Chapter 2

BETWEEN VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY:
SEX WORKERS AND INFORMAL
SERVICES IN AMSTERDAM

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Chapter 2

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines informal services within the sex industry of in the red-light district of Amsterdam, the Netherlands and how these affect the autonomy of sex workers. Data were obtained from the police files of twelve criminal investigations into human trafficking in Amsterdam between 2006 and 2010. The empirical data show that sex workers’ are intermeshed in a network of people who intercede with them and their work: pimps, bodyguards, errand boys, drivers, brothel owners, and accountants. While these informal players offer services to facilitate sex work, they simultaneously create a network of control around the sex workers and profit from the latters’ earnings. The existence of this informal network and its activities both supports sex workers, but also undermines the autonomy of self-employed sex workers in the studied cases.
INTRODUCTION

In October 2014, a Dutch newspaper reported on a man, Juan, who helps sex workers in Amsterdam with administrative affairs and tax declarations. Juan is not an official accountant, but helps Spanish-speaking sex workers with his services from the back of a friend’s hair salon. For sex workers for whom Dutch is not their first language, it can be difficult to fill in tax returns and other forms. They use the advice and services of people they trust and who speak their own language. But Juan is now accused of defrauding the tax authorities and sex workers (Middelburg & Nikkels, 2014).

This chapter raises the issue of informal services by third parties, such as Juan, within the Dutch sex industry, and the consequences of these services regarding the autonomy of sex workers. We argue that, despite the legalization of sex work, certain characteristics of the sex industry maintain a certain degree of informality that influences sex workers’ employment and conditions. Although this study focuses on cases of trafficking, where working conditions are possibly the worst, by exploring how sex workers are able or unable to shape their working conditions we hope to gain better insight into the causes and consequences of exploitation.

Literature about sex work, especially the feminist literature, emphasizes the career opportunities and independent status accorded to those who choose to be sex workers, as well as pointing to exploitation (Sanders, O’Neill, & Pitcher, 2009). These two polarized views actually question the same thing; namely, to what extent women have a choice when they become sex workers, and to what extent they are able to influence their working conditions.

However, various authors have pointed out that a schematic contrast between coercion and choice is too simple because, in practice, sex work is more complex (Sanders, O’Neill & Pitcher, 2009). In reality, a number of combinations exist, and there are many different forms of both choice and exploitation in the sex industry (Di Tommaso, Shima, Strøm, & Bettio, 2009; Bettio & Nandi, 2010). Several authors argue that it is better to speak of a continuum in which sex workers occupy a position between two extremes (Brents & Hausbeck, 2001; Sanders, O’Neill, & Pitcher, 2009; Bettio & Nandi, 2010; Bungay, Halpin, Atchison & Johnston, 2011; Weitzer, 2012).

We look at the working conditions of sex workers, considering both elements – exploitation and coercion, on the one hand, and autonomy and freedom of choice, on the other.

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36 All personal information that would allow the identification of any person(s) described in the study has been removed.

37 According to Hughes (2004), legalization would mean the regulation of prostitution with laws regarding where, when, and how prostitution could take place. Decriminalization eliminates all laws and prohibits the state and law-enforcement officials from intervening in any prostitution-related activities or transactions, unless other laws apply (Hughes, 2004). Unlike legalization, a decriminalized system does not have special laws aimed solely at sex workers or sex work-related activity (Lutnick & Cohan, 2009).
By autonomy we mean the extent to which sex workers can determine and influence their own working conditions (Persak, 2013). By exploitation we mean profiting from other people’s earnings in a way that is disproportionate to the services provided. While sex work can be voluntary and offer possibilities, it can also be exploitative. We think it is important to recognize both. Our focus remains specifically on the factors affecting the degree of exploitation as well as autonomy. We think that acknowledging prostitution as work offers the best possibilities to improve and protect the position of sex workers. We see, however, that there are still several challenges to overcome even within a legalized sex industry.

Views on sex work automatically lead to perspectives about the role the government should play in combatting trafficking and exploitation in the sex industry. In the Dutch policy on sex work, legalized sex work is seen as a means to strengthen the autonomous position of sex workers and to protect women from abuse. Prostitution was legalized in the Netherlands in 2000 to counter human trafficking in the sex industry. Since then, sex workers have been required to pay taxes, and brothel owners must obtain a license before they can rent workspaces to sex workers. Nevertheless, in practice, trafficking still occurs in the Dutch sex industry. Since 2000, several criminal cases have been conducted in the Netherlands in which trafficking suspects have been prosecuted and sentenced for the exploitation of sex workers (Verhoeven, Van Gestel & De Jong 2011; Verhoeven, Van Gestel & Kleemans, 2013).

In this contribution, trafficking follows the 2000 UN Palermo Protocol’s definition of trafficking in persons, applied to trafficking for sexual exploitation. This internationally recognized UN definition is also used in the Netherlands. This means that pimps exploiting sex workers by means of coercion, deception, or fraud can be prosecuted for the offense of human trafficking. Although this internationally recognized definition exists, it does not mean that trafficking is a clear concept. Several authors address the different perceptions of exploitation. Wagenaar, Altink & Amesberger (2013: 71) write that trafficking is “an unclear and fuzzy concept,” while Agustín (2008a) addresses the disagreement about the meaning of key words like coercion, force, and deceit in concrete situations. She adds that those who are labeled as traffickers by outsiders, provide services that insiders (migrants for example) keenly desire (Agustín, 2008b).

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38 The UN Palermo Protocol defines sex trafficking as:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation shall be irrelevant (2000: 2).
Thus, we look at what role informal economic activities play in the everyday work of women who sell sex. Furthermore, we examine whether these activities may constitute or enable exploitation of sex workers in the sex industry. The main question is: what informal economic activities take place in the red-light district in Amsterdam, and how do these activities involve both the exploitation of sex workers, on the one hand, and the autonomy of sex workers on the other?

The red-light district - in Dutch, “de Wallen” - refers to the area located in the center of Amsterdam, widely known for its “window prostitution.” The district consists of live sex shows, peep shows, sex shops, brothels without windows, private houses, and window prostitution. Here, we focus only on window prostitution in this particular red-light district. Window prostitution refers to (full) sexual services that are provided in a room where the window fronts the street and serves as a “shop window” and “negotiation venue” for the services offered. In principle, sex workers work independently: they are self-employed, and they negotiate the price and the services provided to their clients on their own (Van Wijk et al., 2010). The district has about 290 windows, or workrooms, which are offered for rent by thirty-one brothel owners (Van Wijk et al., 2010).

LITERATURE ON SEX WORK AND THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

While the “formal” economy refers to economic activities that governments recognize (and therefore regulate, tax, inspect, and so on), the informal economy refers to income-generating activities not protected by labor legislation (Agustín, 2006a, 2006b). Agustín explains: ‘[S]ome informal occupations closely resemble formal sector activities but they do not fulfill certain regulations or do not operate in locations zoned for them; some are primarily forms of tax evasion; some are crimes that require a victim; others fit definitions of “alternative” or “solidarity” economies (mutual-aid, community projects, voluntary work, self-help)” (2006b: 120). Although informal activities are not necessarily illegal or punishable by law, informality provides opportunities for people to operate outside government rules (Agustín, 2006a; Slot, 2010).

Sanders (2008, 2013) emphasizes the role of informal or shadow activities within the sex industry, including regulated sex work. She studied the sex industry in the UK and described the phenomenon of service providers within the sex industry as “ancillary industries.” Here she is referring to the ancillary activities, which are usually informal services, of various players that enable the sex industry. Sanders (2008) identifies six such ancillary industries: prostitution venues, advertising, security, transport, presentation, and recreation and hospitality. The difference between service providers in other industries and

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39 In addition to the old center of Amsterdam, there are two other areas in the city where window prostitution takes place, comprising another 117 windows.
that of sex work is that sex workers are usually not registered with tax or other authorities, although the sex industry itself can be formal if it is recognized by the government.

**Anonymity and informal service providers**

Several factors influence sex workers, even within a regulated sex industry, to abide with some degree of informality or to use informal service providers. The first factor is the desire for discretion and anonymity, to which sex workers generally attach great importance due to the stigma associated with sex work. As Agustín notes, sex work is an “advantageous but stigmatized occupation” (2007: 529). Even when sex workers want to be open about their work, they might choose to remain discreet because of possible negative consequences for themselves or their children. For example, it can be difficult for a sex worker or a sex work-related business in the Netherlands to open a (business) bank account or obtain a mortgage loan, despite the legalization and regulation of the industry (Daalder, 2007; Knight, 2011). That legalization of sex work does not automatically reduce such stigma is also shown for New Zealand where, although decriminalization has increased the rights of sex workers, it has not reduced stigma (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2010; Pitcher, 2015). Also, from the Dutch literature, it is apparent that anonymity for both sex workers and clients is an important feature, if not a prerequisite. Van de Bunt (2007: 80) argues that, despite the opportunities that arose from the lifting of the ban on brothels so that sex work could be performed as a “regular occupation,” many women preferred to operate on the margins by evading taxes and working in secret, particularly some sex workers who want to earn extra money or to work without their family members knowing the type of work they do. Dekker, Tap & Homburg (2006) interviewed 100 sex workers who worked in “the windows” and found that 70 percent refused to pay taxes. Daalder (2007) also noted considerable resistance within the sex industry toward the payment of income tax and social insurance premiums. Tax evasion, in other words, contributes to the need to remain anonymous, so that tax evasion is another reason why sex workers may go along with informality or informal services. The persistence of a cash economy is related to the need for anonymity, and cash continues to be the only way of paying for services in this industry in Amsterdam. Cash leaves no tracks; as a result, financial exchanges remain concealed from authorities. Tax evasion is simple, or even obvious, when women want to remain anonymous; thus, informal services can be attractive in this sense. Earnings are also greater when taxes are not, or not fully, paid.

A third reason why (potential) sex workers may utilize informal service providers is because they may need “people who facilitate the finding of jobs, people to provide advice, addresses of safe and inexpensive places to stay, information on whom to trust and whom not, transport, translations, information on labour and cultural norms, etc” (Agustín, 2006b: 121). Other affairs where assistance can be welcome are the (international) journey, the first rent to pay a workplace, and dealing with administrative matters, for all of which formal alternatives are not always available. For example, the regular and usually formal
employment agencies mediate for work such as mushroom or pepper picking, babysitting, and cleaning, but not for sex work.

Pitcher (2015) underlines that third parties assisting in these affairs often are not recognized in policy and regulation of the sex industry. This is also the case in the Netherlands. This probably has to do with the fact that the independence of sex workers is a starting-point in the Dutch policy on sex work. From this point, sex workers are assumed to be self-employed and thus lack interference from others.

**Informal services**

When examining the effect of informality on autonomy and exploitation, Persak’s work is useful: her study (2013) focused on the informal economy in the sex industry. She described how the characteristics of the informal economy have both advantages and disadvantages for working conditions and the autonomy of workers in the sex industry (see also Sassen, 2007). Informality offers flexibility, employment and income, and anonymity. Moreover, Persak emphasizes that informality can be “more deleterious and more involuntary” in this particular industry (2013: 309). Not only do the activities and the identity of those involved in the informal economy remain out of sight, but so do the working conditions and possible exploitation taking place.

Furthermore, Williams and Windebank (1998) note that migrants, regardless of their legal or illegal status, are often more vulnerable to labor conditions in which they can be exploited. According to Agustín (2006b), people who are overeager to travel do little research to test what they are told by service providers. Some migrants might make themselves extra vulnerable or collaborate in their own deception “by signing a contract (with informal parties) without understanding what it meant, or without having an idea about the value of foreign money” (Agustín, 2006b: 122). But Agustín (2003) also states that just because a part of this informal economy turns to criminal exploitation does not mean the entire network does, nor that all of the clientele are its “victims”.

**METHODS**

This study originated from a research project that initially focused on human trafficking and police strategies to combat it (Verhoeven, Van Gestel & De Jong, 2011). The main sources for this research project were police files of Dutch criminal investigations into human trafficking in Amsterdam’s red-light district. In addition, interviews are conducted with police investigators and public prosecutors about those investigations. We chose to study police files because our research question was focused primarily on the nature of human trafficking and on police investigation strategies. Insight into the gathered empirical data, however, gradually led to other interesting research topics and questions; for example, findings about the intimate relationships between sex workers and pimps
and questions about the role of the informal economy for sex workers (Verhoeven, Van Gestel, De Jong & Kleemans, 2015; Verhoeven, Van Gestel & Kleemans, 2013). This contribution addresses the last question.

Using police files as a main source for research has advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is that police files contain second-hand information. While fieldwork can provide first-hand information, access to primary sources can be restricted, and participants probably would rather not share information about their operations outside of government rules – although some informal activities may not necessarily be illegal.

Another disadvantage of studying police files is that police data by definition are incomplete and biased because they are collected for the purpose of criminal investigation and prosecution (Soudijn, 2006). For example, some pimps stay out of sight because they outsmart the police, while others may often come into view because of their clumsy working methods.

Nevertheless, studying police files has significant advantages. These files contain a lot of information about the way sex workers, pimps, and other participants operate, cooperate, and interact with each other. In the Netherlands, the police are permitted to use wide investigative powers to collect evidence concerning the behavior of suspects. This information is gathered by (unobtrusive) police methods like telephone taps, police observations, and interviews with suspects, victims, witnesses, and other individuals who might be involved. In this way police files give a broad and detailed picture of the daily life and the social world of people who work in the realm of sex work. Consequently, the files also contain information about informal activities that are not necessarily illegal. The extensive use of telephone taps in Dutch criminal investigations especially reveals a lot of interesting information about everyday social interactions between individuals, such as conversations between sex workers and drivers. While this kind of information is often not of interest to investigation teams because their focus primarily is on finding evidence for human trafficking, it is very useful for social researchers.

Another advantage is that law enforcement agencies in the Netherlands are quite willing to cooperate with researchers and to provide access to police files (Kleemans, Soudijn, & Weenink, 2010). For this study, we had access to the original police files. We guaranteed anonymity in any publications.

**Selection of police files**

We selected all criminal investigations into human trafficking that took place in the red-light district between 2006 and 2010. Altogether, twelve investigations of varying sizes were conducted in this period. Three cases involved only one suspect; four cases covered two or three suspects; five cases focused on six or seven suspects; and one investigation was quite extensive, involving about thirty suspects.

Seventy suspects of human trafficking were involved in the twelve case files. The suspects consisted of pimps (thirty-seven) and other service providers (thirty-three), such as drivers, errand boys, and bodyguards. Most of them were men. The pimps created
situations in which they managed or claimed an amount of the money that sex workers earned, sometimes in exchange for protection or mentoring in sex work. The ages of the suspects appearing in the cases varied from 18 to 58 years. The average age was 30 years. Most were born in Turkey (seventeen), Hungary (sixteen), the Netherlands (fourteen), or Germany (twelve). At the time of writing (February 2015), there had been convictions of human trafficking in nine of the twelve cases. Two cases have yet to come to court and in one case, the details are as yet unknown.

Seventy-six female sex workers were identified as victims in the twelve case files. The ages of these women varied from 17 to 35 years, with an average age of 23 years. The women were mainly in their 20s (fifty-four), but there were also adolescents (fifteen) and women in their 30s (seven). More than half of the women were born in the Netherlands (forty-five). Another significant group was born in Hungary. Other countries of birth were Romania, Germany, and in a few cases Poland, Thailand, France, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Belgium, and the Netherlands Antilles.

**Coding and recoding**

Each case study started with face-to-face interviews with police investigators and public prosecutors about the criminal investigation. These interviews were fully transcribed. Subsequently, case-study data were collected and analyzed in several steps or “cycles” following the methodology of Saldana (2009, see also Charmaz, 2014). We started with a list of initial codes to gather rough data from the files. This list contained broad general descriptive codes like “recruitment,” “working conditions of sex workers,” “earning money,” “housing,” “violence,” “coercion,” “facilitating circumstances,” “social relations,” “police investigation strategies,” and so on. After this first step of gathering rough empirical material, we explored and filled out these codes (Saldana 2009). By reading the data again and comparing the initial codes with each other, we developed a code system. We refined the initial codes into sub-codes and furthermore constructed different codes, such as “assisting sex workers,” “protection,” “oppression,” “informality,” “intimate relationships,” “taking money,” and so on. The new codes were actions and relationships that became evident in the data.

We used computer software (MAXQDA) to code the data. With this software we could apply more than one code to the same passage, and we could code a smaller portion of text within a larger portion of coded text. It was also possible to quickly collect and display similarly coded data (or keywords) for further examination and to make comparisons (Saldana, 2009). This process of coding and recoding enabled us to find repetitive patterns and actions and enabled us to see which codes were especially useful. During this coding process, we gradually developed more abstract and analytical themes such as dependency, autonomy, the meaning of work, and self-determination.

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40 The term “pimp” is used for this kind of activity, including possibly living off of the earnings of one or more sex workers; this study uses the term in this sense.
INFORMAL SERVICES IN THE RED-LIGHT DISTRICT

Looking at the informal activities among the twelve case studies, several players can be distinguished: pimps, bodyguards, errand boys, drivers, brothel owners, café owners, and accountants. Some of these players are legal professionals, but they partly participate in informal activities as well. Several informal activities and services that take place in the red-light district are described below. We look at the way these informal activities relate to the working conditions of sex workers, and how this relates to either exploitation or autonomy.

Protection by pimps and bodyguards

In the case studies, pimps and bodyguards provided protection for money. The reason for providing protection seems to be twofold. On the one hand, sex workers can be vulnerable for several reasons: they work alone behind a window and are alone with clients while there is cash in the room; clients may be under the influence of alcohol or drugs; and working hours can start or finish at nighttime. On the other hand, providing protection can also be a means to profit from the women’s earnings. The hiring of protection is usually not at the initiative of the sex workers, and women are often coerced into it.

Pimps can undertake the work of protection themselves, but there are also examples in the case studies where the work is outsourced to bodyguards or “sitters,” as one of the women calls them. In these cases, the bodyguards keep the pimps informed about all that takes place.

Protection usually means that the premises and the surrounding area around the workspace are continuously monitored. The men who are responsible for protection loiter in the area, walk around, or drive around and have regular contact with the women by phone. These “protectors” also ensure that no other pimps get too close to the women with the intention of profiting from them. Tapped phone calls reveal what this protection can look like. Linda, a Dutch sex worker, talks about being checked, while on the phone with a friend:

Glenn, my “watchdog”. He is always standing on the bridge to check me when I am working. Even when it is raining, he is always standing there. I hear it from customers too. 41 (intercepted phone conversation in police files of case 8)

The same Glenn is called by a pimp and is told to check on another sex worker’s house, to see who is coming out.

Some women are not allowed to leave their room during a shift under the guise of security. In this way, pimps and bodyguards try to make women work as much as possible.
A bodyguard may also accompany a woman when she does leave her room. One woman states:

At the end of my shift, he escorted me to a car. He gave me a sense of security.
(statement in police file of case 9)

By controlling the “safety” of the women, pimps and bodyguards check if women work according to the set or “agreed” conditions. These working conditions differ significantly among the women. Some women say that they themselves decided how many days and hours they would work, although some kind of control was always present, as with Stella, a Romanian sex worker:

Stella told the police that she could decide for herself if she was working or not. She said that she could visit her mother back home if she wanted, but she adds that her pimp made sure someone accompanied her if she made such a visit to her home country. (summary of statement in police file of case 5)

Others were urged by pimps or bodyguards to work six or seven days a week and to work long hours, as Vicky’s case shows:

Vicky felt relatively free, but she said her freedom was limited by the fact that she had to pay that much money for protection. Vicky’s tapped phone calls indicate that she earned 600 to 700 euros a day and had to pay 2,500 euros per month for protection and 500 euros per month for rent. (summary of statement and intercepted phone call in police files of case 5){42}

Phone calls by Ruxandra, a Hungarian woman, reveal that she stayed with her pimp because she felt relatively well off with him:

Ruxandra tells her mother that she stays with her pimp a little longer because she can easily withhold money from him. She says she is better off with him than with a smarter, more violent pimp. At the same time she reasons that she should start looking for help to try to get away from him. (summary of intercepted phone call in police files of case 3)

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42 The price sex workers in the windows charge usually lies between 35 and 70 euros. The price for a visit of around 20 minutes with “a blow job and fucking” is usually 50 euros (Van Wijk et al., 2010: 48). Van Wijk et al. quote a brothel owner who says that “a beautiful woman gets 50 euros and others do it for 30 euros” (2010: 48). The price for a room or window is around 100 euros during the daytime and 130 to 150 euros at night. According to several respondents, a sex worker “must have an average of four customers to take out all costs and three extra to make a little profit” (Van Wijk et al., 2010: 48).
The amounts paid for the services of pimps vary widely. Pimps earn more than bodyguards. Several cases show a hierarchy between pimps and bodyguards. The most extensive investigation, which covered a large number of suspects, illustrates this hierarchy clearly:

Every Friday night, bodyguards collect protection money (100 to 150 euros) from different women who sell sex. The bodyguards then deliver the money to Jane, the pimp’s most important girlfriend. Jane then pays the bodyguards’ wages under his direction. This means the women are actually paying the pimp, and the pimp in turn pays the bodyguards. (summary of police observations and intercepted phone calls from police files of case 11)

In other cases, women worked on the basis of a kind of package deal with their pimps. In several cases, 50 percent of the women’s earnings were shared with a pimp in exchange for mentoring them in sex work, and for housing and protection. This was the case with Maria, who told the police the following about her female pimp:

She did take half of my money, but we agreed on that. That half of the money earned by me was for accommodation in Holland and for my food, etc.[...] She told me that she had a big house where I could sleep. She would buy everything for me and take me to work and bring me back. She also said that Holland was a very scary country with a lot of crime on the streets, and that I could not walk the streets on my own. (statement in police files of case 3)

When pimps arrange accommodation, this usually means the women can stay with these pimps, sometimes, with several other women. A number of women did not actually have a place of their own. Gina, also from case 3, tells the police that she did not have a key for the place where she stayed:

I don’t have a key of the house, and I never had a key. We always go out together. (statement in police files of case 3)

The involvement of other people with sex workers can take different forms and can be perceived in different ways. In some cases, women do not perceive that they have much choice about whether to pay for protection. Some women were simply told that this is the way it works. In other cases, women perceive the services of protectors – including the money that has to be paid – as something that creates opportunities. For Anoeska, a Hungarian woman, her pimp made it possible to earn money in the Netherlands and help her family in Hungary. She told the police about her female pimp who demanded a lot of her earned money:
If we don’t give money to her, we have to go back to Hungary, to the misery. She gave us this opportunity. I cannot work for myself because then I would get on the wrong side of her. She started this business; thanks to her, I can help my parents. (statement from police files of case 3)

As noted previously, the amounts that have to be paid to pimps and bodyguards vary widely. Also, the cases include examples where over time, initial agreements changed, and more money had to be paid. Several pimps told women that they would manage and save all the money that was earned. Later on, the money had been spent or disappeared, as in the following example:

Jewel made a statement to the police about the practices of her pimp, Sam. She explains how Sam took care of everything; he arranged a workroom, and Jewel could stay at his place. The deal was that they would split the earnings, and that he would take care of the money. She has never seen any of the money. (summary of statement in police files of case 12)

Suzy, a woman from case 9, also explains that she did not have access to her money; her pimp/boyfriend saved it. The same applies to Lexy and Lucy:

The files about Lexy and Lucy show that they hardly have money to spend, although they earn considerable amounts of money every day. Linda mentions that she has to start saving money for a daytrip to a theme park with her child. (summary of statement in police files of case 8)

The fact that sex workers have to pay for services, such as protection and access to accommodation and to a workspace, illustrates how sex work can be surrounded by a network of people who interfere with its practice and profit from it. Although pimps can be helpful in accessing employment and housing, dealing with pimps also puts sex workers in a situation of dependency. Often, the way protection is offered and provided involves the continuous monitoring of the women. In these cases, exploitation is taking place that limits the women’s freedom of choice and independence.

Running of errands
Another kind of informal job is performed by people who can be designated as “errand boys.” These are men who run all kinds of errands and provide services that facilitate the work of sex workers, pimps, and room rental operators. Examples include arranging or reserving a workroom for a sex worker (often under the instruction of a pimp), collecting rent for brothel owners from the women while at work, or collecting protection money for pimps. One of the women explains the role of one errand boy, Alex:
Alex had to collect the rent of the workrooms. He had to collect the money of the girls who were working and had to give this to the boss. He earned 30 to 35 euros a day. (statement in police files of case 3)

Other errands include buying groceries such as food and drinks, cigarettes, condoms, phone cards, or clothing for the women so that they did not have to leave work. The cases show how work is commissioned:

Hassan receives text messages from various pimps and bodyguards with instructions such as: “bring the blonde orange juice.” He is also called and instructed to pay a driver, to collect money from the women and to check and make sure they have enough phone cards. (summary of intercepted text messages and phone conversations in police files of case 12)

Other errands include dropping off or depositing cash, usually in a foreign country. One errand boy, for example, was reimbursed 10 percent of the amount of money that he sent through a money transfer agency to a pimp’s family member abroad. In another case, an errand boy had to drop off money in Turkey. He was caught at Amsterdam Airport with 7,000 euros in his underwear. Errand boys can be closely connected to the pimps, are part of their network and are sometimes friends or family of the pimp. Sometimes the errand boys are less closely connected to the pimps and may even work for pimps and sex workers from other prostitution rings, as the story of Oscar illustrates:

Oscar claimed he had no contact with pimps and ran errands solely at the request of the girls. During a police interrogation, he stated that he performed odd jobs for about twenty to twenty-five Hungarian sex workers. According to his own estimates, he earned between 1,500 and 2,000 euros a month. (statement in police files of case 10)

These examples of informal activities performed by errand boys show that their services can be harmless and supporting of the women’s work. On the other hand, in our cases, errand boys are often part of the network that monitors and controls the women’s work, their earnings, and their movements, together with other informal players in the business.

Transportation

Another informal activity in the red-light district is offering transportation to sex workers. Though some women commute to work by public transport, many women in the studied cases are picked up, dropped off at work, and taken home again. This happens usually

43 It is not illegal to carry 7,000 euros in cash, but obviously this person did not want others to know that he was carrying that large sum, possibly because he did not have a formal job or he received social security benefits.
with informal drivers without a taxi license. These drivers can be called by the women themselves. Some women, like Maria, had a regular driver:

I go to work with a cab or when Noa has nothing to do, she brings us. The cab that brings and takes us is always the same cab. The driver is called Mo. We pay a fixed price, 15 euros per trip. I got Mo’s number from one of the girls from the red-light district. (statement in police files of case 3)

A regular driver means a discreet way to get home, and only one person knowing about their workplace and address instead of different drivers every night. This is consistent with Sanders (2008), who indicates that taxi drivers are often associated with sex workers, and relationships are built on trust so that discretion is guaranteed. Sanders (2008) notes that these relationships are built over time in local urban networks of informal shadow economies.

Pimps or bodyguards may also pick up the women themselves or organize transportation for them - as in the case of Jim, who works for Max, one of the pimps:

Jim is a driver. He brings women who work for Max to work, and he brings them home again. He also has to pick up women who are recruited on the Internet from their homes and bring them to the hangout of a group of fellow pimps. Jim is paid by Max. (summary of police observations and intercepted phone calls in police files of case 5)

When transportation is organised by others, this can also be a means to control the women’s movements. Denise from case 5 tries to flee from the network around her. Her driver may also have been part of that network. She told the police:

I closed the curtain of the window as if I had a customer and called a driver. The driver stopped in front of the building, and I got in. Directly after we drove away, the cab was stopped by one of John’s sitters. He gets in the cab with me and called John immediately. John talked to me and asked why I wanted to get away. The sitter brought me back to my window again by order of John. (statement in police files of case 5)

Apart from the advantage of discreet transportation, unofficial transportation arranged by pimps means that in some cases the women never go anywhere independently without a pimp or bodyguard knowing exactly where they are.

Renting of workrooms by brothel owners
Brothel owners in the red-light district run room-renting businesses. Some own the buildings with several workrooms; others rent the buildings and sublet the workrooms to sex workers. The Netherlands maintains strict licensing requirements and conditions for
the operation of brothels and the rental of workrooms. Brothel owners must show proof of good conduct, and workrooms should be rented directly to self-employed sex workers only, without the interference of others. Despite these requirements, examples emerged from the case studies to indicate that activities in this industry are not always arranged in this way. One case in particular brought to light a great deal of information on the nature of informal activities when the rental of workrooms is involved. This case also shows a connection between the brothel owners and several pimps:

Ozan, a brothel owner, lost his license on account of renting workrooms to underage women. He then has his "errand boy" apply for the license again. By doing so, Ozan himself remains off the books while - according to women's stories - he in fact remains in control of the room-rental business. Ozan also runs a café, which is located opposite the workrooms. This café, which was used as a kind of hangout, offers pimps a discreet and camouflaged way of staying near the women. If necessary, the pimp can run from there to the women easily and quickly. The café also facilitates the pimps' activities by having a security camera outside the café. The camera images are visible to the visitors inside the café. This allows pimps to monitor the alley with workrooms and the number of customers going in and out from inside the pub while drinking at the bar. Ozan is mainly present in the café during the evening, where he conducts some of the business relating to the rental of workrooms. He sometimes does business directly with pimps who want to book a room for a woman. Therefore, it is not necessary for the sex worker to organize a workspace herself. (summary of police observations and intercepted phone calls in police files of case 6)

Several women in the case cited above claimed that they had to have sex with Ozan or the errand boy in exchange for renting a room. Laura told the police:

He told me that I would not get a room if I didn't have sex with him. [...] I felt obliged to have sex with him, otherwise I would not get a room. (statement in police files of case 6)

Thus, although the café and the brothel in this case are both legally operated businesses, given their municipal permit, both are entwined with the criminal and informal activities of pimps and errand boys from the red-light district.

Because sex workers in the regulated sex industry are seen as fiscally independent entrepreneurs, brothel owners have to provide invoices to people who rent a workplace. However, this does not always appear to be the case. One woman tells the police that the brothel refused to give receipts or invoices for the paid rent, which makes it hard for her to fulfill formal business requirements:
I asked for it, and my friend too; but they refused to give it. I asked Alex [an errand boy] to go inside and ask for the invoice for the rent. Without an invoice, I cannot go to the tax authorities. (statement in police files of case 6)

Brothel owners who cooperate with pimps and require sex in exchange for the opportunity to rent workspaces indicate that sex workers have little freedom of choice and are dependent on others to perform their work. Sex workers are sometimes forced to conform to the informal and fraudulent practices of others, and are therefore limited in their ability to make choices regarding their working conditions. In contrast, pimps who seek to exploit sex workers already have a network within window prostitution. Sex workers depend on people from these networks to rent a place to work, while some brothel owners may assist pimps who, in this case, are guilty of exploitation. These factors do not contribute to the self-employment and autonomy of sex workers.

Registration and administration services
Other informal services within the red-light district are registration and administration services, offered by accountants and consultants. These people perform legitimate tasks, such as facilitating entrepreneurs by doing their books, but may also advise clients on how to bypass regulations or evade tax liability. For example, the books of the aforementioned brothel and the café in case 6 were done by an accounting firm located in the red-light district. In this case, the police investigation team was confronted several times with the accountant’s mediating role in the business:

The accountant in case 6 advised the brothel owner and the café owner on how to implement fraudulent administrative practices and assisted them with obtaining and maintaining the license to operate the brothel. The accountant was also suspected of keeping "shadow accounts" in collaboration with the brothel owner. For example, the brothel owner does pay taxes but reports an occupancy rate of just 50 percent, while in the parallel accounts it was discovered that the occupancy rate was actually 100 percent. (summary of i.a. police observations, evidence from a house search and statements in police files of case 6)

These consist of arranging a number of administrative matters necessary for the women to be able to rent a workroom at a brothel. These administrative affairs include, for example, registration at the municipality, obtaining a social security number, and registration at the Chamber of Commerce.

Other administrative services have to do with housing. The women in the cited cases often live with their pimps in the same house. These apartments are sometimes sublet. In order to hide these addresses from the authorities, women are registered at another address. Notably, one police file reveals that the women were all registered at the same address,
which was the address of the accountant’s firm. Such addresses are usually made available for a fee. One of the interviewed police detectives told us the following:

The police team came across an address where thirty-five sex workers were registered. Obviously, they were not all actually living at that address ... this is often done, because an address is needed to apply for a registration number at the Chamber of Commerce. It is not clear if, or how much has to be paid for an address. (summary based on interview with police officer about case 1)

Accountants and consultants facilitating these administrative matters can be useful for sex workers because they provide assistance in arranging a number of administrative issues that are necessary for operation (for example, a registered address, a social security number, and a Chamber of Commerce registration). Self-employed sex workers are also required to keep accounting records for the tax authorities. Accountants can be helpful with these requirements. The problem is, however, that some of them commit fraud or circumvent regulations - like Juan, mentioned in the Introduction.

In addition, the women in these cases usually did not approach these firms themselves, but matters were arranged through pimps. These pimps and accountants inform the (migrant) women about the Dutch legislation regarding sex work. This can be helpful, given the large number of registrations that must be completed with different agencies. At the same time, it can undermine their autonomy because they depend on others who sometimes act not fully in accordance with the law. One example is the registration of women at the accountancy firm’s address, while they were actually subletting at another address. Sex workers can end up in a situation where registrations are completed but are fully or partly outside the formal regulations and therefore possibly unprotected by labor or housing legislation.

Subculture
So far, we have mentioned some of the people who make up the network of informal players contributing to the shaping of sex workers’ working conditions. From what is known about these informal players, some common facts are that a number of them have various criminal histories, are not always registered with the municipalities, or have no legal income. Sanders (2008) suggests that the typical characteristics of sex work – that it is concealed or anonymous – creates entrepreneurship that stems from opportunism or necessity. Because of the importance of remaining anonymous and therefore the concealing of certain aspects of the profession, the women engage with informal facilitators. This type of business provides opportunities to earn money for those seeking an alternative to the “normal” mainstream economy (Van der Leun, 2003; Bovenkerk, Van San, Boone, Boekhout van Solinge & Korf, 2006; Sanders, 2008).

Another reason for these informal players to work in this sector can also be found in the concept of “hustling,” as described by anthropologist Sansone (1992). By hustling,
Sansone is referring to engaging in a wide range of informal economic activities, legal or otherwise, that provide additional income (Sansone, 1992). Sansone focused on Creole youth subculture in Amsterdam and describes, for example, how hustling women can serve as an alternative to regular work. Many of the boys he studied used women as a potential source of revenue (Sansone, 1992). The boys try to get “sponsored” (maintained by the money earned by one or more girlfriends) or attempt more coercive ways such as pimping, in addition to other means of making money, such as handling stolen goods or dealing in drugs. The police files contain little information on the viewpoint of the informal players, but it is plausible that Sanders’ and Sansone’s findings in other contexts may also be applied to the boys who are active in the informal economy of Amsterdam’s red-light district.

CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on informal economic services in Amsterdam’s regulated red-light district and how these activities affected the autonomy of sex workers. Data were obtained from police investigations into sex trafficking. Although this information was collected by the police with the goal of investigating exploitation, it also offered an inside view into the hidden world of sex work.

The police files revealed a wide range of informal activities surrounding the sex industry and its working conditions. These activities enabled sex work and were characterized by the fact that they were not regulated or did not fulfill existing regulations. Such activities were, for example, not being registered or performing without the required licenses or permits, or not complying with tax regulations. Examples included pimps and bodyguards who provided informal protection services, errand boys who took care of all kinds of informal services, drivers who transported passengers without a license, brothels that operated under the license of someone other than the real owner, and accountants and consultants who advised on how to bypass regulations and taxes. Together, these activities constitute a lively informal economy. These findings are similar to the ancillary industries that Sanders (2008) found in the UK. She also found unregistered service providers in different industries, such as security and transportation, who support sex workers with several aspects of their work in an informal manner.

We explored to what extent sex workers were able to influence their working conditions and exert their autonomy, in the midst of these informal activities. On the one hand, we saw that some aspects of these informal activities were related to the nature of the work and the needs of sex workers - such as getting access to work or housing, or the desire to remain anonymous. For some sex workers, access to employment and income would be difficult or impossible to achieve without the assistance of informal players.

On the other hand, we saw a wide variety of people who attempted to profit from sex workers’ earnings by offering services in a coercive manner. The empirical data showed
that the involvement of sex workers with informal players also entailed dependency and exploitation. On the basis of the twelve case studies we could say that sex workers are intermeshed in a network of people who affect them and their work. These people can create an informal network of monitoring and control around the work and movements of sex workers and profit from the sex workers’ earnings in an exploitative way.

Regarding the generalizability of our findings to Amsterdam’s sex industry, it is important to note that our data are based on police files of criminal investigations into sex trafficking, and exploitation is a key characteristic of trafficking. Future research should look at the sex industry more broadly to explore whether coercion is common among informal services and if all sex workers have to deal with this kind of network. Nevertheless, our research provides insight into the informal services that facilitate sex work, which can contribute to the search for improvements in the working conditions of women who sell sex.

Within the informal networks we see that pimps are pivotal to several activities that enable sex work in the red-light district. They link a number of activities such as registration, security, and transportation. The services of pimps and other informal players, however, are hardly recognized within the Dutch policy on the sex industry, even though the aim of the Dutch policy is to counter sex trafficking and to strengthen the autonomy of sex workers. The policy is mainly focused on brothel owners and on sex workers themselves, and takes no account of the roles of pimps and other service providers. Moreover, a formal alternative for the offered services is often not available. This has afforded informal players the opportunity to intercede freely with sex workers. The agreements sex workers make with informal service providers, and the working conditions that result, stay out of sight of the authorities. These activities are therefore not inspected by the authorities. This makes sex workers, using informal services, vulnerable to exploitation (Agustín, 2006b).

It is therefore important to look for more formal alternatives for services that enable sex work. This could improve the autonomy of sex workers and could improve the visibility of working conditions within the sex industry (Mossman, 2010; Pitcher, 2015). For example, support agencies for sex workers could provide reliable services. At this moment, sex workers still have to find an acceptable compromise between working autonomously and exploitation, even in a regulated sex industry (Weitzer, 2005; Day, 2010; Persak, 2013).
REFERENCES


Chapter 2


