted service is easier than refusing a client. Indeed, the sex workers I met did not engage in services (such as fetish) that they did not want to perform, and it seems they were in control of their job. Another point of discussion has been their job satisfaction measured in financial rewards and flexibility of their schedule. The sex workers’ fees were perhaps one of the few things in my analysis that significantly distinguished the three groups. On average, the Italian sex workers charged less than the Swedish or international workers (where we find the highest-priced sex workers). In Italy, according to the sex workers I interviewed, the competition is high and the prices, for this reason, are low. On the other hand, international sex workers can charge more than “local” sex workers. As the study of Sanders and colleagues (2016) found, sex workers are able to set their own working hours and manage their activity throughout the entire week. Finally, as opposed to the results of Sanders and colleagues (2016), male sex workers did not experience any violence or severe crime. In most cases, they were able to manage clients who wanted to pay less than the agreed price without difficulty. The main reason my results differ from those of Sanders and colleagues (2016) is obviously that sex workers and clients share the same gender. This explains the low level of insecurity and the high level of control of the sex workers I interviewed. This aspect will be analysed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Finally, the third section was devoted to “bodywork”. First and foremost, sex workers use their own body in encounters with clients. The body as an instrument of work has been conceptualised only recently thanks to the work of Wolkowitz (2006), who maintains that more attention is needed on the body of workers. Walby (2012) also engaged in bodywork as he studied some important aspects of the body of sex workers. I relied on his work to present some activities such as shaving, training, muscular bodies, erection, ejaculation, Viagra, and drug use. The sex workers I met did not shave their bodies, go to the gym, or do training in order to satisfy clients’ requests. Only some of them worked to have a fit body because, in general, there are many different “bodies” that are accepted in the gay community,

clients have different tastes, and they do not look for the same type of body (stereotypically a muscled and defined sex worker). Moreover, judging from their stories, it did not seem difficult to have an erection and just a few of them took Viagra or similar pills. It did not always seem important or relevant in the encounter for the sex worker to have an erection. Some clients asked for “chemsex” but those were a minority. The sex workers I met had different opinions regarding how to deal with addicted clients, whether to accept a meeting with them because they are considered weak due to drug consumption or to avoid them because they are considered dangerous. Only three sex workers in my sample reported being addicted to drugs themselves and only one connected selling sex to drug consumption. In the last part of the third section of the chapter, I engaged with what Walby (2012) called “body trouble”. As I mentioned, a large part of previous research on male sex workers has focused on the use of condoms and HIV/AIDS prevention, but the truth is that sex workers in general are well aware of HIV and other STDs, and most of them test themselves regularly. When it comes to condom use there is a clear division between oral and anal sex: they do not use condoms for the former as much as they use them for the latter. What is called “bareback” sex is generally avoided. Two sex workers in my study are under PrEP treatment and future analysis shall engage with the effects of this particular medication on sex practices and condom use (Rinaldi & Bacio, 2022a). All in all, the results of this portion of the study adhere more closely to the results found in Walby (2012). Once again, the differences among the three groups are marginal, while the similarities are striking.

In the next chapter, I analyse what I call “client relations”. First, I look at power relations between sex workers and their clients and when and with whom they feel powerful or powerless. Then, I shift the focus of the analysis from sex workers to clients in order to answer the following questions: What do we know about clients from the sex workers’ perspective? How do they see their clients? How do they talk about them and with whom?

# Chapter 6

## Relations between male sex workers and their clients

In this third and final empirical chapter, I engage once more with the relationship established between the sex workers and their clients, but from a different perspective: I consider if and how this relationship is shaped by power. Indeed, the literature on sex work takes into great consideration the use of power between sex workers and clients, and much of the discussions within certain strands of radical feminism regard who exerts the power. Explicatory of this position is Pateman's (1988) "The Sexual Contract", in which she understands prostitution as patriarchal power and as violence against women, but the arguments are reiterated also in more contemporary works (Dodsworth, 2015; Ekman, 2013). More recently, however, other positions have emerged among feminist theorists. The so-called "pro-sex feminism" highlights that sex work cannot be reduced to domination only because there is also space left for emancipation and empowerment (Nagle, 1997). Moreover, other feminists joined this field of study, asking that the voice of sex workers themselves should be heard (Bell, 1994). Indeed, until recently, Marxist feminists most often neglected the voice and opinions of the sex workers, but there were also examples of solidarity between the political left and sex workers (Rydström, 2019). What can be said, then, about the dynamics that construct the male-to-male "sexual contract"? In the first part of this chapter, I employ the concept of respect (and consequently of disrespect) to better understand the interactions and the use of power between sex workers and their clients.

In the second part of the chapter, I take a step forward and shift my attention from sex workers to their clients. Indeed, throughout this manuscript I have extensively written about the clients of the sex workers, but they were often obscured by the stories of the sex workers themselves. For this reason, in the last part of the chapter the clients become the main object of my analysis. Who are they? What can be said about them in terms of age, sexual orientation, and class position? Moreover, why do they pay? Of course, the answers to these questions are extracted from the perspectives of the sex workers (as I did not interview clients), but what the sex

workers say about them is worthy of attention to understand “the other side of the coin”.

## 6.1 The male sexual contract and the complex workings of power

This section is divided into two subsections: in the first, I analyse the existence of a power contract between sex workers and their clients and investigate who is actually exercising power and in what way. Is the sex worker in a slave contract with the client as Pateman (1988) has claimed? In the second subsection, to corroborate the complex interplay between the two parts of this particular sexual contract, I highlight the presence of respect and emotions together with market forces and monetary remuneration. Indeed, in both subsections, I let the male sex workers speak for themselves about their relationship with their clients. It is worth noting that in this final chapter I do not group the sex workers’ stories according to where they work. This decision is motivated by the small differences and many similarities between the three groups.

### 6.1.1 The exchange of power between male sex workers and clients

In the previous chapter I made reference to, directly or indirectly, the concept of power. For example, I wrote about the power that sex workers have to refuse a client or a service; the power to set the price of their services; the fact that the sex workers I met often prioritise other activities (such as school or work) over selling sex; and the fact that the sex workers feel in control of their relationship with clients. The absence of crime against them is another important aspect. Pateman (1988) first and foremost wrote about the impossibility to avoid a sexual slave contract for those who engage in sex for money and the inequality of these two actors. It is interesting to highlight that when discussing the concept of power with my interviewees they often did not understand what the meaning of my words were. Indeed, I had to explain what I meant by power, for example this happened with Onofrio in Sweden. In another case, in Italy, the discussion was a bit more straightforward:

M: Previously, when you talked about your clients, you said “they have the power, they have the money”, what did you mean with that? Do you feel that in your relationship with them they have the power and you do not have any?

L: No, I have the power between my legs, they have the power in their wallets, everyone has power, but it is different types of power.

M: Do you think it is a relationship where power is important? Do you feel the power, or do your clients feel it?

L: Neither of the two, I think. Clients have the power to ask, I have the power to say yes or no.

M: Because you do not feel obliged to say yes to all your clients?

L: Nobody is obliged, or if someone feels obliged to say always yes, it is his own problem.

(Leonardo, 24 years old)

Leonardo, as many other sex workers, does not find that the relationships with clients need to be equalled to the exercise of power. Leonardo thinks that they, both he and his clients, have power but of different kinds and exercising it does not imply subjection, or the surrender of one of the two parties to the other. Other sex workers have different opinions on this matter. For example Gunnar said that he always wanted to be in control when he met with clients, even if this was more related to the question of safety. In any case, he added that he never felt used by clients and that it had always been consensual. From the same perspective, we can take Gunther's words:

M: Do you have a different behaviour when you are with a man compared with when you are with a woman?

G: No, because I am not there because I like them.

M: But since you are straight, I thought you had a little more pleasure or involvement with women.

G: I am quite a bit more intelligent than them, so I need to be stimulated in a different way to actually feel, to have a connection. It is not just you have a nice body; it needs to be a lot more than that.

M: So, what is it for you?

G: Everything needs to be stimulated, all your senses, and then I enjoy being with a girl and share myself with her in that way [...] they do not get me, they get my body.

M: Only parts of your body?

G: Yes, I am very in control of the situation.

(Gunther, 22 years old)



Gunther, who is part of the international group, wants to be in control of the situation and, with both men and women, needs to be stimulated to really enjoy the encounters. It is not a question of safety for him, but a desire for power for him and the need to feel in a position of superiority compared to his clients, for whom he does not feel much respect. It is worth noting that another member of the international group shares the same thoughts:

M: Do you think you have power in your relationship with clients or do they?

E: It is me. It is the rule of the big dick, I think.

M: You always have the power because you have the biggest dick.

E: I always have power anyway, dick or not.

M: So, for example, the fact that they have the money is not enough [...].

E: Yeah, it is a power too, but it is something like, you cannot buy everything you want [...] there are things that are stronger than money!

(Esad, 30 years old)

There are three important aspects to highlight here: first, Esad wants to have power in the relationship with clients; second, even if clients have the “power of the money”, money cannot buy everything and, like Leonardo, sometimes money is not enough to exercise power over sex workers; lastly, Esad is always top with his clients and for this reason he can also exercise the “power of his dick” over clients. This is strongly related to the concept of masculinity as analysed in Chapter 4. At the same time, as mentioned in Chapter 5, when sex workers perform fetish services, they are always top while clients are always bottom and, as Lev highlights, this can be interpreted as a form of power, but not like the dichotomy top/bottom may suggest:

M: Why do you still do it?

L: I still feel it is exciting [...], it is like someone who wants to be dominated, I feel the same way, I like to be underpowered, I like the people to have power over me, I like to feel like a whore, it is like a fetish.

M: Even if you are top?

L: Yes, I have learnt to fake it that I am empowered because that is what some people want.

M: Can you explain it better to me? You are the top of the situation, usually the one that dominates, but in your case, you pretend to be the one who has the power but in reality, what you feel is that you are underpowered?

L: Yes, and as long as I have that feeling, I will continue to do it.

M: So, it is the excitement of the meeting, the excitement to earn money and the excitement to be dominated even if they are the ones that want to be dominated.

(Lev, 20 years old)

Many words have been written about domination and the dichotomy top/bottom, as I wrote in Chapter 4, so it is important to analyse Lev's words. Indeed, even if he is top, Lev wants to be dominated by his bottom clients and he regularly achieves this feeling that helps him continue to do this job. Feeling underpowered, in his own words, is a form of pleasure and a fetish. These sex workers have also underlined, explicitly or implicitly, that the relations with clients always include the exchange of money.

As previously mentioned, the relationship between sex workers and their clients is fulfilled through many traits: power and sex are present, as many people usually think, but there is also more than that, for example connections, emotions, empathy, and talk. There is no evidence of Pateman's claim that "there is no desire or satisfaction on the part of the prostitute. Prostitution is not mutual, pleasurable exchange of the use of bodies, but the unilateral use of woman's body by a man in exchange for money" (Pateman, 1988, p. 198). Indeed, throughout the majority of the interviews, the sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden proudly commented on how satisfying it was for them to meet clients. For example, we can take Sven's words:

S: I like to connect with people, that is also why I started with customer service because I like to take care of people and talk with them and get to know them and I get very good response from customers, they react on my profile that is a very nice profile, very gently before even talking to me. They feel like "This is a nice person". They want to contact this nice person and I always reply with "Oh, hi, how are you doing?" Like asking them questions and I get a lot of messages like "Why did you ask me how I am doing?" Escorts never do that, escorts are just like "Ok, pay me and get out". That is how they experience escorts, and I feel like I am making an impact on them by being nice. I always try to be nice, whether I am an escort or a private person or working with customer service.

(Sven, 25 years old)

Sven, who had been selling sex for the previous four years at the time of the interview, wanted "to make an impact on the life of his clients". It is not just sex.

First of all, he wanted to make connections with them, he knew that other sex workers were more “sex and money oriented”, and he could use his attitude towards clients as a way to get more contact and, ultimately, make more profit. The same attitude is shared by Francesco in Italy:

M: So, when your clients come here, at your place, do you start talking?

F: Yes, unless they are in a hurry or busy afterwards [...]. I always try to put them at ease. We are not objects but persons, so we try to create a relationship.

M: More or less, how much do you talk?

F: Fifteen to twenty minutes, then it depends on them, if they have time or not.

M: And your clients, without the need of saying it, they start opening up and tell you their stories?

F: Yes, indeed [...]. You know, I met some of them three years ago, they also know me very well, they asked me “how are you?”, “what did you do today?”, they start to say what they did that particular day [...]. It is like they are friends.

(Francesco, 28 years old)

Francesco points out two important aspects. On the one hand, he insists that before being a sex worker and a client, they are human beings who need to talk and share their feelings; on the other, he ends by saying “it is like they are friends”. Of course, clients are not “real” friends but after a long-time relationship – Francesco started selling sex more than five years ago – it is not strange to get to know a person beyond the “contract” of sex for money.

The word “connection” was widely used by the sex workers I met in order to describe their relationship with clients. Another example comes from Noah, a member of the international group:

M: You do not believe that people look just for sexual gratification?

N: Absolutely.

M: But the reality is that they want connections?

N: They need connections. I think a lot of people do not have an understanding of themselves. Maybe they just do not have time to analyse themselves to the degree of recognizing when they could benefit from feeling an intimate connection with someone. Sexual gratification is the easy one but once I am interacting with someone, I can feel what they need most. I like to give people what would be most valuable to them [...].

M: Do you tell the truth about yourself when you speak to them? If they ask you where you come from, for example.

N: I am very honest with them. I tell them my real first name if they want, or if they ask where I am staying, which typically they ask by accident just not realizing that it is something I might not want to share with them.

M: If your regular clients remember what you told them, then it will be difficult for you to remember all the lies.

N: I am more interested in keeping the connection, something good for both of us, and if they feel dishonesty then they will not trust you and it does not go well.

(Noah, 29 years old)

According to Noah, clients do not just look for sex, at least it is not the main purpose that drives them to sex workers. As pointed out before, some clients have a wife and children, and they tend to be older than the sex workers. Some of these men did not have the chance to express their sexual interests when they were young so, today, meeting a sex worker is not just to fulfil an unexpressed sexual gratification but to create a connection with someone who can understand their needs, even the ones that have been more repressed. I do not want to underestimate the “money strategy” that sex workers employ, since this behaviour can help sex workers meet more clients and, more importantly, to make clients “regulars” and ultimately to make more money. But it is also true that Noah is a member of the international group, the group that relies less on regular clients, so it is interesting to note that these connections, and the willingness to create them, are real and not just a strategy to make more money.

Talking with clients, sharing emotions with them, and, ultimately, creating connections bring us to the last aspect of their relations: empathy. I use this word to demonstrate how authentic the relationship between clients and sex workers can be and that although sex and money are an important part of it they are not the only ones. Peter, from the Swedish group, gives us an example:

M: So, you decided to continue to sell sex. Why did you continue?

P: Because I like it. Because I was able to earn money quickly, because I liked to meet new people, because I was curious, because I am very emotionally attracted to people. I like to hear stories because many of these guys that I have met are like 70, 80 [years old] so they have been through World War Two. Some people could tell me stories that were so interesting. A guy that I met was a very old model and he gave me this b/w photograph of himself when he was young. I still have it. It was not always about quick meetings. They paid for one-hour sex normally, or one-hour massage, or one-hour fetish, whatever they wanted, sometimes even just company.

Sometimes we went to dinner and they paid me 1,500 [SEK] for just having dinner with them, company. People were feeling alone.

(Peter, 25 years old)

Peter describes himself as emotionally attracted to people. The power of empathy helps him connect with his clients, to hear their stories and, most importantly, to continue to sell sex. Indeed, if we take Pateman's (1988) main concept that prostitution is a contract where the prostitute has no other choice than to accept the request of male clients, it is difficult to understand why sex workers decide to continue to sell sex even when they have a choice. Is it easy or difficult to stop this remunerative activity? As I wrote previously, the majority of sex workers in my sample have other sources of income, like a proper job, or they are students. Selling sex and sexual services represent a small percentage of their income and some of them are also thinking of giving up the activity. There are many reasons for this decision but nobody – it is an important point to highlight – told me they wanted to stop because they were not happy or satisfied with what they were doing or, to quote Gerard (21 years old): "Regarding sex work, if I still need it, but even if I do not, I really like it. I am not ashamed". Those who were thinking of quitting said that it would happen within one year, for example Guillermo; or two years, as Duygu said; or between one and three years, according to Esad (these three are all members of the international group). Leonardo and Jacopo have settled 2020 as their last year of activity. There were various reasons for wanting to quit. Some of the sex workers linked the end of selling sex with the fact they were getting older and that this would automatically conclude their career. However, there were different opinions about when someone is too old to be a sex worker: Peter thought 30 years old is his limit, while Matteo said a person cannot be an escort when they are 40 years old. Apart from age, another reason to quit is that some sex workers want to have a boyfriend or girlfriend in a serious relationship and they think that selling sex is not sustainable with a relationship at the same time. Emanuele, Ernesto, Jacopo, Misha, and Henryk fall into this category. In this regard, Henryk (31 years old) told me he had previously quit for one and a half years in the past because his boyfriend was jealous of this activity and asked him to stop. Henryk agreed but then started again when they broke up. Other reasons for stopping are to find a well-paid, full-time job (for example Gunther) and to concentrate exclusively on their education. Finally, three other sex workers, namely Antonio and Misha in Italy and Guillermo in the international group, wanted to stop being escorts but continue doing massage (without happy endings or other sex-related aspects), working in a spa or even in their own beauty-salon. Also, there were sex workers who clearly told me they did not want to stop with this activity, for example Lukasz, Timothee, and Davide. The latter is also one of the oldest sex workers in my sample (both in terms of years of activity and age) and explained it this way:

M: Did you think of stopping selling sex?

D: It does not depend on me, it depends on people who want to buy from me. I can continue without problems, I do not take Viagra or similar pills. As long as I do not have problems with having an erection, I do not have problems to continue. If there are clients willing to pay me, willing to come over here, if they like me. It is an advantage to still have people interested in me. I'm very happy about that.

M: So, you can continue until you want.

D: Until I can!

(Davide, 57 years old)

Davide is selling sex part-time, in his free time, but not only does he want to continue with this activity but he claims that selling sex is also something that gives him pleasure, the pleasure of being requested, of being liked, of being paid. The decision to stop selling sex would not only be a loss of money but, more importantly, it would be the end of a great amount of pleasure in his life. At the same time, Samuele told me that he cannot stop with sex work because it is his only source of income and he relies on that money. On the other hand, Jin is selling sex to have more money, to live better, and to travel across the globe:

J: Sometimes I do not have [any client], I just do not want to do anything at all. This month I have enough economy from my salary, from my work, because I am going to Jordan and to Israel and then to London. I travelled to fifteen countries last year, so I use money for travelling. This year I had to continue travelling but I only have a part-time job [...]. You cannot stop it [selling sex] [...]. Last year I did not have a job because I quit my last job. I was depressed, and this year is a different situation.

M: Why did you say that you do not want to quit even if you have a job?

J: When I started, I had my travelling habit. I did not have any money even if I had a good salary. I feel like it helps other people and I feel such myself.

M: So, can I say that at the beginning it was for a need of money, you needed money since you quit your job and then, now, it is like having more money to live better, to have more money to go on vacation and travel and to help others [...], your clients?

J: Yes!

(Jin, 34 years old)

Having a regular job and a monthly source of income is not enough for Jin. He also has travel plans and selling sex is an activity that he likes and that, according to him,

helps his clients. It is a win-win situation that he does not want to change. Finally, I asked the sex workers I interviewed if they thought it would be easy or difficult to stop with this activity, and whether they were thinking of stopping or not. Fahir made an interesting comparison:

M: Do you think it will be difficult to stop?

F: I can stop immediately, like extinguishing a cigarette. Like in a second, it is not a problem, if you cancel your profiles. You can cancel them all.

(Fahir, 34 years old)

Indeed, practically speaking, ending this activity is not difficult. Cancelling a profile on an escort website is easier than creating one. Like putting out a cigarette.

Almost all the sex workers think that it is easy to quit, if we consider the practical side: cancel a profile, change your telephone number or keep the same number but tell the clients – especially the regulars – that you are not selling sex anymore. But if we take another side of the question, the one related to emotions and pleasure of selling sex and sexual services, then some of the sex workers pointed out that it would not at all be easy to quit. Indeed, Francesco and Timothee in Italy; Onofrio, Jan, and Peter in Sweden; and Esad of the international group told me that it would be difficult to stop seeing their regular clients. Peter made a money-related comment, saying that it would be difficult to refuse money from clients, but the other five (members of all three groups) had a different approach. These six sex workers said it would be bad not having any more contact with their regular clients because with them they had established a closer relationship. Maybe it is not a real friendship and, of course, it is not that they fell in love with them, but they have pleasure in meeting them: a sexual pleasure but also a pleasure related to emotions, recognition, and empathy. For this reason, some sex workers will continue to see their regular clients even when they stop selling sex. Francesco, for example, will give them his telephone number and will continue seeing them without having sex, while Jan said that he will continue having sex with his regular clients for free when he quits. Once again, it is important to highlight, as I wrote in previous chapters, that the relationship between sex workers and clients is not only an economic transaction of sexual services but it becomes a relationship where emotions and pleasure seem more important than all other aspects, as also Walby (2012) and Bernstein (2007) noticed in their samples.

Even though Foucault (1978) rightly said that power is everywhere, in every action and in every relationship, I have demonstrated that in the relationship between sex workers and clients there is not the kind of one-way power described by Pateman (1988) or other radical feminists like MacKinnon (1993). Indeed, as opposed to Rinaldi's (2020) as well as Rebucini's (2014) informants, the sex workers I met

shared many characteristics with their clients (class position and educational credentials, just to name a few) which put them in a more equal position of power in their relations. The sex workers met by Rinaldi (2020) want to exercise power over their clients because they are commonly defeated in life and in society; they are in a weak position, they face everyday deprivation, and they see in sex work a way to compensate for their weakness. In addition, exercising power over clients is a way to push back, to get revenge. Power, according to both Rinaldi (2020) and Rebucini (2014), is everywhere; in my research power is present, as some sex workers said, but it is more subtle and it works both ways. As Foucault (1978) has discussed, it would be wrong to see power as a one-sided relationship.

To continue corroborating the position of equality of the two parts of this contract, I employ the concept of respect in the upcoming subsection to examine whether sex workers and their clients share the same behaviour towards each other.

### **6.1.2 A “pure relationship”? Respect and power**

In order to operationalise the concept of respect, I first analysed the material then decided to look at the following variables with regard to the length of the encounter as approached in the previous chapter: (1) the attitude of sex workers to control the time of their meetings; (2) what happens when clients fall in love with sex workers; and finally, (3) the attitude of sex workers towards clients with disability.

The great majority of sex workers fix their price keeping in mind that a “session” will be one hour long. What is their attitude? Do they check the time and, alternately, ask the client to leave after one hour or ask them to pay more for the time spent together? Apparently, most of the sex workers I met do not check the time when they are with clients: 16 answered in this way, while seven said they check the time, three said they are flexible, and the remaining sex workers did not answer this particular question. In the group of sex workers who checked the time, the behaviour of Bengt, on one hand, and the behaviour of Gunther, on the other, are especially interesting. Indeed, Bengt (member of the Swedish group) said this about time:

M: And are you restricted about the time? Do you look at the clock?

B: No, I do not. Not every time, at least. If this is a man that I met very often, then I do not care about time. But if it is someone I meet only once I say, “Ok, that is your hour”.

M: So, you do not look at the clock, but you say almost at the end, “Ok, 10/15 minutes left”.

B: No, but maybe I say, “I am so sorry, but I have some friends waiting for me in town, maybe more time next time”.

(Bengt, 22 years old)



Bengt made a distinction between regular and first-time clients. The former can enjoy more time and Bengt does not check the clock, while with the latter he is more restricted, and he does not go beyond what has been paid for. On the other hand, Gunther, who is member of the international group, has a different approach:

M: When you meet people do you look at your watch because you have decided an amount of time to spend with your clients? Or since you know already that it will be less than an hour you do not look at the time?

G: I noticed that most of them put a little clock somewhere, so they make sure because I could also not care and let it stretch longer and longer and longer, and then they pay 300 Euros for an hour, so it is absolutely better to keep track of time, or I charge more.

M: So, you do not care about the time because if it exceeds 60 minutes [...].

G: It is more money.

M: When does the second hour start? 65 minutes? 70?

G: No, it is not like [...], if it is one hour and a half, I will make a different price. If it is one hour and fifteen minutes you are going to pay me a 100 [Euros] extra.

M: Do your clients know this in advance?

G: Yes, you pay for my services and I told you what the prices are. If you decide to take longer then ok [...].

(Gunther, 22 years old)

A longer encounter, an encounter that exceeds what has been agreed in advance, means for Gunther more money. He does not tell his clients that one hour is about to finish or that the hour has passed and that if they want to continue, they will have to pay more at the end. It is a question of work ethics. Should he say to his clients that their time is running out or, as he said to me, should they know that time is passing, and that more time equals more money? His attitude cannot be regarded as unethical per se but if we compare his behaviour with the majority of sex workers in my sample, there are differing opinions. Indeed, Onofrio, Jan, Henryk, and Mitar in Sweden; Francesco, Emanuele, Timothee, Ernesto, and Misha in Italy; and Mustafa in the international group do not check the time but they also do not care how long an encounter is. There are, of course, many reasons. For the Swedish group we can take Henryk and Mitar as examples. The former said:

M: What about the encounters, the money you ask is per hour or per service?

H: I know usually it is for one hour, but I never do it for sixty minutes and let us go. So, it is one and a half sometimes. I never count the time.

M: Why?

H: Because you always meet very nice guys, so I say it is not a factory, it is not a shop. If I say, "I have sixty minutes, then I must go" it is not going to work.

M: So, you never check your watch?

H: I had my watch inside my head, and I told them when one hour had passed. It worked really well.

(Henryk, 31 years old)

Henryk does not feel being in a factory or in a shop where a service is provided. He provides something more than this and, more importantly, he meets "very nice guys" and with them he is happy to spend even more time than is actually paid for. Mitar is even more relaxed about time:

M: So, do you look at your watch when you are working?

M: No, no.

M: Do you say, "You asked me to stay overnight, so you have to give me thousands [...]?"

M: No.

M: Do you not discuss this?

M: No, actually. Because I find it stupid. If I am here [...] I do not have anything to do. I am here anyway, so [...].

M: But you also trust your clients that they will give you more money or you do not think like that?

M: Actually, I never thought about that.

M: But you think that they will give you money if you stay for an overnight?

M: Yes, it is my weakness, I trust people.

(Mitar, 27 years old)

Mitar “never thought” like that. He trusts his clients and is confident they will give him more money if, for example, he spends the whole night with them. In Italy, we can take Francesco and Emanuele as examples. The former describes what happens at the end of some of his encounters:

M: What about your regular clients?

F: Yes, they stay here. We chat, and sometimes we also go to have dinner together.

M: So, they stay for the full hour they paid for?

F: Yes, even more, but I do not look at the clock.

M: Do you not have problems about that?

F: No, no.

M: So, if you went out for dinner with some of your clients, it goes beyond the standard encounter.

F: Yes, it goes beyond. It happened one of the first times that they would say, “I would like to go out for dinner”. At the beginning, I charged them more, but then they became my regular clients and I go to dinner with them without charging them more.

(Francesco, 28 years old)

I have already pointed out that for many of the sex workers in my sample “it is not just sex”, and Francesco confirms this attitude, saying that he does not have any problem going to dinner with his regular clients without charging them more money. The pleasure of spending time with them is apparently stronger than what he can earn, economically. Also Emanuele confirms this:

M: Do you check the time?

E: No, absolutely not. I cannot do it. I do not feel like a parking metre so [...]. It happened that some encounters exceed the time we agreed but I never asked for more money because I am not a real escort, I do not care about how much I will earn at the end of the month. Yes, of course, 50 Euros more will be helpful to do groceries, but I also enjoyed that moment, so [...]. Many times, you know, there are clients that are extremely rich, in good positions, but I do not want to treat them like a cash cow. I do not like this way.

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

Even if he is in need of money and some of his clients are rich, he does not like behaving in a greedy way. But the paradox here is that if a client spends more time than was agreed, he would be expected to pay more to a professional since the service he receives in principle should be remunerated. Thus, the attitude of most of the sex workers I met is different from many other body workers like personal trainers, massage therapists, and so on. Once again, we do not find a clear tendency setting any of the three groups apart from the others; the three groups behave the same ways, with exceptions present in every group.

What happens, then, if a client falls in love with a sex worker? In this subsection, I am not dealing with the so-called boyfriend experience (also known as BFE), but with a client falling in love, unilaterally, with a sex worker. Does the sex worker take advantage of this situation because it can lead to more frequent and lucrative encounters, or is his attitude to stop seeing that particular client? It turned out that the majority of the sex workers I interviewed in Italy and Sweden would end the relationship out of respect for their clients. As an example, we can consider Sven's words:

M: Did anyone fall in love with you?

S: If there were someone who fell in love it would be this guy that paid me for the whole weekend. We met a couple of times and he is like very passionate and romantic, but I am always reminding him this is what I do, this is our relationship. I'm not trying to trick anybody in love with me.

M: So, you do not want that they fall in love with you?

S: No, I do not want that.

M: But maybe you can earn more money?

S: Then, I would have more money yeah, but I would also disappoint them because I am selling them my fantasy. I am very keen on reminding them that this is a fantasy that you are getting. I have other ambitions. When I am home, I am lazy, I am like eating pizza, I am greasy, I am a pig but when I show up, I am very groomed, I am proper.

(Sven, 25 years old)

Not only does Sven not want to have clients who fall in love with him but, more importantly, he does not want to disappoint them. He usually reminds his clients that he is selling them a fantasy, the fantasy to have sexual intercourse with a young, twink, sexy guy, but nothing more than that. Also, Sven needs time for himself. When he is at home, he likes to be lazy and to eat "like a pig". He does not want to be a sex worker (i.e. groomed, proper) all the time and having a client too attached

to him will ruin his work-life balance. At the same time, there are also sex workers who go beyond that, and they decide to stop meeting clients with whom they developed something more than the usual sex worker-client relation:

P: Some clients became my friends, and they know [my real name] but I do not tell anything [in particular].

M: How did they became your friends?

P: Because we had fun together, they were nice and at a certain point it just felt that I was not really attracted to them anymore and they were not really [...], maybe they were attracted to me, but I felt like our friendship developed and then I felt it was not worth it. It felt wrong to take money from them. As I said, I am not a greedy person.

(Peter, 25 years old)

Peter describes himself as person who is not greedy, so when he and his long-time regular clients developed their relationship into something more, like friendship or even emotional attraction, he decided to stop charging them. It is worth noting that he did not stop seeing them, he just stopped charging for their encounters. If we trust Peter, I can say, once again, that the pleasure of meeting with (some) clients is stronger than the need or the willingness to take money from them. But not all sex workers behave the same way. Indeed, there is a minority who like it when a client falls in love, because they can earn more money. Lev and Bengt, both working in Sweden, are like this. The former describes his behaviour in this way:

M: Does it happen that your clients become too close to you? That they want to have more?

L: That is how I want them to feel, because then I can get more money. I want them to spend more. It is all about money.

M: Are you not scared to feel uncomfortable if they fall in love with you?

L: No, I want them to fall in love.

M: So, did it happen?

L: Yes.

M: And you were absolutely fine with this?

L: Yes, that is a good money source.

M: Because they are paying you without having sex?

L: Yes, and others give me stuff and, in their minds, they have this relationship and everything and they know it is fake, but it is the moment. Until they run out of money [...].

M: So, they do not exaggerate, like calling you at any time of the day, coming to your place or stuff like that.

L: No, it never happened.

M: You can control them, in a sense?

L: Yes.

(Lev, 20 years old)

Lev, one of the youngest sex workers I met, is very money-oriented. Despite his young age, he is aware that a client who falls in love is also a client who is willing to spend more money, even without having sex, but it is also a client who gives presents to the sex worker. So, he pushes his clients to fall in love with him. It is also important to highlight that, until the time of the interview, nothing unwanted had happened, like stalking, or clients getting too close or too demanding. Is this a disrespectful behaviour? Probably, it is. It is impossible to know if Lev's clients are aware that "it is just faking" to quote Sanders (2005), but for sure we know that Lev, also for his own safety, must put a clear line between public and private and treat his clients with the same respect that he himself wants to be treated.

Finally, I wish to explore the relations between sex workers and clients with disabilities. Only four sex workers reported they have sex with clients with disabilities: Peter and Mats in Sweden, and Alessandro and Edoardo in Italy. It is difficult for many disabled people to have access to sexual pleasure, which is so important for human well-being. Peter describes these encounters:

M: It was always a need of money for you, but were there also other things involved?

P: It was a need of money, but it was always me being curious, me thinking that I could also help these people. Because some of these people were disabled, they could not have sex by themselves, they needed someone to hold a dildo or to wank them off because they cannot move. So, I think that these people have the right to have an active sexual life. For me this is also one of the arguments that I use a lot: "If you have a daughter who is disabled, would you fuck her with a dildo to help her have sex? I do not think so, you would hire me".

(Peter, 25 years old)

Peter describes that what he does with his disabled clients (he has three, both physically and intellectually disabled) creates a good feeling about himself. He is of

the opinion that every person needs and deserves sexual pleasure and the fact he thinks so is also one of the reasons that make him stay in this market.

In the first subsection I demonstrated how the power exchange between sex workers and clients is complex and multi-directional. Economic and physical power is exercised in different ways. But it is a “soft power”, and in the majority of cases the parts involved do not seem to exercise power in any conscious way, even if they are involved in a complex power structure (Foucault, 1978). This can be explained by two factors: first, the sex workers in my sample and their clients share many characteristics (such as class position and educational credentials) which put them in a more equal position of power resources; second, both sex workers and clients are men, and this man-to-man relation has important consequences. In my opinion this, again, makes power less important. Also, I did not find any differences among the three groups. There are some differences, but they are relegated to their personal level. Many earlier studies that see all prostitution as a form of exploitation – a discussion that has led to the criminalisation of the clients – describe sex workers as powerless in their relationship with clients. This interpretation of power in sex work does not take into account that this relationship may also be consensual and, in a sense, more equal. This seems to be true for the male sex workers I met but might also be true for many female sex workers who sell sex online and work in the urban landscape of the Western world.

## 6.2 Clients of male sex workers: what do we know about them?

As the reader is well aware, there are no clients in my sample and for this reason the discussion that follows is based on answers coming from the sex workers I interviewed. This is not an uncommon way to present data about the clients of sex workers. One of the first studies on male clients of male sex workers was based on answers coming from sex workers themselves. In 1999, Minichiello and colleagues studied clients of male sex workers in three different Australian cities. Even if they acknowledged that “without the perspective of the client, this data remains partial” (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 517), they were the first to give a general idea about the basic characteristics of this population, in terms of age, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, country of birth, and drug use.

It seems, however, that the sex workers I interviewed in Italy and Sweden had different perceptions and behaviour towards clients than those interviewed in previous studies. At the beginning of this project, I did not include clients as a group to study but, during the long interviews I had with the sex workers, it became clear that clients constitute one of the most, if not the most, important factors of their

working conditions, and that the large amount of material collected about clients deserves its own space in this dissertation.

### **6.2.1 Some characteristics of men who buy sex from other men**

This third and last section is divided into two subsections. In the first, I describe the characteristics of male clients, namely age, marital status, physical characteristics, class position, sexual position, the exchange and request of pictures, and other personality traits of the clients. Moreover, I also engage briefly on the topic of women clients (for the sex workers who also sell sex to women), priest clients, and the characteristics of clients of transsexual sex workers. In the second subsection, relying on the sex workers statements, I try to understand the motivations that lead clients to buy sex from male sex workers in Italy and Sweden.

#### *Age*

According to previous research, male clients of male sex workers are on average 45 years old with a range of 22-70 years (Sanders, 2008) while others report that 31.7% of clients are in their 40s and 28.7% in their 30s (Minichiello et al., 1999). The sex workers I interviewed told me they usually do not ask their clients their age, so my estimates about the clients' age are speculative, as Duygu describes:

D: I cannot ask people their age. I am younger than them and they feel like they are shit.

(Duygu, 25 years old)

On average, according to the sex workers in this study, clients are around 40 to 50 years old, as found in previous studies. But the range is much wider. At the bottom of the age scale are clients as young as 16, as Esad notes:

M: What was the age of the youngest client you had?

E: He told me he was 18 but he was 16 actually. He told me after, otherwise I would not do it.

(Esad, 30 years old)

In order to avoid a rejection, this young client lied about his age. We do not know in which country Esad (who is member of the international group) met this particular client but in most countries it is illegal to engage in sex for money with an underage person, even if the age limits vary slightly. There are also other sex workers who have had clients of 17 or 18 years old, even if it is not that common. On the top of the age distribution are the oldest clients: the sex workers regard clients over 60 as



old, but there are also sex workers who have had 70- or 80-year-old clients. The oldest was 90, as Faruh (26 years old) recalled. The range is therefore between 16 and 90 years of age, which is a remarkably wide range: some start thinking about buying sex when they are underage and some continue until a very late stage of their life.

### *Marital status*

According to the previous literature: “the clients of male and female sex workers have been found to be married, widowed, single and divorced, bisexual, heterosexual and homosexual men from predominately the upper middle class” (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 511). In her research, Sanders found that “eighteen participants [out of fifty] were married and a further seven were in long term relationship” (Sanders, 2008, p. 403). In my sample, apart from the case of Martin (international group, 27 years old), who said none of his clients was married and the case of Duygu (international group, 25 years old), who said only 15% of his clients were married with a woman, all the other sex workers say that the majority, the vast majority, or even the whole group of their clients, were married with a woman. This suggests that heterosexually married clients are the main source of income of internet male sex workers. In the second part of this third subsection, I will engage with the motivation that makes male clients buy sex, but already here I can anticipate something about the heterosexually married clients. Previous literature about male clients has failed to engage in more detailed discussion of their marital status, so in the following pages I will analyse this aspect in more detail. Like with age, some sex workers have to guess regarding their clients’ marital status. But in most cases, as mentioned previously, sex workers talk with their clients, as Faruh explains:

M: Do they ask you to be more top or more bottom?

F: They ask me to be bottom because 90% of the men are married and they want to experience the man.

M: OK [...]. When you said that 90% of them are married, is it your opinion or they tell you?

F: They tell me, “I am married, I want to experience, that is why I am hiring you. I do not like my wife anymore, because we are in a relationship of 25 years. After living with the lady for 25 years, I need a man”.

M: I understand, so they require you to be bottom.

F: Yeah.

(Faruh, 26 years old)

According to Faruh, clients ask him to be bottom. I will engage later about the sexual positions requested by the clients, but Leonardo, in Italy, has a different opinion and experience with his clients:

L: Obviously, they are top with their women but then, they need it [a penis] from somebody [...]. The majority of clients are engaged or married but they also like to get it [in their anus].

M: Do you think that they are gay, bisexual, or just “curious” straight?

L: Somebody is gay, others are just curious to try, then they like it [the penis], but they have a family, a woman. They love this woman but at the same time they need to take it from behind.

(Leonardo, 24 years old)

Faruh in Sweden and Leonardo in Italy have experienced different types of clients, who define themselves as heterosexuals but who have different sexual needs to be satisfied. So why do married men, sometimes with children, decide to pay and have sex with men? Jin, who is a member of the Swedish group, gives us a possible explanation:

J: They are about 50 years old, a lot of them are bisexual, they have a wife, a family. They come to me, and they tell me they are not happy in their marriage, their life [...]. Especially with people that are 50/60 years old they live a very conservative lifestyle, they have not come out like the young people so those have created families with children and grandchildren maybe, so it is harder for them and that is the reason.

M: Do they come here to feel freer?

J: Yes, and there is a gay doing service for them, they could never meet any gay in real life.

(Jin, 34 years old)

According to Jin, clients who are in their 50s or 60s today did not have the opportunity, the courage, or enough pride to live as gay men when they were young. So, they adapted to a “straight” life, they married a woman, they had children and some of them are grandparents. But today, after years of repressions, they decide to experiment their “real” sexual instinct. Hiring a sex worker seems the easiest way due to the high degree of anonymity and respect they can find with them. With regard to these last aspects, Alessandro recalls what happens when he meets a client in town:

A: It happened that I saw my clients throughout the city, but I never said hello to them. If they see me, and they are willing to greet, then I am fine and I say hello, but I am never the first. Indeed, I made a client very happy once. I saw him in a supermarket with his wife, but I did not know that she was his wife, but when he saw me, he turned white. But I let him understand that there was not a problem. Trust and loyalty are important in my job, because there are many gays who are married.

(Alessandro, 34 years old)

### *Sexual orientation*

At the same time, another sex worker has a different approach with clients who are married and officially heterosexuals:

D: Married clients like to play the victim. I do not trust them! When they leave, I always start to laugh.

M: Do you think they pretend? Do they say that it is their first time with a man?

D: I do not trust them! Maybe they do not say that it is their first time, but they say things like, "I do not know what is happening to me", "I am experiencing a new kind of attraction, a new curiosity". There are clients who wrote me letters. A guy wrote me the other day, he made a film in his mind!

(Davide, 57 years old)

The behaviour of Davide is different because when he was young, he did not take the easy, convenient, and conventional path of heterosexuality. Davide decided to live as a homosexual and confront stigmatisation and all associated difficulties. For this reason, Davide is less patient and finds it harder to accept and believe his clients when they say they are experiencing new attractions and they want to experiment with a man. Finally, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the relationship between sex workers and clients is most often not fulfilled with just sex, but there are also emotions involved. They chat, they talk, and from this exchange not only intimacy or familiarity arises, but sex workers also give suggestions and advice to their clients, even about their personal life, as again we hear from Leonardo:

M: Do you give any advice to them?

L: Yes. I just discovered that one of my clients has broken up with his wife and now he has a boyfriend. I always told him, you should not take the mickey out of your wife, it is better if you are on your own. I know that being alone is different and difficult, but it is pointless to have a relationship with someone that you do not love [...]. Tell straight to her face, you have a life to live in front of you, you are only 35 years old, you are still in time to build something with someone [...] and I recently knew that he did it!

(Leonardo, 24 years old)

Most of the time, the relationship between sex workers and clients seems authentic. They wish the best for each other. They help each other: sometimes with money (the client to the sex workers), in other circumstances with advice and suggestions to live a better life.

### *Looks*

This next discussion is related to the physical characteristics of clients. In the previous chapter, I discussed the literature regarding physical aspects of male sex workers. Walby (2012), for example, highlights that the male sex workers he met had fit and muscled bodies; while Logan (2014; 2017) stressed the statistical correlation between specific physical characteristics and how much sex workers can charge clients. What about their clients? Available literature on male clients does not engage with their physical aspects. Usually, people in general think that clients are unattractive, and that this is why they pay for sex. Many people tend to think that if they were what people conventionally define as “good looking”, they could certainly be in a position to have sex for free. This idea is shared by Gunnar (Swedish group, 25 years old) who told me that “clients have the right to be ugly”. Analysing the interviews, however, different thoughts emerged, the first conceptualisation confirming the general idea of clients. For example, Jin told me:

J: They are all Swedish, they are all very ugly and difficult people. They are so desperate, I think that kind of people really need care, they need something to put spice in their life. They are not satisfied with their life, that is why they come out to look for some other things.

(Jin, 34 years old)

Jin justifies his clients’ physical aspects. He considers them unattractive and, as Gunnar said, this is also their right. Otherwise, why should they pay for sex? Bengt shares the same opinion of the previous two sex workers, but he also added an important feature:

B: They are very ugly, all of them. But when I work, I do not see it. I mean this is work. And if I would not get paid for this, I would throw everyone out.

(Bengt, 22 years old)

Bengt stressed that this is work and having clients he considers unattractive is part of the package. He accepts them, even if they are not what he considers to be good looking. But Sven, another Swedish sex worker, goes beyond the physical aspects of his customers:

M: Do you think that some of your clients can be defined as ugly?

S: I think one-third of them would be considered ugly and not attractive and that is why they usually go and buy an escort and not go through Grindr and etc.

M: But they are not ugly for you.

S: I personally would not go out with them, but when I am with them, because they bought the service, and talking to them, I get to know them and they are all really nice people. So personally I like them a lot but looking-wise they are not usually my type.

(Sven, 25 years old)

Even if the majority of sex workers acknowledge that their clients are not conventionally good-looking, there are also sex workers, like Sven, who go beyond this “at first sight” aspect. Once again, the relationship between sex workers and clients is not only about sex but it is also about talking and sharing stories, emotions, empathy. Beyond that, as Sven has highlighted, being what people consider to be more or less good-looking is not important anymore. There are also sex workers who find many of their clients sexy, like Peter (member of the Swedish group):

P: Physically many of them are good-looking, nothing wrong with them. They excite me too; it is not like they are missing the complete head. Almost everything is there. Some are a little bigger, two of them.

M: But if I ask you, are they ugly? What would you reply?

P: I do not really know; I am the wrong person. I never say people are ugly. I do not like to say people are ugly because I think it is a very relative word. The same goes for beautiful. I say people are beautiful, but I always try to specify what it is. But I can say that many of my customers would not have it easy to find someone on maybe Quiser.

M: So, I understand that you take a lot of care of your customers, also you respect them a lot.

P: Yes, I do. It is all about this, I think.

(Peter, 25 years old)

First of all, Peter affirms that he considers many of his clients good-looking and points out that only two of them are overweight. Anyway, like Sven, he goes beyond physical appearance and prefers to take care of his customers on a deeper level of confidentiality. But many sex workers prefer slim (and shaved) clients because it is easy to perform some services with them, for example massages, as Simone (member of the Italian group) describes:

S: There are also clients that are a bit ugly, skinny, even too skinny, or with a very ugly face, but as I said already, I do not care. The important thing is that I have to perform a massage on them and that they pay me at the end. I do not care about their body, or if they are nice or ugly. Of course, if a nice guy comes over [...] I mean for my job [...]. Of course, I do prefer the guys who go to gym because the majority of them are less hairy, they are narcissists, and they shave. I am a masseur, and they are my favourite because doing a massage with a hairless body means that I have to use less massage oil and it is easier to perform, it is smooth. Unfortunately, I also have very fat clients. They are very heavy, and I need to do double of the effort. Because if you are fat, I need to push stronger on your skin and when you are fat you are also hairy, so I spend a lot of my energies and I also need to use more massage oil, otherwise my hand cannot slip on their hairy bodies.

(Simone, 42 years old)

Simone has declared that since he is straight, he does not care if he finds a client attractive or not. They are always men, and he still prefers women. In any case, Simone associates being nice with having a nice body and, from here, having the characteristics of working out and removing hair. Also, he associates “ugly clients” with fat and hairy bodies. His point is that he likes the former type of client just because it is easier for him to perform a massage, while in the latter case he needs to use more massage oil and more energy.

### *Class position*

Another important characteristic of male clients is their class position. Previous research has shown that 61.9% of male clients of male sex workers come from the so-called “middle class” (Minichiello et al., 1999) while Sanders describes the clients she met in this way: “only seven men did not have any formal qualifications: 34 had a higher education degree. Occupations were predominantly professional including a lawyer, a pilot, and several men involved in teaching or academia, engineering, banking, media, sales and IT” (Sanders, 2008, p. 403). Once again, compared to the sex workers met by Minichiello and Sanders, the male sex workers I met were much more talkative in describing the socio-economic status of their clients. First of all, how do they know the class position of their clients? Some sex workers are very discrete, and they do not ask their clients questions, so it is just guessing, as Noah describes:

N: It is something that they seldom share, and I do not ask, it is a conversational topic, but I stay clear of it. I just assume they value discretion and that they come from middle to upper middle class.

(Noah, 29 years old)

In contrast, there are sex workers who do not have problems engaging with questions about socio-economic status, for example Guillermo:

G: I think they are between middle-class and rich. That is what they say to me. They say that they have good money, properties throughout Europe. That gives me an idea of their status and income. Most of the time, when I am doing massage, I make conversation and, somehow, they tell me what they do. So, I look them up online and I discover that they are general managers or chief executive officers of enterprises.

(Guillermo, 28 years old)

It is interesting to note that both Noah and Guillermo are member of the international group. It is common that sex workers refer to their clients with this hierarchy (starting from the bottom): working class (or poor), middle class, upper middle-class, upper class (or rich). In the previous chapter, when I described the sex workers' fees, the range was quite wide, from as low as 40 Euros to as high as 400 Euros. For this reason, it is possible to assume that paying for sex would not be affordable only for the upper class. As already noted, different sex workers attract different types of clients, also based on their prices. For example, Sven told me:

S: I think most of them are middle-upper class.

M: Do you think that someone coming from the working class cannot afford 2,000 Crowns?

S: I think they can but sometimes most of the customers try to negotiate and you realize maybe they do not have that much money. This is more a luxury hour for them, not something that just happens. They have to prepare, and they cannot meet more than once per month. Then you notice that they do not have that much money.

M: So, there are some of your clients in this situation, but the majority are upper-middle class?

S: Yes, because they can afford it. It is not something that an every-day person can afford [...] most of my clients are Swedish and they are here in Stockholm.

(Sven, 25 years old)

For the sex workers who charge more than the average price (130 Euros) it means that their services become a "luxury", and for this reason they attract richer clients. Of course, many people can afford to pay 200 Euros to hire a sex worker but not everyone can do it more than once a month, as upper-class clients can. Bengt, for example, charges the same price as Sven (both in the Swedish group), just to attract rich clients and he does not offer a discount because he prefers to have fewer clients, but from the upper class. It is interesting to notice, however, that other sex workers

have a completely different attitude. Martin (international group), Leonardo and Edoardo (Italian group) are more open and “accessible” for their clients, not because they charge the minimum fee but because they decided to accept clients from all classes. Martin explains:

M: Are they from the middle class or the upper class?

M: Upper class mostly, some middle class too, and when they come from the upper class I ask 6,000 SEK but if they come from the middle class it is 2,000 SEK.

(Martin, 27 years old)

In both cases, Martin charges much more than the average price, but not only does he not seem to have problem in lowering his fee, but he also adopted an inclusive behaviour, offering a large discount (two-thirds of the price) for people coming from lower classes. This is not a strategy to attract more clients but it is a choice of inclusiveness. In Italy, Edoardo has arrived at the same conclusion:

M: What about their social class?

E: Everyone is coming here: from the blue-collar to the lawyer.

M: Do they all pay the same price?

E: I give them a discount if they do humble jobs.

M: Is it a form of generosity?

E: It is because they are nice clients.

(Edoardo, 23 years old)

As mentioned previously, even if there are sex workers who are very money-oriented in their relationship with their clients, there are also sex workers who give privilege to other types of exchange.

### *Sexual position*

Since I have already discussed the sexual position of the sex workers (in Chapter 5) and how complementarity is important in gay male sex, I will just briefly engage with this point here. Being versatile can be a plus for the sex workers because in this way they can satisfy more clients (those who are top, bottom, and versatile), while sex workers who are only top or only bottom can find only clients who are bottom and top, respectively. Gerard describes his situation:



M: Is it better to be top or bottom? Both? Or it does not matter?

G: I do not know. I think being versatile is really appreciated because you can adapt more but I always met only top guys or guys who do not want anal sex.

(Gerard, 21 years old)

Some sex workers who travel across countries or within a single country have found different clients' behaviour related to the sexual position:

M: In Hong Kong you can make even more money than Switzerland, for example. Asians, for example, most of the times wanted me to be top. And here in Europe it is funny but in the northern places, in the places where the people feel more macho, they want to be top all the time, but in places where you are very free all the people are bottom. It is kind of strange!

M: Where do they prefer to be the bottom?

M: In Asia.

M: And in Europe?

M: In France, totally [bottom]. Mostly. And here in the north they prefer to be top. But hold on, because it is quite strange because the young generation here in Denmark, they were always looking for a top.

(Miguel, 25 years old)

While Samuele describes the situation in Italy:

S: I do like to kiss, doing foreplay, then a huge fuck. I am versatile, more top, but I ended up doing everything. Milan has become more top, Rome is completely bottom, cities where you find top guys are Florence and Bologna.

(Samuele, 35 years old)

### *Clients' pictures*

During the interviews, another important aspect that arose was the availability of clients' pictures. According to Minichiello and colleagues, male sex workers "reported that in 61.2% of the cases they had some information about the clients [...]. Client's occupation was the most commonly known information (48.4%), followed by client's home number (26.8%), and client's home address (26.0%)" (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 515). It is not strange for sex workers to know where a client lives, basically because sometimes they meet clients at their places. While it was the home number in 1999, it is the mobile phone today. Indeed, some sex

workers ask their clients to provide their phone numbers, in order to make the conversation more “real” than that of the web, but also as a trick, as Emanuele describes:

M: Do you ask your clients to send you a picture of themselves?

E: Yes, I do prefer to see them.

M: And if they refuse?

E: If they refuse, I try to direct the conversation to WhatsApp and to ask for their pictures there. Many clients refuse in the beginning because it is on the web. You know what? We meet for having sex. This is our goal, at least, it is sex. So, I have to see you sooner or later. There is no sense in refusing to send me a picture.

M: Do they give you their phone numbers?

E: Yes. Many people prefer the phone number over the web. I do not know, they find it more personal [...]. They usually say, “Please, do not call me”, because they are working or because they have a woman. But they like when there is this direct contact between us. They receive something back, contrary of the web.

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

Nowadays, having someone’s mobile number opens up many possibilities. Indeed, many sex workers use the number to check the clients on the web. Many people post their numbers on social media (like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), or they put it on a CV that is available for online search. So, sex workers are able to discover many things about possible clients. Not only the picture that, for some sex workers, appear to be an important piece of information to have before the actual encounter. But other sex workers consider it rude to ask for a picture in advance, as Simone describes:

M: Why do you not ask for their pictures?

S: Whoever calls me is welcome! Then, if they write me on WhatsApp, they have the picture on their profile. But I cannot ask for more money if I see from the picture that they are ugly or fat.

M: So, you do not want to see their picture.

S: Nope, I do not care. I do not care, and I do not want to jeopardise the meeting itself. It is a marketing rule: I do not want to lose a client because I see them and then write something inappropriate about their body. I cannot say to a client, “You have

to pay 10 Euros more because I saw that you are fat”. Actually, some clients – usually in their 60s – told me “I am a bit fat, is it a problem?” and I reply “Obviously, not!”

(Simone, 42 years old)

Simone wants and needs to have clients. He is available to meet them without knowing their face in advance and he is afraid that asking for a picture will reduce his chance to meet a client. Generally, sex workers try to have something more than an online chat before meeting a client. Phone numbers are usually welcome as much as a photo of the client’s face, but many sex workers refrain from asking for one or both things in order to not risk the encounter. It is a different matter when there is a concern for their safety. In this case, sex workers can be very demanding in terms of both pictures and phone numbers.

### *Women clients*

The final three points are related to women clients, priest clients, and the clients of a transsexual sex worker. Some of the sex workers I met also sell sex to women, even if they represent a small percentage compared to male clients. In total, there were 10 sex workers in my sample who sold sex also to women: Lev, Peter, and Faruh in Sweden; Alessandro, Leonardo, Samuele, and Ottaviano in Italy; and Noah, Martin, and Gunther in the international group. The majority of them have just one female client, even if Peter used to have more in the past. Those who have more women clients say the women do not exceed 20% of their total number of clients (this is the case of Gunther), or even 30% (like Faruh, who is the sex worker I met with the highest number of women clients). Peter explains his point of view:

M: How many female clients do you have?

P: Nowadays, I only have one.

M: And in the past did you have more?

P: Yes, it is mostly men because men are more developed in this kind of world. They buy more sex. But I had many women in heterosexual relationships and “solo” women, but not so many.

M: Do you think that being an escort that goes only with women would be possible?

P: I think it is very possible. I think you just look at the sex industry in West Africa or Haiti. There are these rich women going there fucking with these black men.

M: But this is more “touristic sex”.

P: Of course.

M: What about here in Sweden?

P: It is hard to get women to buy sex, but I have heard about it from friends and I have seen it with my own eyes. I have done it, but it is harder.

(Peter, 25 years old)

Peter highlights exactly what earlier research has reported about women as clients and so-called “touristic sex”. In his opinion, it is difficult to be a male sex worker for women clients only because this market is not developed where he works and, however, there are few of them. Faruh, on the other hand, prefers women clients over male clients, and he describes why:

F: I would like to have more contact with ladies because I feel more comfortable [with them].

M: Why?

F: It is a bit more natural with women. With men who are drunk it is difficult to [...] ehm [...] fit, do the massage, men are much more violent, and some men behave badly like “lick my foot” and some fetish things.

M: Women do not engage in fetishism?

F: You know what, they do not like dominating. They like more massage and soft things.

(Faruh, 26 years old)

Faruh defines himself as bisexual, but he still describes sex with women as “more natural”. In addition, he refers to sex with men as difficult, kinky, dirty, violent, and includes fetishism, while sex with women is soft, vanilla. Finally, Alessandro highlights the situation in Italy with his women clients:

A: The women’s world: women do not pay for sex. The majority of women who are looking for sex are businesswomen, they have a “name”, they cannot run the risk to be discovered with a doormat, privacy is the most important thing.

M: How old are they?

A: Women are 40, 50, or 55 years old. I also met younger women, but it is rarer. They were all very rich because I charge them 1,000 euros per night and not everybody can afford it. Moreover, women call a gigolo in Milan to go to France. They do not call a gigolo who lives and work in the same place. It is different among gay people, who are like Milan for Milan. Women care about their reputation; they pay a gigolo because in this way they have the security that their privacy is guaranteed.

(Alessandro, 34 years old)

Even Alessandro stresses that women and men clients are different. In particular he highlights that women clients take more care of their privacy and that they prefer to travel abroad with the “gigolo” they hire instead of a meeting in their home city.

### *Priest clients*

Three sex workers had sex with Catholic priests: Mattia, Samuele, and Fahir (all from the Italian group). Samuele even says that 10% of all his clients in Rome are priests:

S: At least 10% are prelates because there is the Vatican in Rome, I have clients who are priests, prelates, bishops, not like the priest of a small church.

(Samuele, 35 years old)

While Mattia describes with more detail an encounter he had with a priest:

M: And then there are the priests [...]. There was one, it was in the summer of 2016, he was an actual priest from a church in the south of Milan. We met at the underground station and he brought me to his church, in his vicarage, he showed me an album full of pictures, it is better if I do not say what was in there [...]. He also gave me a CD with an “amateur”<sup>5</sup>. Then, we had sex, not very qualitative if I must say [...]. He asked me to be blasphemous in front of a painting of the Holy Mary with a young Jesus and he was doing the same.

(Mattia, 43 years old)

### *Male clients of a transsexual sex worker*

As I have pointed out, there is a transsexual male sex worker in my sample: Lukasz. As I wrote in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3), I decided to discuss him in the same context as the other male sex workers I interviewed. But here, I want to understand if there are any similarities or differences in terms of clients, since Lukasz describes himself as “a man with a vagina”. This is how he describes the sexual orientation and the marital status of his clients:

M: What about the sexual orientation of your clients?

L: Some of them are gay men, some of them are bisexual, some are straight.

M: Is it like 33-33-33%?

L: Maybe 60% are straight and the rest are bisexual or gay.

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<sup>5</sup> A porn movie made by non-professional actors.

M: Among those who are straight, how many of them have heterosexual families?

L: Not all of them, but a huge part, maybe 95%. From what I remember there is just one guy who is straight and does not have a family.

(Lukasz, 25 years old)

As happens with the other sex workers, also Lukasz has a prevalence of “straight” clients over bisexual and gay men. Lukasz can offer different types of services compared to the other sex workers, but not all his clients are able to understand this when they contact him on the internet:

L: I always say “I am a man with a vagina”. Some people cannot actually understand that there are people like me so they think I am a girl who looks like a boy, or I am a girl who thinks that she is a man but she still has a vagina and boobs but it is actually not the case. Some of them, those who are very straight, they usually are disappointed or are not interested when I try to explain better who I am, but there is also a lot of gay men who want to try to have sex with someone who has a pussy but they do not want to have sex with a woman or they are bisexual who really want to try and they always want to experiment, they are open minded. It depends, different kinds of people.

(Lukasz, 25 years old)

Even if he clearly writes in his online ad that he is a “man with a vagina”, many clients do not really understand that Lukasz is a trans man. The confusion arises for two possible reasons: there are many people who do not really understand what a trans man or woman is and the effects of the transition on the personality and physical body; and many gay men who perform sex as passive very often refer to their own anus as a “pussy” or a “vagina”. For this reason, many clients can legitimately think that Lukasz’s ad is a colourful reference to his anus and not that he really has “a vagina”. Finally, Lukasz describes the physical characteristics of his clients:

M: How do your clients appear to you?

L: There is a difference between straight men and gay men in this area. A lot of gays are very muscular and work out a lot and they are like trimmed, fresh, but most of the straight men either are in a marriage that lasted for 5, 6, or 7 years or they do not care so much about how they look, they have a stable family life and they do not think about being sexual for somebody else, to appear sexual.

M: Would you say that straight clients are also uglier than the gay guys?

L: I think that this is a matter of taste [...]. For sure, they do not care as much as the gay guys about hygiene. Sometimes you need to ask them to take a shower before meeting them.

M: And you do not have this kind of problem with gay guys?

L: No, I do not.

(Lukasz, 25 years old)

Since I do not have other transgendered sex workers in my sample, it is difficult to understand if Lukasz's clear distinction between straight and homosexual clients is happening by chance or not. It is possible that the clients who contact and meet him can be categorized on the basis of their sexual orientation and, from this, based on different physical characteristics (muscled, trimmed, fresh, and conventionally good looking vs. standard, dirty, and low personal hygiene).

Instead of summarising this subsection, it is perhaps more interesting to create a typology of client based on the descriptions of the sex workers I interviewed. The most common client is about 45 years old; he is in a heterosexual relationship with a woman, probably married; he is looking for intimacy with a man, but sex is not necessarily a prominent part of the relationship he establishes with a sex worker, even if it is present; he is a member of the so-called middle-class, if not in the upper-middle class; he is more bottom; and he shares both his telephone number and face pictures with sex workers before he meets them.

### **6.2.2 Why do men pay for sexual services from other men?**

The last question in all my interviews with the sex workers I met was: "Why do your clients pay for sex?" Indeed, with the proliferation of apps such as Grindr and the liberation of sex among gay men (Bacio & Peruzzi, 2017; Bacio & Rinaldi, 2021) I found it interesting that the phenomenon of paying for sex is wide and flourishing in our society, especially in Sweden where clients are even criminalised. In this final section, I report and discuss the sex workers' answers to the question why they think their clients are buying sex from them instead, for example, trying to find sex for free through other means (such as Grindr or other "gay apps" or attending clubs, *battuage*, or other "gay places").

Scott and colleagues (2014) reviewed the literature on male clients of male sex workers' motivations and they highlight three main points: seeking power, seeking intimacy, and seeking motivation. The first point involves power as domination, but it can be valid either way: domination over the sex workers or domination by the sex workers. The second point highlights the pleasure and sharing of emotions that sex with sex workers can give to both seller and buyer. Regarding the last point,

clients look for something that they cannot have with their existing relationship in order to fulfil their unmet sexual interests (Scott et al., 2014).

Finally, Sanders (2008), studying the motivation of regular clients, identifies five key features of the traditional sexual script that men, as regular clients, adopt with their “special” sex workers: 1) the role of communication; 2) courtship rituals; 3) sexual familiarity; 4) the desire for mutual “satisfaction”; and 5) sex as the “extra”: emotions, friendship, and “connection”. Once again, she employs the “script theory” of Simon and Gagnon (1986) to show that regular male clients of female sex workers share a common set of characteristics. Discussing “the role of communication”, Sanders (2008) explains that the exchange of mobile numbers is frequent and, more importantly, a mutual disclosure of thoughts, ideas, and conversation are the typical frames and clients and sex workers are not engaging in “small talk” only, as previous studies revealed. Moreover, the boundaries of commercial sex are pushed away and emotions are allowed, for both sides, together with the possibility of being vulnerable. Finally, even though some clients are able to confine their emotions to the commercial context, other men are not able to do that and they engage in authentic relationships with sex workers. The second point, for Sanders (2008) is called “courtship rituals” where regular clients are less inclined to short-term relationships without emotions but oriented toward in-depth and more holistic relations. At the same time, sex workers act as sexual initiators: “the commercial sexual interaction is not necessarily a sexual conquest (something that normative heterosexual men may pursue) but can instead be an emotional conquest that produces the desired connections for the client” (Sanders, 2008, p. 406). I discussed previously the presence of young clients, even younger than 18 years old. According to Sanders, the presence of this type of population is not linked with the need of a sexual conquest, but with the need of being initiated into sex and, in my case, to sex between men. The third script highlighted by the British criminologist is called “sexual familiarity”. Here, familiarity and comfortable interactions between sex workers and clients occurred, providing both parties with sexual and emotional security, building, in this way, a trusting and steady relationship. The fourth script found by Sanders (2008) is called “desire for mutual satisfaction”. This characteristic of the relationship between sex workers and clients addresses a question I discussed earlier: is it possible to have mutual sexual and non-sexual pleasure or is the focus only on the pleasure of the clients? According to some studies, sex workers do not receive pleasure from clients (Weinberg et al., 1999), but “the literature documents a strong discourse amongst male clients regarding their desire to ‘give’ sex workers pleasure” (Sanders, 2008, p. 408). Moreover, “the desire for mutuality is intrinsically functional in men’s individual sexual stories and tied closely to issues of self-esteem, sexual performance, and body image” (Sanders, 2008, p. 408). The point is that the goal for these regular clients is to achieve mutual sexual pleasure with the sex workers and, in this way, their relationships become



much closer to a “conventional relationship” than a “commercial sex relationship” (Duncombe & Marsden, 1996). Sanders’ (2008) last script is called “sex as the “extra”: emotions, friendship and “connections”. She argues that for regular clients, sex work is a “listening occupation” where trust and intimacy play a key role. Analysing the interviews she conducted with male clients or female sex workers, Sanders underlines how clients compared the relationship with sex workers with a “regular relationship” in terms of friendship, sometimes even saying that it resembles the emotional support of a spouse or a close friend: “whilst sexual pleasure experienced by clients of sex workers is usually not mutual, relationships of trust, friendship and other normative relations may be genuine and mutual, reflecting strong features of non-commercial relationships” (Sanders, 2008, p. 410).

The list of answers the sex workers in my sample provided to the question “why do they pay?” is rather long, and it contains different and sometimes opposing ideas. Thanks to Atlas.ti software, I was able to select the top eight answers: 1) time (it is time saving to hire an escort compared to spending time on gay apps); 2) power (clients can obtain most everything they want in terms of services and attention); 3) possibilities for non-attractive clients who fear rejection (some clients face difficulties finding sex due to their physical characteristics); 4) an outlet for straight or married clients (some clients are in heterosexual relationships and, very often, with a wife and children); 5) loneliness and the need for emotional sex (some clients are alone or feel alone and need to share and satisfy their emotions); 6) egoism (paying for sex means that the client is at the centre of attention); 7) fetish (clients who do not want or cannot have fetish or kinky sex with their regular partners); and 8) business deal (paying for sex is safe and gives clients certainty compared to non-commercial sex). These eight answers, as I show in the following pages, do not exclude each other, but can be seen as complementary, in the sense that it is possible to find more than one reason that leads every single client to buy for sex. Indeed, for the sake of brevity, I do not present each answer one after the other, but I have grouped them together as the sex workers I interviewed described them.

For example, Henryk, a member of the Swedish group, in answering my question, describes why clients are buying sex from him instead of seeking it for free on “gay apps”:

H: Maybe if you are using Grindr you see that everybody is very tired, everybody is planning to meet in the weekend, everybody is very lazy. So, I think, a lot of guys think, “Ok, I will pay, he is coming to me, he must give me pleasure and I will be happy”. If you buy something on the internet, you pay, and it is coming direct to you.

M: Because it is quick and easy?

H: Yes.

M: It is not because they are ugly and fat?

H: No, I met many good-looking guys, and I was very surprised.

(Henryk, 31 years old)

According to Henryk, the main reason that motivates people to buy sex is to save time. The use of gay apps, even the most well-known, Grindr, does not give certainty. Again, from the Swedish group, we can hear the words of Sven:

M: Why do your clients pay for sex?

S: There are several reasons. There is a sense of power and there is a sense of financial support, and there is like a stigma to it, so they have a bigger adrenaline, a rush, because there is a stigma to do it. Or, the fourth reason, I think is that they cannot get sex in any other way. I mean, I should not really speak on their behalf because I am not a buyer, but I think of those reasons. Most of the clients I had usually, I feel, want to support me.

M: So, do you think all your clients want to support you, because of this boyfriend experience?

S: Yes, a little bit. I cannot tell, I feel that is more what they want.

(Sven, 25 years old)

Sven gave me four different answers to my question: power, financial support, the thrill of engaging in a stigmatised activity (which is not among the top eight answers in the whole sample), or the inability to have sex with a man without paying. It is interesting to analyse the second reason: the financial support that is linked to the service of the boyfriend experience. According to Sven, his clients want to help him, financially. This reason, unlinked to having sex, explains the familiarity he developed with his regular clients. These interactions that go beyond having sex with clients are part of the service he provides and that his clients want to buy from him. As Sven said, we cannot talk for them, but this is a feeling that a sex worker with four years of activity in Sweden had at the end of the interview. Sven also said, as the fourth reason, that his clients “cannot get sex in any other way”, something that Timothee also underlines:

T: It is very difficult to organize an encounter, so they pay for one hour, or even fifteen, or twenty minutes to have someone close to them. They pay for this moment of intimacy. Because they are not able to find this in another way. I see this also with married men I know – even if they are married, they are looking for someone to belong to and to possess for some time.

M: Even if it is so easy to have free sex between men?

T: I do not think that it is so easy [...]. Yes, it can be easy. But it is easy to meet someone and have sex with him, it is not easy to create a relationship with him. They like when I make compliments during our encounters, they do not receive them with people that they meet in a [gay] sauna.

(Timothee, 46 years old)

Timothee, who is member of the Italian group, stresses that what he is offering to his clients it is not what they can find without paying for sex. Paying for sex gives his clients the possibility to share emotions and compliments that do not occur when people have “egoistic” sex in a gay sauna or on the internet. Another example of this familiarity between the sex workers and their clients comes from Emanuele (Italian group):

E: I told you, it is the fact it is a transgressive activity that pushes people to buy sex. The transgressiveness, the shyness. Sometimes they are people that have the need of a friendly person. Like going to a psychologist. You go there and you unload, you talk [...]. It is like the psychologist of the body. I mean, you go to the psychologist because you have problems, you lack something, and you are not able to find it and you talk about sex. When you go with an escort you have a need that is more physical, and you unload it. But then, this need is more psychological than physical – because it is a need related to your loneliness. Many people work all the time, like constantly, and they are always alone. They come back home and some of them have a woman that is not able to satisfy them or who is not able to give them warmth, any affection – that something that can help them to fill their need of esteem, of love. Then, they go with an escort [...]. They have to satisfy this need. They have a boring life. Maybe they have a successful life as well, but it is so “normal” so anaesthetic, the same day after day, they need something to feel alive [...]. Instead of going to a psychologist, they go with an escort. They need a psychologist, not an escort. More simply they need a friend. A person to speak with, to unload, to say something, to stay together, just watching a film.

(Emanuele, 28 years old)

Even Emanuele highlights the need of comfortable interactions between sex workers and clients. They need sex, but also a friend, someone close to them, with whom they can share emotional security, to use Sanders’ words (2008). In Emanuele’s view, loneliness is not only being literally alone, since he acknowledges that some of his clients “have a woman” at home, but it is often also being with someone who it is not able to help you. Maybe a psychologist is more useful, but they prefer to pay an escort and, sometimes, to develop a steady relationship with them. Mattia also comments on the aspect of loneliness:

M: It is a dirty job because you play on their loneliness, and this disturbed me psychologically. Today, it is simple because you are young and dashing but in thirty years? There is a lot of loneliness. I am a very sensible guy, I am empathic, I do not have muscles, otherwise how can I explain why 40% of my clients come back to me?

(Mattia, 43 years old)

According to Mattia, clients are coming back, becoming regulars, not because of his physical characteristics, indeed he is not young nor does he have a muscled body, but only because he gives to his clients something they need, which is not sex, but helping them to fill their loneliness. The encounters are not made for doing sex, but to handle the need of sharing emotions with another person. This view is not shared with all the other sex workers. Indeed, for some sex workers, clients are looking for “emotionless sex”. We can take Duygu and Mats as examples. The former says:

D: I think that some people like to rent people, the domination. I met some handsome people paying, I think they are like “I rent you, you are mine [...]”. What I want, you will do”. They like this state of mind; it is not ugly people who pay because I met some handsome guys.

M: They could have sex for free, but they want to pay.

D: Yes, because they like paying. They like we are doing sex because there is no emotion involved. They do not want to be emotional, they just say “He is next to me because of the money”.

(Duygu, 25 years old)

Duygu, who is member of the international group, is convinced that his clients are looking for people to hire, to possess sexually, to exercise power over, where emotions not only are not important but clearly to be avoided. They can share their emotions with other people because they have other people around them, they are not lonely so, under these circumstances, they pay for sex and nothing more than this. Mats continues on this “emotionless sex” theme:

M: The fundamental force behind heterosexual prostitution is the enormous demand for emotionless sex. For men there is a supply of women and this pays the market and basically an industry. For example, in Germany there are websites where people trade experiences about this. And this does not exist in the gay world. Supply needs demand, basically, and still you have some sex workers. For example, I have a quite educated, rich friend in London, and he is working extremely hard like an executive. He says that “It is so convenient, I know what I get and order at a special time and they come up, they are fabulous looking, they have fun, and they make money”. So, he pays for these things. You do not have to spend time in a bar or whatever to advertise on the internet. Otherwise, I think this less organized “*taschengeld*” market,

the pocket-money, that is only to exchange your number with a few people that someone can have sex with.

(Mats, 56 years old)

According to Mats, who is a sex worker in Sweden and a client in Germany, the existence of (heterosexual) prostitution is explained with the enormous demand for emotionless sex. To support his view, he gave the example of one of his friends who stresses the convenience of paying for sex instead of spending time in a bar or on the internet. At the same time, the German market of the “*taschengeld*” clearly highlights the fact that many gay men prefer to pay for having a quick sexual gratification without even the time to ask for emotions or empathy. Interestingly, neither Duygu nor Mats refers to regular clients. Duygu is in the international group and, as I already pointed out, it is difficult for members of this group to have regular clients. Mats’ opinion, on the other hand, does not preclude the idea of regular clients engaging repetitively with the same or with different sex workers of the “*tasZhengeld*” market, so it is important to stress that not all regular clients are looking for emotion. There are, of course, also those who are looking for the opposite: just sex.

In Sweden, Gunnar explains another category among the most cited, “fetish”:

G: I think it is a bit of a fetish, they like to pay for it, and I have not done much exploration on the subject but I think it is something exciting and they have a kick out of it because it is illegal so I think if it was decriminalized less people would do it. I have not asked people, “Why do you buy from me?” but I think it is a bit a fetish and a bit because it is illegal, and they do not have to look after my feelings. If they only want to have anal sex, then it is what is going to happen. They do not have to do anything else.

(Gunnar, 25 years old)

It is possible to divide the “fetish” illustrated by Gunnar into two different categories. The first one, as Gunnar describes, is related to the fact that, for some people, paying for sex is something that you can do, a possibility, a dream that becomes true. The other is that some clients need to meet sex workers in order to satisfy their fetishism. Something they cannot do with or cannot ask their regular partners, even spouses. As we saw in the previous pages, paying for fetish is a lucrative activity for sex workers. At the same time, it is interesting how, according to Gunnar, sex work is supported by the criminalization enforced in Sweden. To make something illegal, forbidden, automatically increases the need and the willingness to participate in that particular thing. It is an old but always true law of human nature.

In Italy, Davide explains his position about hiring a sex worker as making a “business deal”:

D: It is like I have a small net to catch butterflies, and I go around to catch guys on the street. I see someone, I say “I want him”, I pay, and I get him. That is why escorts exist. If you go on those chats and you see someone that you like, you write him “Hi” and he is not going to reply to you.

M: Maybe you need to stay there for some hours [...].

D: No, there is nothing you can do. If he does not like you, he does not reply, but you like and want him. With the escort, you can have it.

(Davide, 57 years old)

Making a deal gives clients the possibility to obtain what they want, the certainty of meeting a real person, and it also saves time. These are, according to Davide, the main reasons that many people want to pay for sex. In the same vein, and in the same country, there is Matteo.

M: I think that people are tired of justifying what they do; people do not want to justify all the time. They are accustomed to paying for everything: for pleasure, to give pleasure to another person. When a client decides to pay for sex, he is already satisfied. He pays so he does not need to justify what he is doing.

(Mattia, 31 years old)

As Serughetti pointed out: “the demand for prostitution is supported by a moral of the sexual exchange that does not contrast but affirms the sexual transformation of the intimate relationships” (Serughetti, 2019, p. 201, my translation). Therefore, it is not unusual that people see sex work as just an economic transaction, because the existence of this activity is directly related to how intimacy is perceived by society as a whole. These changes make sex work more visible and more acceptable, despite existing legislations that criminalise this market.

When I asked Martin why clients pay for having sex with sex workers, he offered an unexpected comment:

M: It is a nice experience, when you are a lover you do not really get the word prostitute because it is like, another world. It is evaluating you before they meet you and they really want to spend time with you, and they pay you. I do not know why people talk about prostitution so badly when it is such beautiful work. I am fed up with people thinking that it is bad.

(Martin, 27 years old)

When I asked Martin why his clients are buying sex from him, he replied accusing people who see “prostitution” as a bad activity. Martin, who travels a lot around the globe, has met nice clients who “really want to spend time with you” not only having sex, but sharing something more. Of course, clients are going to pay for that time, but the exchange of money, according to Martin, is not a sufficient reason to disqualify what he is doing.

To summarise, it is possible to identify some common features to understand why people pay for sex. Sanders (2008) analysed the behaviour of regular clients and made a clear distinction between fixed and occasional clients that can also be applied to my sample. Indeed, regular clients value the time they spend with sex workers. Power is present, but in terms of the attention they can receive; they are looking for emotion both in and out the bed, in order to achieve familiarity. Occasional clients, on the other hand, are driven by sexual impulses. They want to satisfy their fetishism; they want to exercise power, in terms of control, over the sex workers; they are looking for egoistic sex, the attention is on them, the sex worker plays a secondary part in their path to achieve sexual gratification.

## 6.3 Conclusions

In this chapter, I analysed the relationship between sex workers and their clients. In the first section, I engaged with the concept of power. In contrast to much previous research, I demonstrated that the relationship between sex workers and their clients does include power, but these relationships go beyond that, since connections, emotions, empathy, and talk take central stage. Verbal connection is important because the reason to meet a sex worker is often not just to fulfil an unexpressed sexual gratification, but to create a connection with someone who can understand one’s own needs, also those that have been repressed. Another important word is empathy, the “power” of empathy helps many sex workers connect with their clients, hear their stories and, most importantly, continue to sell sex. Moreover, I tried to understand how much time sex workers want to spend with their clients. I found that the time spent together with clients very often exceeded what was agreed upon in advance, but that this extra time often did not involve a surcharge on the part of the sex worker. Indeed, the pleasure of spending time with their clients often seemed stronger than economic remuneration. At the same time, the majority of sex workers did not want their clients to fall in love with them, and it was the respect that they had for their clients that exceeded the need to earn more money. Many sex workers did not describe themselves as greedy, so when some long-time regular clients wanted the purely economic relationship to develop into something more, like friendship or even love, some sex workers decided to stop charging them. Once

again, the pleasure of meeting with (some) clients seemed to be stronger than the need or the willingness to charge them.

In the second section, I moved the focus from sex workers to their clients. I wanted to understand something about them, in order to understand who they are, in terms of age, sexual orientation, and class position. Finally, I discussed why they decide to pay for sexual services. Previous literature has often defined sex work as a stigmatised activity, a stigma shared by clients and sex workers alike. On average, according to sex workers, clients are around 40 to 50 years old, as previous studies found. But the age range reported by my participants was much wider, between 16 and 90 years, which indicates that clients can be of any age. The strong majority or, in some cases the whole clientele of a sex worker, were heterosexually married. This is explained by the fact that clients who now are in their 50s or 60s did not have the opportunity, the courage, or enough pride to live as gay men when they were young. So, they adapted to a “straight” life and married a woman and had children. But today, after years of repression, they have decided to experiment with what was previously denied them. Once again, I demonstrated how the relationship between sex workers and clients can be a “real” one, fulfilled not only by sex, but also by emotions and care. As I mentioned, there are indeed sex workers who are very money oriented, but also many sex workers who value types of exchange other than the monetary.

Finally, I identified eight main reasons that can explain why clients buy sex. I used the work of Sanders (2008) and Serughetti (2019) to better explain those reasons. Serughetti (2019) stressed that it is mostly the “culture of consumption” behind the decision to buy sex from sex workers. While Sanders (2008) identified five key features of the traditional sexual script that men, as regular clients, adopt with their “special” sex workers. My analysis showed that for the majority of sex workers I interviewed, the encounters they had with clients meant more than “just” sex, even if some clients, especially the occasional, were more oriented toward “egoistic” sex, to the satisfaction only of their sexual needs. In the typical encounter, however, empathy, connections, and emotions seemed more important than sex. Sex is almost always present and is more similar to the script of a normative relationship because clients generally aim for a mutual sexual satisfaction, they want to give pleasure to sex workers as much as they want to achieve pleasure for themselves. Other reasons to buy sex were related to saving time, practising fetish activities, doing something illegal (in the case of Sweden), or simply to consider sex for pay as a business deal.

In the next chapter, I conclude my dissertation, presenting the most important results of my work and giving some possible developments for future research in this area. Also, I present a possible typology for male sex workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.





# Conclusions

## A typology for male sex workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

This concluding chapter is divided into three sections. First, I summarise the main results of this dissertation as discussed in the three empirical chapters (Chapters 4-6), then present a typology for male sex workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and finally discuss what has been left out of my analysis, highlighting possible future developments for research on sex work, in general, and male sex work, in particular.

### 7.1 Anyone can be a sex worker

As I presented at the beginning of my research, this work has been explorative, due to the lack of previous research on this subject. Following “grounded theory”, the interviews I conducted and the male sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden gave me the possibility to study and learn something about this “hidden population”. In this section, I summarise the main results of my study, but first it is important to emphasise that the sex workers I met do not represent a certain type of people but are completely ordinary and with great variations among them. Both Kaye (2014) and Rinaldi (2020) have demonstrated that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is not uncommon for heterosexual and, increasingly, homosexual men to decide to sell sex and sexual services to other men. They are, to use a single word, “banal” men. This is true not only for sex workers, but even for their clients as Colombo (1999) and Serughetti (2019) affirmed.

The first empirical chapter (Chapter 4) combined Connell’s (2005) theory of masculinity with previous research on men selling sex to other men. I employed the reflections of Rinaldi (2020) regarding men who sell sex in public places to understand how sex workers construct their masculinity in their encounters with clients. The first thing to note is that in my sample (made up of 45 male sex workers), only a tiny minority (five of the interviewees) declared to be straight. This goes in the opposite direction of previous studies (e.g., Rinaldi, 2020) that overwhelmingly support the instance that the majority of male sex workers are heterosexuals. To

make a connection between chapters, I believe the presence of gay male sex workers is corroborated by Bernstein's work (2007) on the new kind of respectability that sex work is acquiring in our century, as I discussed in Chapter 5.

Returning to masculinity and sex work, I found two main types of behaviour: those sex workers (both straight and gay) who stressed the importance of masculinity in their work, and those (gay only) who did not emphasise masculinity in their relationship with clients. The first group corroborates Rinaldi's (2020) assumption, while the second group opens up space for resistance and subversion, what Johansson (1990) called the "homosexualisation" of sex work. All male sex workers operationalised masculinity with the old dichotomy of being active (or top), in other words masculine, versus being passive (or bottom), feminine. All five male sex workers who defined themselves as straight and the large majority of those who defined themselves as gay emphasised the importance of the division between top and bottom, masculine and feminine. Interestingly, both straight and gay sex workers talked about their activities in the same way, affirming their own masculinity over the femininity of their clients. According to Rinaldi (2020) many sex workers tend to position themselves inside hegemonic and normative gender rules in order to avoid stigmatisation. In other words, it is acceptable to be a sex worker as long as you are top, the one who penetrates, and not bottom, the one who is penetrated (for oral sex the distinction is between those who suck, bottom, versus those who are sucked, top). For straight male sex workers, this "heterosexual line" is achieved in different ways: it can be to make an effort for obtaining an erection, or even not having an erection as a sign of virility; it can be doing a handjob, trying to avoid sucking, or letting clients do a blowjob on them. For the majority of gay male sex workers (who do not have a heterosexual image to preserve) a possible explanation for this behaviour is that the hegemonic character is so widespread that minority groups, such as gays, tend to adapt and seek the same type of hegemony instead of trying to subvert it, a sort of "survival mechanism".

Gay sex workers are more market oriented and adapt their activities to their clients' desire. But the most interesting result of this first empirical chapter comes from a tiny minority of gay sex workers. These three gay sex workers were ready to challenge and subvert the dichotomies in sex, sexual practices, and sexual behaviours. They might be seen as early examples of the "homosexualisation" of male sex work because of their capability to go beyond preconstituted forms of masculinity (and femininity) in both sex work and sex among gays. I added "sex among gays" because later in Chapter 5 I showed that the border between sex work and private sex can be very blurred.

The last aspect to underline is the absence of differences among the three groups (Italian, Swedish, and international sex workers). This is also another important result since there are important differences between Italy and Sweden when it comes

to attitudes to gender identity, sexual orientation, and sex work. Even if we take into consideration all the differences, in my sample there is not a correlation between the country where sex workers sell sex and their decision to stress or subvert masculinity, as I showed in Chapter 4. These two variables are independent (to use quantitative terminology). The only correlation I found is between the sexual orientation of the sex worker (if heterosexual) and their identity with the group of sex workers who highlight their hegemonic form of masculinity and not the country where they work. As I wrote, gay sex workers have different behaviours, although the majority belong to the same group of straight sex workers.

In the second empirical chapter (number 5) I studied what I called “economic constraints” of male sex work, looking at the motivation that led them to begin this activity, then moving to their working conditions, and finally studying what it means to work with one’s own body. As I briefly noted in the beginning, I employed Bernstein’s (2007) theory of sex work as a job with a new respectability, finding that men with high educational credentials, as in my sample, decided to sell sex and sexual services instead of trying to find a “standard” job in the labour market. This is possible only because in the 21<sup>st</sup> century selling sex has lost many of the bad connotations of previous centuries. The majority of male sex workers I met entered this market because they were in need of money and even if there are nuances in this observation, the men I met clearly favoured sex work over other jobs. Taking inspiration from the work of Bourdieu (1984) on the “new petite bourgeoisie”, Bernstein (2007) highlighted the force that pushes women and men to start selling sex and sexual services: “the ethic of fun”. Many sex workers sell sex because it gives them excitement and fun. Of course, there are also other reasons. A minority of sex workers engage in this profession because they had friends who were sex workers, or to overcome bad situations or because they lacked the formal documents that would allow them to find a work in the formal sector. The results of my research confirm those of Bernstein (2007) on female sex workers and of Walby (2012) on internet male escorts. Even if the educational credentials were higher in Sweden than in Italy, the behaviour of the subjects was almost the same, with the reasons for starting to sell sex and sexual services recurrent among the three groups.

Working conditions, on the other hand, was an umbrella definition I used to explain the many different work aspects of male internet sex workers. For this conclusive chapter, it is important to stress the main result which was that male sex workers, in their relationship with clients, tend to create what Bernstein (2007) called “bounded authenticity”, in contrast to Sanders’ theory (2005) of “manufacturing identity”. The sex workers in my sample and their clients apparently enjoy the time they spend together. It is paid work, of course, and money is unavoidable. But the encounter is “open”, to quote Walby (2012). Open to emotions, enjoyment, pleasure, and other positive feelings. Is it always like that? Of course, it is not. The important part is that not even a tiny minority of sex workers report they are unhappy with their

clients, as was the case for those who embrace the “homosexualisation” of sex work. The strong majority of male sex workers stressed the high satisfaction of doing their job. This is also supported by the almost total absence of bad experiences in their relationships with clients. This minimal level of violence is not surprising since in the case of male-to-male internet sex workers, both sex worker and client share the same gender: a factor that lowers the risk of threats, especially when compared to women selling sex to men (as in Sanders et al., 2016).

The last section of Chapter 5 was devoted to the use of condoms and HIV prevention. Indeed, the stigmatisation of male sex work and sex workers has been linked to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) but my results show that the male sex workers I met in Italy and Sweden were well aware of HIV and other STDs. They test themselves regularly, but there is a clear division between oral and anal sex: they do not use condoms for the former as much as they use them for the latter. So called “bareback” sex (i.e. sex without the use of a condom) is largely avoided. Finally, two of the sex workers were under PrEP treatment and I believe future analysis must engage with the effects of this particular medication on sex practices and condom use (Rinaldi & Bacio, 2022a). Once again, the behaviour of sex workers does not change if we take into consideration the variable of where they sell their services. I am not referring only to the last section on HIV prevention and condom use, but also on the previous part regarding working conditions.

It is perhaps astonishing to note there are so few differences between the groups, in light of the different legislation in place in Italy and Sweden. As I wrote in Chapter 1, Swedish legislation which criminalises the clients of the sex workers does not appear to influence the working conditions of male sex workers in that country. The target of the law is the clients with the main target being male clients, but the only real target is male clients of female sex workers (Bacio, 2021a). Thus, male sex workers and their clients do not seem to be affected by the legislation and there seems, once again, to be no significant difference between the three groups.

In the final empirical chapter (number 6), I engaged with the concept of power in the relationship between sex workers and their clients. Discussing Pateman’s (1988) theory about the “sexual contract”, I analysed if power was a constant and important aspect in their relations with their clients. In contrast to Pateman (1988), however, I demonstrated that the relationship between sex workers and their clients does indeed have a component of power, but that connections, emotions, empathy, and conversation have a central role in the meetings. Giving and taking pleasure was a more important aspect than the characteristic that one of the two parts needs to subdue the other. Fulfilling the relationship with emotions and respect, from what sex workers told me, was more pivotal than exercising power. The sex workers I met are of course not representative of all men who sell sex to other men. In that regard, I studied a niche: men who sell sex to other men, through the internet, in two

countries of the Western world. But, in my opinion, these results are valid for many male sex workers of the urban landscape of the Western world. In this sense, it is possible to infer (again, a quantitative term) these results to many more sex workers, although this remains a qualitative study with its own limits.

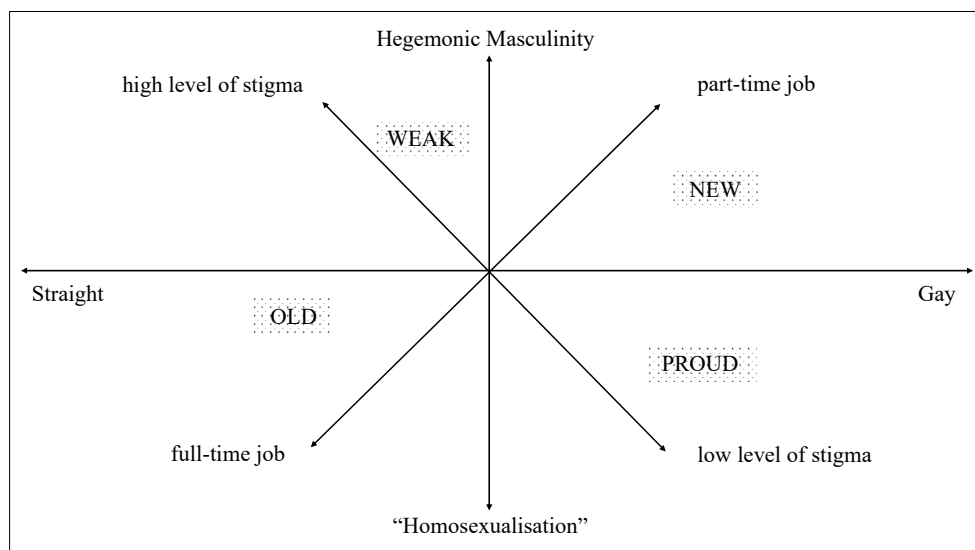
Finally, in the second section of Chapter 6, I shifted the focus from sex workers to their clients. I did not meet the clients, but from the interviews I recorded it was evident that clients deserved some analysis. From the sex workers words, I depicted the main characteristics of their clients: on average, they are around 40 to 50 years old, with a wide range between 16 and 90 years of age, highlighting the fact that clients can be of literally every possible age. The great majority are married with a woman. Clients who are in their 50s or 60s today, did not have the same opportunity when they were young as today to live openly as a gay man. Thus, they adapted to a “straight” life, married a woman, had children and some of them are grandparents now. But today, after years of repression they decide to experience their “real” sexual instinct. As Colombo (1999) found, and as I wrote at the beginning, clients are not different from other people. This is an interesting phenomenon for sure, that can explain much social behaviour about sex and sexuality, breaking the barriers of stigma. If sex is fun, why not enjoy it?

## 7.2 Creating a useful typology for male sex workers

Here I present a typology of male sex workers, based on this research and its main results. I use four different dimensions: 1) sexual orientation (in a scale from being “straight” to being “gay”) – sex workers self-defined this aspect; 2) level of stigma in selling sex and sexual services (from low to high) – I elaborate this variable according to their own words, as differentiating just by country was not precise enough; 3) doing sex work as a full-time or a part-time job (and in between) – again, self-defined; 4) a scale about the importance of masculinity in their encounters with clients (in a scale from a hegemonic form of masculinity to the “homosexualisation” of sex work) – elaborated.

The following graph (7.1) presents the main scheme.

**Graph 7.1 – Scheme of typology**



The intersection of these four dimensions creates a typology of male sex workers, with four different blocks. In order to be concise, I have avoided categorisation of all forty-five male sex workers I met. Some of these men do not fit the typology, others share some characteristics but not all are present at the same time, and in the correct way. I shall present four male sex workers, one for each of these blocks.

I call the first block, starting from the lower left, “old standard” (with this name, I deliberately recall the old assumption about male sex workers, as I wrote in Chapter 1). Here, it is possible to find Simone (who is member of the Italian group). The second block, in direct opposition to the first one, is called “new ordinary” (highlighting the main new characteristics of male sex workers, as presented in the empirical chapters of this dissertation). Here we find Peter (Swedish group). The third block, at the bottom right, is called “proud” and, as the scheme suggests, both “new ordinary” and “proud” share some characteristics but there are distinctions too. Here it is possible to find Ernesto (Italian group). Finally, in the fourth block, in opposition to the latter, there is the “weak” group: those who have a weaker identification as a sex worker. Here we find Gunther (international group).

Simone (old standard) is a 42-year-old straight sex worker with a long career in sex work (about seventeen years of activity at the time of the interview). He does sex work as a full-time job although he is also a professional masseur; he told me he does not have enough clients to survive in his “regular” profession. Although he has been involved in sex work for many years, he said he never had anal sex with a man; the only thing he accepts is to receive a blowjob from his clients. Thus, his heterosexuality is safe. Indeed, he affirmed his masculinity during the interview (for

example, he took off his t-shirt to show me his muscles), highlighting high levels of stigma.

Nearby is Gunther (weak). He is a young, straight sex worker (22 years old) with a short career in sex work (only about two years). He has been doing this activity to “feed himself” because he is in need of money. Gunther has a high fee and, according to his story, it allows him to sell sex sporadically. Compared to Simone, he strongly affirmed his heterosexuality throughout the interview, but with a distinction: even though both Simone and Gunther sell sex to both men and women, for Simone selling sex to the latter category was acceptable as both revenge and compensation for the homosexual activities his job requires. On the other hand, Gunther had both scornful and contemptible words for all his clients, men and women. His attitude towards clients showed an extremely high level of stigma. The combination of a high level of stigma and the need to constantly express hegemonic traits of masculinity over his clients made him “weak” in the sense that he has a weaker identification as a sex worker. He also belongs to the group of heterosexual informants, who display more social challenges than the other groups.

On the other side of the scheme, closer to the group of gay sex workers, we find Peter (new ordinary) and Ernesto (proud). Peter is 25 years old and has a long career in the market. He defines himself as bisexual, having both men and women as clients, and is one of the few sex workers with disabled clients. He perceives a low level of stigma attached to what he is doing, indeed he told his friends he is a sex worker and also decided to open up with his classmates, apparently they were (almost all) shocked. He does sex work part-time because his main occupation is to be a student. I position himself half-way on the scale related to the expression of masculinity, in a sort of “neutral” point between the hegemonic form and “homosexualisation” of sex work. I position “new ordinary” in contrast to “old standard”, thus I place Peter opposite Simone explicitly for the characteristics of being bisexual rather than straight; having a low level of stigma rather than high; working part-time rather than full-time; and in a “neutral” position rather than affirming his virility and masculinity.

Finally, there is Ernesto (proud), a 25-year-old student and part-time sex worker in the market for only the five months leading up to the interview. He is gay and open about it. Like Peter, he is versatile, and said he accepts being passive in fetish services (one of the few sex workers who said so). He is also under PrEP treatment in a research study about PrEP, HIV, and the young gay population in Milan. For this reason, he usually refrains from using a condom in his encounters during anal sex. All in all, Ernesto displays a low level of stigma and is one of the three sex workers I identified as examples of the “homosexualisation” of male sex work. This is indeed the main difference between Ernesto and Peter, in addition to Ernesto’s short presence in the market.



As I concluded in Chapter 4, I predict that the “proud” category of Ernesto, in particular, but also Peter’s “new ordinary” will prevail. In my opinion, the future of male sex workers and male sex work depends specifically on subjects like Ernesto and Peter. The young generation of sex workers can contribute to changing their working life: being a sex worker, being top as well as bottom, being open about their activities (whether it is a full-time or a part-time job). Of course, this does not mean the other categories will disappear. Indeed, in opposition to Ernesto we have Gunther who is also young but who has a completely different approach, not only about sex work but also about his life. I speculate that it is possible to find a correlation between how sex workers conduct their private lives and how they conduct their activities of selling sex and sexual services. Gunther probably has a very small chance of continuing his sex work given the high level of toxicity he expressed about selling sex (to both men and women), unless he can find a “balance” like Simone’s. But it is the “new ordinary” of Peter and the “pride” of Ernesto that may characterise many future male sex workers, especially in the urban landscape of the Western world.

## 7.3 What did we learn and what can we still learn?

From the start of this long journey toward my PhD, I have learnt many things, not only about sex, sexuality, and sex work. First, as I had abandoned all my prejudices about this subject, I learnt how similar I was with many of the men I met in Italy and Sweden over the last few years. At a certain point, instead of asking them why they started selling sex, I asked myself why I never did it. Convinced that there is nothing wrong per se in selling sex and sexual services to other men, I listened to the voices of men who are selling sex and sexual services to men and women around many places of the (Western) world. Of course, the men I met were not representative of all the men who sell sex, but the existence of trafficking should not silence the voice of those who chose to do this activity as a job. As an external observer, I discovered how the debate around this subject is complicated in Sweden – much more than in my home country – in both society and academia. With this work, however, I hope to have contributed to the debate.

In any case, the effort to improve conditions for sex workers in both Italian and Swedish society is not over yet. There are many possible developments for my work too. As I pointed out at the end of Chapter 6, male clients of male sex workers deserve researchers’ attention. I have conveyed some basic knowledge about this population, but without hearing their voices directly, what I have presented remains largely partial. A possible advancement of the knowledge on this matter could be approaching male sex workers from a different perspective, compared to what I did. I left out several aspects of their work and life that may attract other scholars’

attention, such as the mental health and general wellbeing of those who sell sex. Above all, I think future research should analyse other subjects and other conditions of sex work: for example to analyse those sex workers who sell sex in public venues or on-street sex workers as Rinaldi (2020) did. At the same time, an expansion of studies on sex work should also embrace transgender sex workers, among the most hidden and unresearched population in the field.



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