Transformations of Labour through the Lens of Sex Work

Navigating Digitalization, Precarity and Resistance

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Chapter 5

Ambivalences of precarity

Sex workers' assessments of quality of work in Slovenia's sex industry

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Introduction

Although the organization and status of sex work have changed significantly in recent decades, data from various countries, including Slovenia, show that it is still mostly work that does not provide labour rights, protection against occupational risks, and social security (Berg 2021; Dziuban 2016; Levitt 2021; Orchiston 2016; Radačić and Pajnik 2017). A closer look at other dimensions of the quality of work, however, also reveals that this precarity is ambivalent, as it can offer a high degree of flexibility, autonomy, earnings, and work–life balance, making sex work an attractive alternative or complement to other employment options for many individuals (Berg 2021; Berg and Penley 2016; Bowen 2021; Levitt 2021; Sanders and Hardy 2012).

In this chapter, we argue that precarity is an ambivalent state having both positive and negative implications for the quality of work. To explore which factors of precarity are most significant in the lives of sex workers, we draw on literature that conceptualizes precarity as a multidimensional issue (Kalleberg 2011; Vosko 2011). According to these studies, precarity is an employment condition characterized by uncertainty, instability, and insecurity, often accompanied by low incomes, limited labour rights, and little control over work processes (Kalleberg 2011). Precarity is thus a quality of work issue and a multifaceted concern, which must be reflected in the light of the International Labour Organization's (1999) concept of "decent work," which promotes work in the conditions of freedom, equity, security, and dignity. We adopt a theoretical framework defining quality of work as "the extent work is able to give access to a fulfilling life, in the absence of adverse effects of the activity" (Adriaenssens, Garofalo Geymonat and Oso 2016, 122), focusing on workers' subjective perceptions of quality of work. As insights from the sociology of work have shown, assessing the quality of work is directly connected to reflections on a good life (Adriaenssens, Garofalo Geymonat, and Oso 2016). This highlights the importance of including workers' perspectives, noting that precarity and quality of work encompass not only objective conditions but also subjective experiences and perceptions of job insecurity (Alberti et al. 2018, 447). From this standpoint,

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addressing what constitutes a "good job" requires focusing on workers' own evaluations of their jobs as a key measure of labour market outcomes (Burchell et al. 2014), as we will do in this study.

Our study broadens existing scholarship, which primarily addresses the precarity and quality of work in the context of the decline of permanent and full-time employment in the formal economy, by focusing on an examination of precarity in the informal economy, where much of sex work is situated. This enables a deeper understanding of conditions and transformations in the labour markets, including invisible forms of labour such as sex work in discussions about precarization. Our approach to studying precarity in sex work is therefore rooted in a broader analysis of labour market transformations, considering multiple factors and different service industries. In particular, we are building on empirical studies that address the quality of work and precarity in sex work in relation to labour law protections (Cruz, Hardy, and Sanders 2017; Dziuban 2016; Hardy and Sanders 2014; Orchiston 2016; Sanders and Hardy 2013), the gig economy (Berg 2021; Easterbrook-Smith 2023; Levitt 2021) with a special focus on platform- and internet-based work (Hamilton, Barakat, and Redmiles 2022; Hardy and Barbagallo 2021; Sanders, Connelly, and Jarvis King 2016), stigmatization (Benoit et al. 2021; Bowen 2021; Zarhin and Fox 2017), and occupational risks (Ross et al. 2012; Sanders 2004). Given that sex work shares many characteristics with other sectors of the economy, particularly displaying a variety of occupational structures, requiring diverse skills, and being shaped by local labour markets and global economic shifts (Brewis and Linstead 2000), our analysis also incorporates research on precarity in other sectors of the service economy, particularly gig, cultural, and care work (e.g. Cohen 2012; Khan et al. 2023; Mathisen and Knudsen 2022), which is not yet a sufficiently established approach in sex work studies.

We conducted an online quantitative survey[1] among sex workers in Slovenia, a Central and Eastern European country with a socialist past and a population of two million. The sex industry is relatively small and only partially integrated into the formal economy (Markelj et al. 2022; Šori and Markelj 2022). In terms of prostitution policy, a restrictive model with some repressive and integrative elements prevails (Kogovšek Šalamon, Učakar, and Frelih 2023). Involvement in prostitution as a third party is criminalized, while the sale or purchase of sexual services remains decriminalized. As a result, workers in this sector mostly operate in private apartments, independently and unregistered. Some forms of sex work, such as erotic massage, telephone sex, and striptease, may be eligible for registration under similar terms as other occupations, allowing sex workers to gain formal employment status, while work through online platforms is limited to the status of a sole proprietor. It is important to note that the registration of sex work is not a common practice among sex workers due to its stigmatization (Pajnik 2008).

Within this framework, our analysis focuses on examining the relationship between various factors of precarity in sex work and sex workers' subjective

assessments of the quality of work. Our selection of precarity factors for analysis was guided by Vosko's (2011, 2) multidimensional framework, which proposes five factors for empirical operationalization of precarity: employment status, form of employment, social context, labour market insecurity, and social location. In our analysis, we focused on three factors due to their particular relevance. First, we selected *employment status*, a crucial determinant of quality of work, as it dictates the range of rights and protections workers are entitled to. The second factor was the *form of employment*, through which we aim to address the diversity of organizational structures within sex work. The third factor, *stigma*, is included because the social context uniquely shapes sex workers' position in the labour market, distinguishing them from other workers. Two factors were excluded from our analysis: *social location*, which involves intersectional vulnerabilities such as gender or citizenship status, was not examined due to sample limitations, and *labour market insecurity*, because it would require a different analytical approach. Nevertheless, our study adopts a multidimensional perspective on precarity, incorporating economic, legal, and social dimensions to provide a comprehensive analysis.

In the following sections of the chapter, we begin by outlining the theoretical framework that situates sex work within a comparative perspective alongside other precarious sectors of the service economy and conceptualizes interrelated factors of precarity and quality of work. Next, we present the research methodology and analysis of the survey data.[2] This is followed by a discussion in which we demonstrate that precarity in sex work is inherently an ambivalent and multidimensional issue, in which various factors have distinct implications for the quality of work. We conclude the chapter by emphasizing the significant role of occupational social status in shaping workers' perceptions of the quality of work.

Outlining dimensions and complexities of precarity

Sex work as gig, cultural, and care work

Existing scholarship has recognized that many aspects of precarity are harmful for the worker, such as vulnerability, insecurity, poverty, and social exposure, which can negatively impact various areas of life, including workplace well-being, general health, mental health, and emotional well-being. However, some aspects of precarity can be beneficial, such as freedom and flexibility, which foster creativity and the accumulation of diverse knowledge, skills, and abilities (Berg 2021, 5; Fantone 2007; Gutiérrez-Rodriguez 2010, 102; Irvine and Rose 2022; Jaydarifard et al. 2023; Precarias a la Deriva 2004, 157). This reveals, first, that precarity is limited not only to the domain of work but should also be defined as Precarias a la Deriva (2004, 158) had written: "as a juncture of material and symbolic conditions which determine an uncertainty with respect to the sustained access to the resources essential

to the full development of one's life." Second, precarious workers are not just victims of the neoliberal transformations of the labour markets without agency; some enter the precariat because they do not want the available alternatives and some because it suits their particular circumstances at the time (Standing 2011, 59). Younger generations, in particular, appreciate flexible work and, in this respect, prefer "self-employed" status to being in a job (Standing 2011, 66, 74). Precarity is becoming a normalized and naturalized part of work, extending beyond merely being a "business model" of neoliberalism, as it is evolving into a pervasive way of living and thinking about future life (Kanjuo-Mrčela 2021).

From a global labour market perspective, sex work is comparable to other service economy sectors not only in terms of work organization, processes, and required skills but also in how it is similarly impacted by precarity. In this regard, sex work today in many ways resembles the conditions of jobs in the gig economy, where workers perform multiple precarious jobs in order to earn enough, often through platforms or apps (Levitt 2021) such as Uber, Wolt, OnlyFans, or Care.com. To earn enough money, sex workers today need to provide multiple services, use a variety of platforms, and manage a variety of roles, from service providers and managers to producers (Berg 2021, 9; Bowen 2021, 42; Hardy and Barbagallo 2021; Levitt 2021, 59). In other words, the precarization of the sex industry compels sex workers to embrace neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivities, adopting values such as autonomy, self-realization, and competition (Scharff, 2016). Although sex work is largely part of the informal economy, it is subject to similar processes of precarization as other forms of gig work.

Because precarious work is typical of diverse professions, the precariat as a class is inherently ambivalent and finds it difficult to find a common identity.

> A freelance designer and a sex worker have certain things in common—the unpredictability and exposure of work, the continuity of work and life, and the deployment of a wide range of unquantifiable skills and knowledges. However, differences in social recognition and in the degree of vulnerability are also clear.
>
> (Precarias a la Deriva 2004, 158)

Although the position of sex work in relation to other occupations is distinct due to its stigmatization and specific occupational risks, such as violence, health-related concerns, and influence of work on private lives (Šori and Markelj 2022), it is in many ways comparable to other (feminized) sectors of the service economy (see e.g. Sanders 2005), particularly in cultural and care occupations. Creative work, such as production and marketing of erotic content and the performance of erotic shows, is similar to work in the cultural industry, for example, in film, television, photography, advertising, or music. Body and emotional labour, such as escort, girlfriend experience, or webcamming, on the other hand, intersects with care work, for example, nursing,

therapy, or social work. In this way, sex workers are often both: cultural and care workers, as can be seen in the example of platform workers who create erotic content and at the same time do a lot of emotional labour in communication with clients. Sex, cultural, and care work are also characterized by precarity in a similar way. They offer little labour and social security, small benefits, limited access to union protections, and nomadic careers with unpredictable periods of intense hard work (Cohen 2012, 148; Hebson, Rubery, and Grimshaw 2015; Levitt 2021; McKee 2016, 110). In all three professional areas, intensive platformization is taking place. In all three, most of the hard work is done by women. In the field of cultural and sex work, additional instability and income decline are brought by internet piracy (Berg and Penley 2016, 163). At the same time, a high level of work satisfaction also occurs in these occupations, particularly related to autonomy and freedom provided by independent, freelance work (Cohen 2012, 147; Griesbach et al. 2019; Hamilton, Barakat, and Redmiles 2022; Hunt and Samman 2020; Mathisen and Knudsen 2022, 72), enhanced possibilities of creativity and authenticity (Berg and Penley 2016, 164, 166), as well as to relational aspects of work with clients, which may be rewarding (Khan et al. 2023, 15–16), again pointing to the ambivalent nature of precarity.

Employment status, form of employment, and stigma as factors of precarity

Precarity results from a complex interaction of interrelated factors that must be considered when evaluating its implications for the quality of work. One of the key determinants of precarity is the presence of formal labour protections, particularly employment statuses that guarantee labour rights and protections against occupational risks. While there are similarities between precarious work and non-standard employment, these two terms should not be equated. For instance, certain forms of non-standard employment can offer relative security, while some full-time permanent positions may still be precarious due to factors like low wages or restricted access to rights and protections. Thus, none of these employment statuses inherently ensures high quality of work. Employment conditions in sex work are particularly shaped by legal and social contexts. In most countries, this sector remains inadequately regulated under labour law (Ross et al. 2012, 116), while criminal law often imposes restrictions on certain forms of sex work. Stigma also hinders the development of jobs with more secure employment statuses, as for some individuals, disclosing work could have devastating consequences across various spheres of life (Bowen 2021). As a result, a large proportion of sex workers operate within the informal economy, without any formal employment status. Others usually work on short-term contracts or as self-employed (Dziuban 2016; Levitt 2021; Orchiston 2016). When we compare conditions in different employment statuses in sex work, we therefore compare more and less precarious forms of work, while standard secure jobs

in the sex industry have never existed (Berg and Penley 2016, 159; Hardy and Barbagallo 2021). This opens the old question of whether more regulated and secure employment statuses could be advantageous for sex workers.

Another factor that determines precarity is the form of employment, which includes diverse organizational structures such as independent work, work through business companies such as agencies and brothels, or platform work. The question of how much control over work processes the worker has within an individual form appears to be an important indicator of precarity (Orchiston 2016, 6). Research on employment within the legal sex industry has shown that sex workers often operate as independent contractors, which in practice means that they are treated as employees without benefits and exposed to a number of exploitative practices by managers (Cruz, Hardy and Sanders 2017, Dziuban 2016, 10; Orchiston 2016, 6). The lack of control over the work process in these environments is manifested in long working hours, economic dependence, and the rules governing personal appearance and behaviour (Orchiston 2016, 6). An additional problem is the underdeveloped workplace rights culture in the industry, so precarity depends not only on managerial practices but also on the extent to which the state enforces formal labour protections (Orchiston 2016).

With the migration of sex work to platforms, the management of work and workers is being taken over by algorithms. Digital platforms, in the role of facilitators, connect service subscribers, on the one hand, and workers, on the other hand, but the legislation does not treat them as employers obligated to ensure workers with rights arising from their labour (Srnicek 2017). All platforms are prone to exploitation, as they impose self-employment status, while remaining vague on working conditions, and rely on algorithmic management, that is, practices that allocate, organize, and evaluate work assignments based on algorithms and automated decisions (Hauben 2020, 50). There is considerable variance among platforms concerning algorithmic control. Content creation platforms typically used by sex workers provide more flexibility, autonomy, and control over the work process than, for example, service platforms (Jokubauskaitė, Rieder, and Burkhardt 2023), which are characterized by "algorithmic despotism" (Griesbach et al. 2019). But even precarious workers working through "despotic" delivery platforms have highlighted autonomy and freedom as advantages of work, especially not being under the control of a boss and having scheduling flexibility (Hodson 2001). In the field of sex work, the role of platforms can be similar to that of a physical manager or boss, as they receive a high percentage of workers' income, control what content they can sell, and make decisions to highlight certain performers while shadowbanning others (Easterbrook-Smith 2023, 9). Another problem with platform work is that it does not provide income security (Berg and Penley 2016). However, while algorithmic management introduces risks, it also brings benefits in the form of platform accessibility, more control, greater income, enjoyment, ease of boundary setting, and physical safety (Hamilton, Barakat, and Redmiles 2022; Hamilton et al. 2023).

Independent freelance work done through platforms can thus be a beneficial form of employment for sex workers, contributing to the quality of work.

The third set of factors underlying precarity relates to the social context in which sex work is performed and includes structural factors such as policies or stigmatization. As we have already noted, sex work is targeted with repressive policies that criminalize certain services or organizational forms and discriminate against workers (Jones 2016; Levitt 2021). Policies contribute to the precarity of sex workers even when they perform registered work, as in the porn industry, which forces workers into self-employment, exempts employers from guaranteeing workers' rights, and makes it impossible to organize trade unions (Berg and Penley 2016, 159). In the online environment, repressive policies cause financial discrimination, withholding earnings, shadow bans, and cyberbullying, and identity disclosure against sex workers (Berg 2021; Bowen 2021; Jones 2016; Sanders, Connelly, and Jarvis King 2016).

While sex work has undergone economic mainstreaming of sexual consumption in recent decades, the social and cultural acceptability of sex markets has not fully mirrored this (Brents and Sanders 2010, 60). Individuals who engage in the sex industry on either the supply or demand side continue to be regulated by social stigma and moralist attitudes (2010). In this context, Imogen Tyler (2022, 26–27) emphasizes the "political economy of stigma," or "the role that the power of stigma plays in the distribution of material resources and the transformation of cultural values." Stigma is therefore not just a set of stereotypical beliefs and discriminatory experiences, but an instrument of governing that exposes certain groups of workers to exploitation and silences them. From the individual perspective, stigma has implications for many areas of sex workers' lives, including their position in the labour market, where potential employers discriminate against sex workers or employees even lose their regular employment due to sex work (Carrasco et al. 2017). Stigma can negatively affect job satisfaction (Pitcher 2019) and exposure to occupational risks (Platt et al. 2018). In order to secure alternative employment in the future, many sex workers hide or avoid registration of sex work, leaving a "resume gap" that represents a barrier to finding employment outside of sex work (McCausland et al. 2020). In addition, the effects of stigma extend beyond the workplace into the private lives of sex workers (Sanders 2004). Both policies and stigma, therefore, expose sex workers to risks that have significant implications for the quality of work.

Methodology

Building on the theoretical background outlined, we propose three hypotheses:

H1: Working under formal arrangements is positively associated with the quality of work compared to working in the informal economy.

H2: Working independently reflects positively on the quality of work compared to work under managerial control.
H3: Higher rates of stigma are negatively associated with the quality of work.

To test the hypotheses, data were gathered from sex workers in Slovenia through an online survey conducted using the 1KA tool. Our sample consisted of 106 sex workers. Only respondents aged 18 and above who confirmed their voluntary engagement in sex work were included in the analysis. Recruitment took place between March and May 2022. Our outreach primarily targeted sex workers through web portals and social media platforms commonly used for advertising services, where we contacted a total of 1,079 ads. We also contacted nightclubs, massage parlours, hotline service providers, and organizations advocating for sex workers' rights. Additionally, we employed snowball sampling, leveraging personal connections with sex workers established through previous research activities. Participation in the survey was anonymous and rewarded with shopping vouchers. Prior to participation, all respondents provided informed consent.

The following variables were used to assess various factors of precarity. First, *employment status* was assessed through five items: "unregistered," "sole proprietor," "full-time employee of a legal entity," "contractual," and "other." Second, to evaluate the *form of employment*, participants were asked whether they worked independently or had intermediaries such as managers who organized and supervised their work. Regarding forms of employment, we categorized workers into three groups for comparison. The first group comprises independent workers operating on digital platforms, subject to what we termed "algorithmic management" as their work is governed by platform algorithms. The second group consists of independent workers engaged in live (offline) sex work without managerial supervision. The third group encompasses workers who rely on a manager or supervisor to organize their work. Finally, the last independent variable was *stigma*, which was assessed through scales with dichotomous answers, encompassing anticipated, experienced, and internalized stigma (Jain and Nyblade 2012; Lekas, Siegel, and Leider 2011). The reliability coefficients (KR20) for the stigma scales were as follows: 0.72 (*anticipated stigma*), 0.80 (e*xperienced stigma*), and 0.63 (*internalized stigma*).

The subjective perceptions of quality of work were measured by two factors: satisfaction with working conditions and perceived influence of sex work on sex workers' private lives and health outcomes. Work satisfaction was evaluated through five items representing various aspects of work: (a) "workspace," (b) "working hours," (c) "payment/earnings," (d) "freedom to decide where, when, and how you will work," and (e) clients or spectators. Similarly, the perceived influence of work on different aspects of workers' lives was assessed using four items: (a) "partnership or love life," (b) "private sex life," (c) "mental health," and (d) "physical health." These areas

of occupational risks were identified based on our prior research (Šori and Markelj 2022) and focus groups with sex workers. Both sets of items were assessed through a five-point Likert scale.

The analysis focused on exploring the relationship between (1) various factors of precarity, specifically employment status, form of employment, and stigma, and (2) quality of work, defined by variables of "work satisfaction" and "perceived influence of sex work on sex workers' private life and health-related outcomes." Upon checking for normality of the observed variables and their categories as well as testing the variance homogeneity, we applied a t-test and its non-parametric alternative, the Mann–Whitney U test, for comparing two categories and analysis of variance. We applied the Kruskal–Wallis test, for comparing three or more categories. In cases where we found statistically significant differences, we applied post-hoc tests (Hochberg and Dunn tests for parametric and non-parametric tests, respectively) with Bonferroni correction for multiple testing. In addition, we applied the Kendall-Tau coefficient for computing the (non-parametric) correlations. The analysis was performed in SPSS software (IBM SPSS Statistics 25).

Results

Socio-demographic and work characteristics

The sample consisted of 83 female, 21 male, and two transgender sex workers. The largest proportion of participants (39.6%) fell within the age range of 25 to 34 years. Regarding education, approximately half of the respondents (46.2%) had completed vocational or technical high school. The majority of participants were born in Slovenia (92.5%).

Sex work in Slovenia encompasses a diverse array of sexual services offered by sex workers, indicating heterogeneity within the industry. The biggest proportion of respondents engage in live sex (40.6%), erotic massage (36.8%), and escort services (25.5%), while nearly a quarter offer girlfriend or boyfriend experience, webcamming, telephone hotlines, and Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) services (22.6%). It is common for sex workers to offer multiple services to clients. The most commonly combined services include live sex, erotic massage, escort, BDSM, and telephone hotlines. Sex work predominantly takes place indoors in private settings such as apartments (71.7% of respondents), clients' homes (30.2%), and private parties (18.9%). Outdoor work occurs on streets or parking lots (9.4%) and in cars (12.3%). Additionally, 19.8% of respondents reported working on online platforms.

The largest share of respondents reported working approximately 100 hours per month (15.7%) and 2 hours per day (27.4%). However, working hours vary widely, ranging from 1 to 310 hours per month to 1 to 10 hours per day. Nearly half of the respondents (44.0%) earn less than 1,000 euros monthly, which is less than the average wage and close to

minimum wage in the country; a quarter (25.3%) earn between 1,000 and 2,000 euros, and a third (30.8%) earn over 2,000 euros.

Factors of precarity

Our data show a variety of employment statuses within sex work. Nearly two-thirds (62.3%) of sex workers operate without any formal employment status. Others work as sole proprietors (17%) or under contracts (14.2%), while a minority (3.8%) are employed full-time by legal entities. An additional 2.8% indicated other employment statuses within sex work; however, due to the small number of cases, this category was not included in the subsequent statistical analysis. Among those who operate without any formal employment status (n = 66), almost half (47.0%) are employed outside sex work, followed by unemployed (31.8%), students (9.1%), self-employed (7.6%), and retired (4.5%). A majority of respondents (65.1%) rely on additional sources of income alongside their involvement in sex work.

With regard to the form of employment, the majority of respondents (87.6%) are involved in independent sex work, operating without intermediaries to organize or supervise their activities. The majority of respondents (68.6%) engage in live (offline) sex work without managers, followed by independent workers on digital platforms (19.0%) and sex workers who have a manager (12.4%). Additionally, sex workers typically work alone (80.0%).

Stigma measurements reveal a high prevalence of various forms of stigmatization faced by sex workers. Anticipated stigma concerning access to services and professionals' attitudes towards sex work is particularly problematic, with 84% of respondents anticipating discriminatory treatment by police or social service centres upon disclosure of their involvement in sex work. Similarly, 74.5% of the respondents anticipate discriminatory treatment by healthcare professionals. Nearly half of sex workers have experienced instances of stigmatization in their private lives: 45.7% received negative or offensive comments about their work, 39.0% experienced estrangement from loved ones due to disapproval of their work, and 35.8% faced threats of work disclosure. Approximately a third of sex workers have internalized negative societal attitudes towards sex work, leading to feelings of guilt (27.4%) or shame (22.6%). A minority of respondents also reported feeling unworthy (4.7%).

Quality of work

Overall, our survey revealed a high level of work satisfaction among respondents. A majority (76.2%) expressed being satisfied or very satisfied with their working hours, 74.6% with their workspace, and 74.5% with their payment or earnings. Notably, respondents displayed the highest level of satisfaction regarding their autonomy in determining the conditions of their work.

Remarkably, nearly all the respondents (91.5%) are satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to make decisions about their working conditions. Regarding interactions with clients, while satisfaction levels were slightly lower in comparison, they still remained relatively high. 68.6% of all respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their clients.

Regarding the perceived influence of work on various spheres of their lives, a predominant proportion of sex workers (60.4%) reported that their partnerships or love lives remained unaffected by their work. However, a notable subset (22.6%) indicated a negative or very negative impact, while 17.0% reported positive or very positive effects. Similarly, a major proportion (60.4%) reported no perceived influence on their private sex lives, with 17.9% perceiving negative and 21.7% reporting positive influence. Regarding physical health, the majority (52.8%) reported no influence from sex work. Of those who did perceive an impact, a larger share (34.0%) viewed it positively, while 13.2% reported negative or very negative effects. Responses regarding mental health varied considerably, with 38.7% asserting no perceived influence, 35.9% perceiving positive effects, and 25.5% reporting negative impacts.

Assessing the implications of various factors of precarity for the quality of work

In order to test the hypotheses, our main analysis focused on exploring how the various factors of precarity relate to the quality of work. We came to the following results.

Employment status: Work satisfaction levels across various aspects of work do not significantly differ based on the employment status within the industry. Whether working unregistered or under formal arrangements such as sole proprietorship, full-time employment, or contractual agreements, sex workers reported similar levels of satisfaction with various aspects of work (Table 5.1). However, we observed statistically significant differences in how the employment status is related to the perceived influence of sex work on workers' private lives and health outcomes (Table 5.2). Post-hoc tests revealed notable distinctions among various groups of sex workers. Specifically, full-time employees demonstrated a more positive influence on mental health compared to those working unregistered (mean difference 95% CI [0.09, 2.85], $p = 0.031$) as well as on physical health (mean difference 95% CI [0.39, 2.27], $p = 0.003$). Similarly, full-time employed sex workers also reported a more positive impact on physical health compared to sex workers working contractually (mean difference 95% CI [0.21, 2.76], $p = 0.014$).

Form of employment: While our data highlights the prevalence of independent work without intermediaries, our findings show no statistically significant differences in work satisfaction levels across various aspects of work between sex workers with a manager and those without. This holds true for both workers on digital platforms and those engaged in live (offline) sex

Table 5.1 Descriptive statistics for satisfaction with various aspects of work (five-point scale from 1 – very dissatisfied to 5 – very satisfied), test statistics for differences between different categories of employment status and form of employment, and correlation coefficients with stigma ⏎

	With workspace	*With working hours*	*With payment/ earnings*	*With the freedom to decide where, when, and how you will work*	*With clients or spectators*
Employment status, M (SD)					
Unregistered (n = 66)	3.74 (1.13)	3.91 (1.07)	3.68 (1.06)	4.35 (0.89)	3.68 (0.85)
Sole proprietor (n = 18)	4.33 (0.69)	4.39 (0.70)	4.22 (0.65)	4.67 (0.49)	3.67 (0.46)
Full-time employee of a legal entity (n = 4)	4.50 (0.58)	4.00 (0.58)	4.00 (1.41)	4.50 (0.58)	4.25 (0.50)
Contractual (n = 15)	4.13 (1.13)	3.73 (1.13)	4.13 (0.64)	4.27 (0.88)	3.53 (1.06)
Test statistics, H(df), p	7.347(4), 0.119	5.343(4), 0.254	7.282(4), 0.122	6.559(4), 0.161	2.789(4), 0.594
Form of employment, M (SD)					
Not having a manager and working on platforms (n = 13)	4.10 (1.07)	4.10 (0.85)	4.10 (0.72)	4.75 (0.44)	3.75 (0.72)
Not having a manager and working off platforms (n = 20)	3.81 (1.10)	3.90 (1.15)	3.75 (1.05)	4.29 (0.94)	3.73 (0.77)
Having a manager (n = 70)	4.23 (0.72)	3.92 (1.04)	3.92 (0.86)	4.08 (0.86)	3.23 (1.09)
Test statistics, H(df), p	2.423(2), 0.298	0.125(2), 0.939	1.329(2), 0.515	7.502(2), 0.023	3.293(2), 0.193
Stigma, Kendal-Tau					
Anticipated stigma	–0.032	–0.042	0.019	–0.134	–0.158
Experienced stigma	–0.230**	–0.243**	–0.156	–0.259**	–0.304**
Internalized stigma	–0.105	–0.153	–0.267**	–0.263**	–0.363**

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .001$.

work (Table 5.1), with the exception of satisfaction with freedom to decide where, when, and how they will work. Pairwise post-hoc comparisons showed that sex workers working on platforms are significantly more satisfied with this aspect of work in comparison to those having a manager ($p = 0.03$). However, workers did not differ significantly in their satisfaction with other aspects of work. Our analysis also indicates statistically significant differences in the association between form of employment and perceived influence of work on sex workers' mental and physical health (Table 5.2). Post-hoc tests showed that sex workers subjected to algorithmic management reported experiencing a more positive influence on both mental and physical health compared to those working off platforms and not having a manager (mean difference 95% CI [0.11, 1.33], $p = 0.015$ and [0.11, 1.16], $p = 0.012$, respectively). No statistically significant differences were found for the impact on partnership or love life, or private sex life.

Stigma: Anticipated stigma showed no significant correlation with any of the observed aspects of work satisfaction. However, we did find significant correlations between experienced stigma and several aspects of work satisfaction. Specifically, experienced stigma was negatively correlated with satisfaction with the workspace, working hours, autonomy in decision-making regarding work conditions, and interactions with clients or spectators. Similarly, internalized stigma was negatively correlated with satisfaction with payment, autonomy in decision-making regarding work conditions, and interactions with clients or spectators (Table 5.1). These correlations, while low to moderate, show that sex workers with higher experienced and internalized stigma scores indicate lower work satisfaction. Anticipated stigma did not exhibit significant correlations with the observed influence of sex work on private life and health. However, we did observe low negative correlations between experienced stigma and perceived influence on partnership or love life, private sex life, and mental health. Additionally, we found moderate negative correlations between internalized stigma and all spheres of private life and health (Table 5.2). These correlations show that sex workers with a higher experienced and internalized stigma score indicate a more negative perceived influence of sex work on their private lives and health.

The quality of work in precarious and stigmatized occupations

We now proceed to a discussion of the results, starting with an overview of key labour market features of the sex industry in Slovenia, which indicate the precarization of sex work. The supporting data show that the majority of sex workers in Slovenia engage in sex work without formal arrangements, rely on supplementary income from outside sex work, work independently, and provide a variety of services. This structure highlights the economic insecurity associated with jobs, both within and outside the industry, as they do not offer a self-sufficient income. Consistent with other studies, we can conclude that sex work often subsidizes low wages, lack of

Table 5.2 Descriptive statistics for perceived influence of sex work on various spheres of life (five-point scale from 1 – very negative to 5 – very positive), test statistics for differences between different categories of employment status and form of employment, and correlation coefficients with stigma ⏎

	Partnership or love life	*Private sex life*	*Mental health*	*Physical health*
Employment status, M (SD)				
Unregistered (n = 66)	2.86 (0.82)	2.91(0.99)	3.03 (0.99)	3.20 (0.85)
Sole proprietor (n = 18)	3.33 (1.10)	3.61 (0.92)	3.61 (1.04)	3.56 (0.78)
Full-time employee of a legal entity (n = 4)	4.00 (1.16)	4.00 (1.16)	4.50 (0.58)	4.75 (0.50)
Contractual (n = 15)	3.07 (1.28)	3.27 (1.10)	3.13 (1.06)	3.27 (0.96)
Test statistics, F (df1, df2), p	2.639 (2, 102), 0.054	3.577 (2, 102), 0.017	3.925 (2, 102), 0.011	4.774 (2, 102), 0.004
Form of employment, M (SD)				
Not having a manager and working on platforms (n = 13)	3.40 (1.10)	3.60 (1.05)	3.75 (1.02)	3.80 (0.83)
Not having a manager and working off platforms (n = 20)	2.96 (0.91)	3.00 (0.98)	3.03 (0.99)	3.17 (0.86)
Having a manager (n = 70)	2.69 (1.03)	3.08 (1.12)	3.08 (0.95)	3.38 (0.87)
Test statistics, F (df1, df2), p	2.229 (2, 102), 0.091	2.787 (2, 102), 0.066	4.205 (2, 102), 0.018	4.361 (2, 102), 0.015
Stigma, Kendal-Tau				
Anticipated stigma	–0.052	0.004	–0.109	0.019
Experienced stigma	–0.282**	–0.163*	–0.178*	–0.036
Internalized stigma	–0.408**	–0.372**	–0.499**	–0.394**

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .001$.

income, and precarious jobs in other parts of the economy, thereby compensating for the structural shortcomings of the formal economy (Benoit et al. 2021; Hardy and Sanders 2014). In comparison to previous research (Benoit et al. 2021; Bowen 2021; Hardy and Sanders 2014), the prevalence of sex work as a supplementary job in Slovenia is particularly high. We believe that this phenomenon is not unique to Slovenia but reflects a broader global trend of precarization in the sex industry and labour markets in late capitalism. As noted by McKee (2016), it has become more challenging to earn substantial income through sex work, while earning smaller amounts has become easier. Another indicator of the precarization of the sex industry in Slovenia is occupational multitasking, which involves diversifying services, tools, and roles that workers manage as a means to navigate the precarity they confront, a phenomenon described by Berg and Penley (2016) as "creative precarity." This trend is not exclusive to sex work but mirrors the transformation of work and entrepreneurial subjectivities in other areas of the economy, including cultural work, where workers must be adept at branding, niche marketing, and exploiting new technological opportunities to succeed (McKee 2016).

While our research undoubtedly demonstrates that sex work in Slovenia exhibits many indicators of precarious work, it also aligns with findings from other studies suggesting that precarity is not solely a negative and coercive condition (Berg 2021, 5; Fantone 2007; Gutiérrez-Rodriguez 2010, 102). This is particularly evident in the fact that even if sex workers assume all economic, health, and safety risks (Berg, 2021), they generally assess quality of work positively (Hamilton et al. 2023; Sanders, Connelly and Jarvis King 2016). High levels of satisfaction with the workspace, working hours, payment or earnings, autonomy over work conditions, and client interactions were also noted in our survey. Respondents expressed particular satisfaction with their control over the labour process, specifically their autonomy and freedom to decide when, where, and how to work – features also characteristic of other service industries (Cohen 2012, 147; Griesbach et al. 2019; Hamilton, Barakat, and Redmiles 2022; Mathisen and Knudsen 2022, 72). Similarly, regarding work satisfaction, only a minority of sex workers in our sample reported negative impacts of their work on their mental health, physical health, partner life, or private sex life. However, while some aspects of sex work may empower workers, as demonstrated in our study, this can lead to a "whitewashed" concept of precarity. Despite the relatively positive image of the quality of work in sex work, we must not overlook the fact that some report low satisfaction and negative consequences of the work. Workers do not acknowledge the risks associated with precarious employment, as feelings of autonomy and self-determination may "compensate" for precarity, a dynamic common in creative industries (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). These insights suggest that precarity in sex work is an ambivalent condition, where objective characteristics and subjective perceptions are often contradictory, indicating that precarity is not only a labour market

condition but also an ontological experience that shapes how workers subjectively perceive insecure employment (Neilson and Rossiter 2008).

Furthermore, in this chapter, we define precarity as a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond traditional views of employment relationships and contract types. In line with this, we aimed to identify which factors of precarity most significantly shape workers' subjective perceptions of the quality of work. We hypothesized that more precarious working conditions – in terms of employment status, forms of employment, and stigma – would have more negative implications for workers' perceptions of quality of work. However, our hypotheses were only partially confirmed. We found that formal employment status is not associated with higher satisfaction regarding working conditions, though it is related to less negative perceived impacts on health-related outcomes. This may be explained by the fact that formal employment often includes regulatory protections against occupational risks, leaving unregistered workers solely responsible for ensuring their own health and safety (Deering et al. 2014). Thus, while employment status is crucial for improving health-related outcomes for sex workers, our data suggest it is not significantly related to other indicators of quality of work.

Similarly, comparison between various forms of employment revealed no significant differences in overall job satisfaction between workers with managers and independent workers. However, independent workers on platforms reported higher satisfaction with autonomy and freedom at work, along with more positive influence of work on their mental and physical health. In this context, the so-called "algorithmic despotism" (Griesbach et al. 2019) appears to inflict less harm than traditional "physical despotism" or working offline on your own. To understand the advantages of platform-based work, it is necessary to consider the specific occupational risks in sex work, especially client violence and exploitation by managers. Independent platform work allows sex workers to avoid physical contact with clients and third-party intermediaries, reducing risks of violence, health issues, and exploitation (Dziuban 2016; Šori and Markelj 2022). Furthermore, it is crucial to account for the limited opportunities available to sex workers. Standard employment models that provide stronger worker protections remain rare in the sex industry. Viewed within the broader labour market context, platform-based sex work is still highly precarious and exploitative. Although flexibility and independence are frequently cited as advantages of platform work, "these benefits are undermined when flexibility provides the preconditions for vulnerability" (Easterbrook-Smith 2023, 263). It is important to recognize that algorithms are created and controlled by individuals and companies who profit substantially from the precarious conditions faced by sex workers and other platform workers. This highlights the entrenched exploitation of sex work within late capitalist gig economies.

Besides the economic and legal contexts, our study highlights the crucial role of the social context in shaping the quality of work. In Slovenia, sex workers operate within a stigmatized social environment that contributes

to the low social status of sex work, acting as a "structural constraint to quality of work" (Benoit et al. 2021). Many sex workers in our study reported high levels of anticipated stigma from institutions and experienced stigma in their private lives. This is partly explained by the fact that most respondents engage in sex work as a side job, making them hesitant to disclose their involvement due to potential repercussions on their regular employment and personal relationships (Bowen 2021, 129). More importantly, in our study, we found notable correlations between experienced and internalized stigma rates and quality of work and clearly confirmed our hypothesis that higher rates of stigma indicate lower work satisfaction and more negative perceived influence of work on both private lives and health. It has been shown in other studies that stigma can create challenges in maintaining private relationships, leading many sex workers to conceal their occupation from intimate partners and family members (Zarhin and Fox 2017). The necessity of leading double lives can contribute to psychosocial stress, adversely affecting workers' mental health (McCausland et al. 2020). Additionally, stigma can normalize violence and discrimination against sex workers (Leaker and Dunk-West 2011), hindering their ability to negotiate working conditions. It may also discourage disclosure or registration of sex work, leaving sex workers without formal labour protections. However, doing sex work as an unregistered side job might be precarious, but in many ways also beneficial from the workers' perspective. By having employment or a source of income outside of sex work – as many sex workers in our sample do – workers can more easily justify their income, open a bank account, find an apartment or a new job, and access the rights guaranteed by regular employment. Being unregistered as a sex worker can thus protect against adverse effects of stigmatization, discrimination, and precarity in the formal market, while also providing opportunities for pursuing personal aspirations, interests, and desires.

In summary, the results show that the quality of work in sex work is shaped by both the employment status, as formal employment is associated with a less negative perceived impact of work on workers' health, and the form of employment, as independent platform workers report greater freedom and well-being and a more positive impact of work on their health. However, a key factor diminishing the quality of work is stigma, highlighting that professional well-being is affected not only by labour law policies but also by other "mechanisms of inequality" (Tyler 2022), which reinforce occupational and social hierarchies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined the implications of various factors of precarity for the self-assessed quality of work in sex work. Our findings confirm that precarity is a complex and ambivalent condition. This ambivalence is particularly evident when comparing employment statuses, forms of

employment, and intense stigmatization with positive self-assessments of quality of work. This dynamic mirrors other precarious sectors within the service economy, where workers navigate tensions between uncertainty and autonomy and vulnerability and resilience. As we have demonstrated, unregistered precarious status in sex work can be beneficial from the workers' perspective in several ways, especially in terms of freedom and autonomy, favourable working conditions, and protection from stigmatization. However, idealizing these aspects can inadvertently disempower sex workers and reduce their motivation to address insecure working conditions. It is crucial to consider the structural conditions in which sex workers operate, as they occupy an insecure position within the gig economy, bearing all the risks and managing the organization of their work while being excluded from systemic protections. In this respect, our study reveals that the perceived quality of work is significantly shaped by the social status of the profession, a dimension often overlooked in mainstream discussions of precarity.

Notes

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