Chapter 7

GENERAL DISCUSSION
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examined the nature of human trafficking in the Dutch legalized and regulated sex work industry and the approaches by the authorities to address the problem of trafficking. As of now, much is unknown about what methods are most effective in preventing trafficking, prosecuting offenders and protecting victims of human trafficking in the sex industry, and to what extent they are consistent with the nature of the problem. Therefore, the goal of this dissertation was to provide insight into the connection between the nature of human trafficking and the way in which it is investigated and addressed, primarily in the Netherlands. By studying the nature of human trafficking in the sex industry and the ways in which it is addressed by policy makers, law enforcement agencies and municipalities, this dissertation examined (1) the characteristics of human trafficking in the sex industry, (2) relationships between suspects and victims of human trafficking, (3) the criminal investigation of human trafficking, and (4) the meanings sex workers ascribe to anti-trafficking measures. These four main issues were addressed in the five empirical chapters of this dissertation.

This final chapter reflects on the research methods, the main findings, and theoretical implications. The chapter closes with implications for policy and practice.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In order to examine the exploitation of sex workers and the approaches of the authorities in the Dutch context of regulated sex work, two primary methods were used: the analysis of police files of human trafficking cases, and interviews with sex workers and government officials. Although there are advantages to these methods, there are also limitations.

First, several limitations come with the use of police data. One limitation is that police data by definition are incomplete and biased because they are collected for the purpose of criminal investigation and prosecution (cf. Soudijn, 2006). Also, situations of human trafficking that are not investigated by the police are not included in the data. For example, certain traffickers might stay out of sight because they outsmart the police, while others may come under scrutiny because of their clumsy or violent behaviour.

Nevertheless, data in police files from criminal investigations into human trafficking contain useful information about the hidden world of sex work and exploitation, as this dissertation demonstrates. The files consist of original (sometimes translated) wiretaps of both telephone and internet communication; transcripts of suspect interrogations; witness and victim statements; observation reports; reports of house searches; and financial information about suspects and victims of human trafficking. These data have the advantage that they reveal extensive information on the characteristics of sex workers, pimps and other people involved, on the way they operate, cooperate and interact with
General Discussion

each other, their backgrounds, their modus operandi, the world of sex work, interpersonal relationships, and flows of money. This information is gathered by the police without people involved knowing that they are followed or that their conversations are intercepted. This type of unobtrusive research material is difficult to obtain using other types of data or methods, or even from direct interviews with participants.

The data from police files were complemented with information collected by face-to-face interviews with sex workers and government officials. This made it possible to include the experiences and perspectives in the study, directly from the people involved. The selection of sex workers who were willing to cooperate in the study was possibly affected by a sample of interviewees who may have been opportunistic rather than representative (Sanders, O’Neill & Pitcher, 2009: 176). There is a possibility that, for example, by gaining access to sex workers via social workers, only sex workers who were in contact with aid agencies were included. In addition, there is a chance that only those who were willing or in a position to cooperate with the study were interviewed, and that the experiences of this group may be different from those not interviewed. By using different ways to contact and include a range of sex workers, this risk was limited as much as possible. We contacted sex workers both through aid agencies, and by approaching them ourselves at their workplace. Next to this, we approached sex workers in different cities, and both during daytime and at night.

Furthermore, sex workers who faced negative work advice or outcomes and subsequently disappeared or moved to other cities—the most severe consequence of anti-trafficking measures—were not included among the interviewed sex workers, despite attempts to find and include them. Interviewing this group may have yielded interesting insights. Future research could try to include this group of sex workers.

Another limitation is that the interviews with sex workers mainly centred around their experiences with the anti-trafficking measures. Given the main findings of this dissertation, it would also be interesting to speak with them about wider issues, such as their experiences with informal services and more thoroughly about relationships. Although some of the interviews touched on these issues, this was limited for reasons of demarcation of the study. Future research could use the findings of this dissertation to further explore these issues among sex workers.

Apart from further interviews with offenders and victims of human trafficking which could provide additional valuable information, participant-observation within informal networks or subcultures of people working and offering services in red-light districts would be a valuable contribution in future research.

Caution is warranted when generalizing the results from this dissertation to other groups or locations. This is because of the specific regulations in the Netherlands, the data that focused mainly on cases that had a link with Amsterdam, and the fact that the study covered the period 1998-2014 (with a focus on the period 2006-2010). Apart from this, the approach to use police files and interviews (including their limitations) may have influenced the results and conclusions of this dissertation. The main aim was to achieve
insight into the extent to which the ways human trafficking is tackled and how this fits the manifestation of the problem. However, data that could be collected in other ways may be missed or under-represented. It is methodologically important to reflect on what different outcomes could have come forward should other methods or data had been used. It could be possible, for example, that people not included in the data face a different kind of exploitation, face less or more autonomy, or have different views on or experiences with government actions. In addition, it is possible that using police files of cases linked to the city of Amsterdam under-exposes cases that have a more global reach and possibly show more aspects of organised crime. Also, the use of life histories, or participant observation (instead of single interviews) in which women are followed for a longer period of time and whereby a relation of trust could be developed, possibly could provide a more layered, multidimensional picture of the level of agency, or perhaps a more severe account of exploitation and of women’s needs and attitudes towards government actions. Moreover, it is known that self-representations can differ depending on the context (McConnell, 2011). It is conceivable that victims when talking to the police are more positive about their level of agency and are more reluctant to talk about the nature and downsides of their relationships. This also applies to interviews with researchers. It is conceivable, for example, that women emphasize their independency when talking to the police or to a researcher. Within relations of trust, possibly more severe levels of exploitation, or more appreciation of government action could come forward.

However, by combining different types of information (namely, police interrogations, wiretaps and interviews), and by systematically coding and analysing the data, this study was able to examine existing approaches and their connection to the specific nature of human trafficking in the Dutch sex industry.

**MAIN FINDINGS**

**Sex work and informal services**

The first aim of this dissertation was to examine the nature and characteristics of human trafficking. Chapter 2 therefore explored the role of informal economic activities in the everyday work of women who sell sex and how these activities affect the exploitation and the autonomy of sex workers.

The findings from chapter 2 revealed a wide range of informal activities surrounding the regulated sex industry affecting its working conditions. Examples are pimps and bodyguards who provided informal protection services, errand boys who take care of all kinds of informal services, drivers who transport sex workers, brothels that operate under the license of someone else than the real owner, and accountants and consultants who advise on how to bypass regulations and taxes. These activities enabled sex work and were characterized by the fact that they were not regulated or did not fulfil existing regulations. Such activities were, for example, not registered, or were performed without
the required licenses or permits, or did not comply with tax regulations. All in all, these activities constituted a lively informal economy.

I explored to what extent these informal activities influenced the working conditions of sex workers and how the informal services were related to exploitation and to the autonomy of sex workers. On the one hand, some aspects of these informal activities were related to the nature of the work and the needs of sex workers; for example, 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 actors.

On the other hand, there was a wide variety of people who attempted to profit from sex workers’ earnings, often by providing services in a coercive or exploitative manner. The empirical data showed that the involvement of sex workers with informal actors also entailed dependency and exploitation. On the basis of the 12 case studies it is evident that sex workers’ line of work is 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.

**Relationships between suspects and victims of human trafficking**

The findings from chapter 3 indicate that there often are intimate relationships between those who are seen as traffickers and victims in the police files. In all 12 cases there were examples of intimate relationships between suspects and victims, and in some cases suspects and victims lived together. These relationships display various characteristics of domestic violence such as intimidation, control and violence. Factors such as affection and attachment contribute to the persistence of these relationships.

Within the relationships, the men generally supervise women who sell sex. For example, they take them to and from work and arrange food and shopping for them. The men are often close by, which sometimes takes the form of controlling the woman’s behaviour. Apart from love and attachment, these relationships also often know intimidation and violence. For several reasons (fear, love, attachment or dependency) these relationships undergo difficult detachment processes (see also Helfferich et al., 2011). The relationships do not simply end, but often persist despite the occurrence of violence, control or intimidation, also women commonly do not file a report to the police. This corresponds to patterns of domestic violence, in which similar mechanisms are at work and where partners also do not split up easily.

Several factors make women who are seen as victims of human trafficking decline any help or interference from outside agents. It was found, for example, that women consider the deceptions, intimidation or the forms of coercion to be relationship problems, something they have to solve themselves. Other issues that play a role are: the attachment to their partner; the benefits of the relationship; the shared life; the idea that the situation is not that serious; or a feeling of gratitude towards their partner (who has helped her).
Also, violence and control may be played down, considered as something temporary, or seen as their particular way of interacting with each other. For those reasons, women do not always perceive themselves as victims. Moreover, it was found that the women do not want to subject their partner to a prison term. These factors discourage women from seeking outside help or filing a police report (see also Hester et al., 2000). These attitudes and coping mechanisms are comparable to those of victims of domestic violence.

**Criminal investigation of human trafficking**

In chapters 4 and 5 the criminal investigation of human trafficking was explored. The findings indicate that police teams investigating human trafficking face several challenges that arise from the features of the crime and from police organizational issues.

Firstly, there are the complex and ambivalent relationships that can exist between victims and offenders. In those relationships love, loyalty, intimidation and threats are intertwined. It is not always a matter of brute physical force providing obvious criminal evidence. Sometimes manipulation, intimidation and psychological pressure are the main means of exploitation, which can make it difficult for law enforcement to collect evidence. Often, as we have seen in chapter 3, complex relationships between victims and suspects persist after arrests have been made (or even after the conviction). This can make the interrogation of victims and witnesses and their collaboration with criminal justice difficult.

To collect information on exploitative relationships, wiretapping generally provides relevant information for the investigation. Intercepted conversations provide information about the relationship between the victim and the suspect. In human trafficking, dependency and exploitative relationships, ascendancy, coercion and deception play a role, so information about the nature of the relationship between the suspect and the victim is important. Over the phone, caresses and threats are made and phone calls can show the control that suspects exercise or show the way in which victims talk to other people about their situation. Therefore, the use of wiretapping plays an important role in collecting evidence into human trafficking. It is therefore widely used and plays an important role in trafficking cases.

Secondly, human trafficking is, unlike other forms of crime, not a single, static ‘event’, but much more a gradual process (David 2007: 2; ICMPD 2003: 87). It is therefore not always possible to identify a certain moment of exploitation and it is therefore difficult to prove something that evolves gradually. This makes the presence of relevant knowledge and expertise of law enforcement personnel very important. Particular knowledge and expertise on signalling human trafficking, on approaching victims and of the complex and broad legislation are important.

Thirdly, apart from being an international offence, human trafficking is also very much a local problem and embedded in local situations (see Van de Bunt & Kleemans, 2007 for a discussion of the local embeddedness of crime). The activities of sex workers and human traffickers are often concentrated within certain districts, neighbourhoods
and streets. In the studied criminal cases, victims of human trafficking worked in window prostitution in streets forming part of neighbourhoods, often in small-scale sex work areas. The women were often visible in or close to the street, and had contact with people in the street. This local character of human trafficking provides possibilities for involving the community police in the investigation.

Acknowledging these three points, police teams use several approaches to investigate human trafficking. Four different approaches are distinguished within the criminal investigation of human trafficking, each with its specific focus:

- **the “victim statement oriented” investigation**
- **the “public nuisance oriented” investigation**
- **the “organisation oriented” investigation**
- **the “offence oriented” investigation**.

First, the **victim statement** oriented investigation is primarily focused on getting reports from victims. The investigation teams in this case worked hard to win the confidence of the victims and get them to cooperate actively. This was done inter alia by giving the community police an active role in the investigation, because they had regular contacts with the women working in the red-light district.

Second, the **public nuisance** oriented investigation aims to end public nuisance and investigate human trafficking at the same time. Therefore, the police cooperated with the municipality by sharing information on persons, centres of nightlife, permits and criminal activities. The municipality had the power to revoke the permit for the suspects’ bar, as a result of which the meeting point of the human traffickers was curtailed.

Third, an **organisation** oriented investigation focuses on mapping out the whole criminal organisation and on the relations of and division of tasks within the group of suspects.

Fourth, the **offence** oriented investigation is distinguished that focuses on the ‘elements’ of human trafficking, such as using violence, arranging accommodation, giving up earnings, deception, duress, etc. The investigation team ‘stacked up’ the information gathered about identified suspects and their victims systematically on the basis of the different ‘elements’ of human trafficking. This is also called the ‘0+0+0+0=1 principle’ by the police.

**Meanings sex workers ascribe to anti-trafficking measures**

The fourth aim of this dissertation was to examine the meanings of anti-trafficking measures for sex workers. In chapter 6 I therefore explored sex workers’ experiences with a specific anti-trafficking measure: obligatory intake interviews. These are mandatory talks, or “intakes”, that sex workers have to undergo to assist the authorities (municipalities and police) in identifying signs of human trafficking. To understand the effectiveness of this measure, I studied how sex workers experience the measure. The perspective of symbolic interactionism was used to explore meanings sex workers assigned to the government’s
anti-trafficking initiatives and to their own situations. Symbolic interactionism argues
that the meaning that people assign to things, phenomena and events around them is
essential to understanding the people and their social reality. A symbolic interactionist
framework was used because it helps to clarify the relationship between the opinions,
ideas, motivations and feelings of people and their actions; rather than look for causes of
behaviour, it is useful in describing and clarifying how people act on the basis of the design
of their world, their reality (Wigboldus, 2002; Rijkeboer, 1989).

The findings in chapter 6 were based on interviews with 21 sex workers, which indicated
a variation of meanings that sex workers ascribed to their own situations. Several themes
were found that describe the meanings that their work and current life have for them.
These were: choice; a form of entrepreneurship; freedom; an improvement on earlier
situations; something they do not want to change; and as hard work. Women presented
themselves as entrepreneurs, and they emphasized their ability to make choices. They
also indicated that the situation they were in meant an improvement on earlier situations.
Some women reacted strongly against the involvement of pimps and boyfriends, while
others explained the role of pimps and boyfriends in terms of support or people who “can
be there for you.”

I also explored the meanings sex workers ascribe to initiatives by the authorities to
counter or signal human trafficking. The interviews indicated that sex workers interpreted
these anti-trafficking initiatives as support, but also as misguided attention; false intentions;
control; discrimination and work restrictions. While receiving adequate support (mostly
with every day problems) was experienced as a kind of respect, the ignoring of real problems
of sex workers and the focus on exploitation were perceived with distrust regarding the
actual intentions of the authorities. Within a symbolic interactionist perspective, these
meanings can clarify how and why people acted towards these initiatives, or towards the
authorities.

It is remarkable that several of the meanings sex workers ascribed to their work
and to the anti-trafficking initiatives did not match the meanings government officials
ascribed to sex workers’ situations and to the intentions that the authorities had with the
policy instrument. For the government, sex workers who depend on others or who do
not speak any English sound alarm bells. For sex workers, however, the help of others
means possibilities, action or change, getting away from an unwanted situation, and an
investment in the hope for more independency and better times in the end.

The meanings they ascribed to their work and to the anti-trafficking measures can
explain sex workers’ actions towards the initiatives of the authorities. They know the
focus of the authorities on pimps and boyfriends and know that the authorities can
interpret the presence of a pimp or boyfriend as exploitation, or at least associate these
men with dependency and possible exploitation. Furthermore, sex workers possibly
know the importance the government attaches to the independence of sex workers. The
findings in chapter 6 show that sex workers acted towards the anti-trafficking initiatives
by withholding information about pimps and boyfriends from representatives of the
government. Moreover, sex workers who were filtered out by the intakes mostly moved to other cities to work, and most sex workers did not make use of the assistance offered by the authorities. The abovementioned meanings by sex workers offer valuable explanations for these actions and attitudes.

In general, there seems to be a gap between the meanings of sex workers and that of the authorities as expressed in policy documents and in the implemented initiatives. The effects of this gap on the actions of sex workers was shown in practice by the way most women reacted to a negative recommendation (in Dutch, ‘een negatief werkadvies’) that may have been the result of identified signs of trafficking. As a result of this negative recommendation, they were restricted in their possibilities to work. The study found that most sex workers who encountered this negative vetting were angry and disappointed and mostly moved to other cities to work there.

**MAIN CONCLUSIONS**

The overall question of this dissertation was to explore the nature of human trafficking in the Dutch sex industry and how this connects to the way human trafficking is addressed. The findings in the five chapters of this dissertation lead to two main conclusions regarding this central question.

1. **The nature of human trafficking: informal services and intimate relationships**

This dissertation demonstrated that, to understand human trafficking’s nature we must take informal service providers into account and the informal activities surrounding the sex industry affecting its working conditions. Sex workers use the informal services of others to help or support them. These include pimps and bodyguards providing work and protection, drivers, brothels operating with the use of straw men, and advisors on bypassing regulations and taxes. These informal services are related to the nature of the work and are useful for sex workers who want to get access to work or housing, and who attach great value to anonymity. The dissertation also demonstrated that the involvement of sex workers with informal players can entail dependency and exploitation. These people can create a network of monitoring and control around the work and the movements of sex workers, and profit from their earnings in an exploitative way.

A second aspect of the nature of human trafficking relates to intimate relationships that often exist between those who are viewed as traffickers and victims. The mechanisms within these relationships resemble those in relationships involving domestic violence. Trafficking suspects and victims often live together and in those relationships loyalty, dependency, and intimidation are intertwined. In these relationships partners do not split up easily and women may not want help or interference from outside. They consider deception, intimidation or forms of coercion to be relationship problems, something
they have to solve themselves. Moreover, attachment to their partner, the benefits of the relationship, or a feeling of gratitude towards the partner (who has helped her) play a role. Women do not necessarily perceive themselves as victims or do not want their partner to go to prison, which prevents them from calling in help from outside or from filing a report with the police.

The network of informal services as well as the intimate relationships can gradually lead to exploitation. This supports the image of human trafficking as a gradual process (David 2007: 2; ICMPD 2003: 87). As a consequence, it is not always possible to identify a situation of human trafficking at a certain moment in time because it is difficult to identify or label something that evolves gradually. Further, the informal and relational character of human trafficking demonstrates that human trafficking is also very much a local problem and embedded in local situations. Exploitation can take place in (informal) work relationships that are concentrated in small sex work areas. Exploitation also can take place within personal intimate relationships, such as in victims’ and suspects’ private homes. Contrary to the image of human trafficking as a purely transnational phenomenon, this dissertation demonstrated the importance of acknowledging the local embeddedness and the local aspects of the phenomenon.

2. Tackling human trafficking: policy versus reality

I also examined the way human trafficking in the sex industry is addressed by the authorities and how this connects to the nature of human trafficking. It was found that there are several differences in the way human trafficking is pictured in policy papers versus the way the phenomenon occurs in practice. In fact, we can speak of a gap between a so-called policy reality regarding human trafficking and that of a certain sex work reality. Sex workers attach different meanings to several features of human trafficking. Service providers who can be responsible for exploitation can also offer assistance. Coercive partners or relationships also entail belonging, while prosecution, prevention and protection via the authorities’ initiatives can mean control and work restrictions for sex workers.

Regarding the connection between the nature of human trafficking and the criminal investigation by the police, the findings indicate that these are partly addressed or acknowledged in the (investigative) strategies of the police and the municipalities. The local embeddedness would suggest to involve local actors for prevention, identification and protection. Cases where the local community police is involved indeed seem to have a positive outcome for the investigative process and seem to better meet the needs of victims (as we have seen for example in the victim statement oriented investigation). The service providers that are often the central suspects in the human trafficking cases, form an example of how human trafficking is locally embedded in a subculture of informal services within the red-light district. Involving the local community police could also
contribute to gather knowledge about these players and about potential arrangements that could lead to exploitation.

Where travels or ‘entrance’ for EU citizens are not complicated barriers to take, the tight housing market and the specific rules and requirements and registrations for sex workers can be. Service providers offer assistance in overcoming these barriers. These players however do not seem to face much government attention before they appear as suspects in the criminal cases. Then, the gradual nature would suggest to arrange more long-term contacts with possible victims to be able to encounter, recognize or determine exploitation. Up to now this is not integrated in the current system. Where the relational nature of human trafficking is a challenge for law enforcement, wire taps offer law enforcement insights into exploitative relationships.

In sum, this dissertation indicates that in addressing and investigating human trafficking, acknowledging the meanings, needs and relationships of victims and sex workers it is not a matter of course yet. However, more than is reflected in the policy notes, individual police officers investigating human trafficking dive into the world of sex work. They interpret their phone conversations and talk to the women about their situation. These police officers therefore often do have an eye for the meanings and needs of sex workers, but their instruments and options (prosecution of traffickers) are not always in the interest of victims. The goal of criminal investigation being the prosecution of suspects, is not always what victims want. Like with domestic violence, victims often want to be involved in ending exploitation, but not in the prosecutions of their partners. This implicates that it might be a good idea to start looking at additional options that incorporate sex workers’ interests and that could increase their cooperation.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

These findings add to our understanding of human trafficking and its manifestations, to the search for effective solutions, and inform theoretical discussions, as follows.

SEX WORK REALITIES

Our findings indicate that the mediation by third parties, and in some cases exploitation by them, can be part of sex work. At the same time, the same aspects that are sometimes exploitative (ie. third party interference or relationships), can also enable sex workers and can be helpful, or offer a way to survive economically or emotionally. These insights into sex work realities offer several new leads about how to think of the nature of human trafficking, about sex workers’ needs, and the connection between trafficking and the way it and workers’ needs are addressed. Anthropological, sociological and philosophical concepts offer possibilities to further interpret the overall conclusions of this dissertation.
Agency

A first concept is that of agency. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own choices, based on their own free will. In studies of sex work and human trafficking this concept is often used (Agustín, 2003; Weitzer, 2007; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2008; Skilbrei & Tveit, 2008; Oude Breuil et al., 2011; Vanwesenbeeck, 2011; Bottenberg & Janssen, 2012; Oude Breuil & Siegel, 2012; Marcus et al., 2014, 2016). While policy papers on the regulation of sex work and on addressing human trafficking centre around the idea that human trafficking is a phenomenon that limits free choices, several scholars nevertheless emphasize the agency of sex workers and of people experiencing exploitation (Agustín, 2003; Oude Breuil & Siegel, 2012). Our findings indicate how both agency and autonomy can go hand in hand with exploitation, that human trafficking can be embedded in the engagement of third parties for informal services and in intimate relationships between pimps and sex workers. In these intimate and work relationships, women are not so much passive victims without will, but rather active agents organising their work or migration, engaging and negotiating informal business relationships, as well as engaging and negotiating intimate relationships with people in their social circles. While we encountered ways in which this agency was affected, it also was recognized that there was a ‘continuum of agency’, as described by other scholars (Brents & Hausbeck, 2001; Sanders et al., 2009; Bettio & Nandi, 2010; Bungay, 2011; Weitzer, 2012, 2014; Bettio et al., 2013, Marcus et al., 2014). Sex workers in their work often face both freedom of choice as well as coercion and exploitation. Several ways by which they constantly negotiate their position on this continuum have been noted in this dissertation.

The negotiation of their working conditions within the circumstances and in the circle of people around them brings us to the influence of ‘structure’. Apart from their own will, certain structures or ‘social locations’ of the sex industry can influence sex workers’ actions; for example, not to engage in the prosecution of their exploiters, or not to use the assistance of the authorities. In sociological theories ‘structure’ often refers to factors that limit or influence the opportunities that individuals have. Recently, agency and structure have not been used as contrary notions, but rather have been combined in holistic approaches of reality. These approaches include both agency (action based on reason, emotions, beliefs and attitudes) as structures (ie. sets of social relationships, class, gender, subculture, etc). An example is the study of Bottenberg and Janssen (2012) who looked at both agency and power structures within the context of the Chinese beauty branch in the Netherlands. They conclude that it is essential to not only look at the lived experiences of (in their study) migrants, but also to the power structures within which they have to manoeuvre, such as family values, kinship networks and relationships (Bottenberg & Janssen, 2012: 58). A concept that integrates both agency and structure is that of ‘belonging’.

Belonging

The concept of belonging, or social identity, is ‘a central aspect of how we define who we are’ (Marsh, Bradley, Love, Alexander & Norham, 2007: 4). This concept can be used to
further interpret and explain the findings on the meanings sex workers ascribe to themselves and to the world around them. Belonging has to do with “self-image” and/or “common-image”, with what differentiates me vis-à-vis “others” (Golubović, 2011). The findings in chapter 6 illustrate the self-image of sex workers, who identify themselves as ‘choosing entrepreneurs’. The concept of belonging explains the importance of belonging for individuals and how this determines how we act (or not act). In a study by Marsh et al. (2007), several social identities are identified that are useful in interpreting the role of belonging for our understanding of sex work realities and of sex workers’ attitudes towards government policies. These social identities in which people most frequently anchor their sense of belonging are: family, friendships, lifestyle choices, nationality, and professional identity. These social identities shape the social capital – the social status, shared values, and cultural practices – that go with it (Marsh et al., 2007: 5).

For the sex workers and pimps (or traffickers) it can be expected that their partners are their “family”. Their co-workers tend to shape the social circle from which they choose their friends. Working in the sex industry with its night-time hours creates certain lifestyle choices that have to do with physical appearance and the nightlife scene. One’s nationality also shapes identity. Finally, their professional identity as sex worker is important, as it is for pimps. Our findings showed how sex workers emphasized their identities as entrepreneurs with certain qualities and skills, and in some cases as successful migrants or mothers. It is all these social identities that shape how people give meaning to their lives, to the choices they make and to their beliefs, values, or practices (Marsh et al., 2007: 7).

In order to understand sex workers’ perceptions and actions regarding work, exploitation and government initiatives, we have to take these social identities into account. These beliefs and values can be made explicit, but they can also be embedded in the activities and practices that characterise the group. It is these networks of which they are part, or belong to, that shape their ideas about what is right (such as paying for protection), what is beautiful (e.g. tattoos and enlarged breasts), what is customary (e.g. having a pimp), and what is status-enhancing (such as working for a certain pimp).

Moreover, making the decision to leave a group involves crossing the ‘gulf’ of belonging and not belonging, and such an act may involve social sanctions (Marsh et al., 2007: 11). This is significant because it enables us to consider the importance of belonging to a certain group by the severity of the social alienation involved in leaving, for example, a marriage/relationship/pimp, a group of friends or co-workers. This helps explain the findings on relationships and arrangements with pimps or other service providers which may be violent or exploitative but are nevertheless not ended. Ending them would cause women to sacrifice certain social identities, such as that of partner, friend, family member or business partner.

Reciprocity
To further understand values regarding exchange within this subculture of sex work, the concept of reciprocity provides possibilities for interpretation.
In the previous chapter of this dissertation I explored sex workers’ meanings using the methodology of symbolic interactionism. To further interpret these meanings the concept of reciprocity offers a useful tool. Exploitation is in fact the core of human trafficking and is about seemingly uneven or disproportionate ways of profiting from other people’s earnings. In cultural anthropology, reciprocity refers to norms about what to expect in return for certain gifts, help or services and when this is expected (in the short or long term). When the exchange is delayed, it creates both a relationship as well as an obligation for a return (i.e. debt). Anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1947), argued that human relationships are in part based on the norm of reciprocity (see also Lindahl & Van Klink, 2014; Pessers, 2014). Sahlins (1972) suggested how the degree of social distance affects the kind of reciprocity. His classification suggests the principle that the closer the social relationship, the less is expected in return and the more something in return can be delayed. Here, the findings on the relationships between traffickers and sex workers are significant. While for the authorities living off or profiting from sex workers’ earnings is human trafficking, sex workers can have different perspectives based on their norms of reciprocity.81

Staring (2012b) also uses the concept of reciprocity to clearly illustrate the considerations, choices and actions of illegal migrants regarding employers, smugglers and the authorities. His enlightening descriptions of the expectations of illegal aliens regarding reciprocity (what to expect in return for provided services) help understand seemingly unbalanced arrangements of exchange. He describes how ideas, or norms of reciprocity, are often dominated by risk aversion, by looking for ways to survive, and by norms that are present in one’s social group (Staring, 2012; Scott, 1976). Staring documents how illegal immigrants, in the context of their aspirations, sometimes (temporarily) settle for substandard payments, poor working conditions or poor housing conditions. When exchanges or exchange relationships are for them perceived as somewhat balanced in regard to their present situation or their future, they will not take action to report employers to the police (Staring, 2012b). My findings support this idea that sometimes unbalanced arrangements of exchange are accepted by sex workers based on certain meanings these arrangements have for them. For example, it is seen as something normal, as an improvement of an earlier situation, as a possibility to work abroad, to support family, as a lack of perceived other options, as risk aversion, or in the light of an intimate relationship.

Several findings and examples from previous chapters of this dissertation illustrate how norms of reciprocity influence sex workers’ expectations about acceptable arrangements. For example, Ruxandra in chapter 2 stayed with her pimp because she could easily

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81 Pesser (2014: 154) documents how reciprocity as a way of human interaction within a homogeneous group (with moral rights and duties to give, receive and return), can become ‘an oppressing system which leaves little room for freedom and for escaping from this – sometimes exhausting – chain of duties’.
withhold money from him and because she was better off with him than with a smarter, more violent pimp. Anoeska perceived paying a pimp as offering possibilities, while at the same time avoiding the risk of having to go back to Hungary if she did not agree with splitting her earnings. According to her statement to the police, working for herself would include the risk of getting on the wrong side of her pimp, which was a reason to leave things as they were.

Contrary to policy realities which attempt to eradicate exploitation, there are sex work realities where other things are more important and some degree of exploitation sometimes is accepted (to achieve other goals). Hiah & Staring (2016) address the consequences of this difference in meanings in their article about labour exploitation. They state that an overemphasis on the legal definitions of ‘exploitation’ distances the law from the people it addresses because it reduces certain groups to offenders and others to victims, ‘while in practice people operate in situations where not only formal rules, but also informal rules and culturally shared expectations about justice and reciprocity exist’ (Hiah & Staring, 2016: 98).

**POLICY REALITIES**

**Normalizing versus restricting sex work**

Apart from the issues of agency, belonging and reciprocity that are part of sex work realities, there is a certain policy reality in which other things are central. When it comes to addressing human trafficking in the sex industry, the policies on both sex work and on human trafficking are relevant. Within both policy agendas there are several assumptions about the nature of the problem and about appropriate solutions and approaches.

The first assumption in the government response to human trafficking is that, by legalizing and regulating sex work, its workers and their positions are protected and the sector will be freed from marginal elements because it can be more easily controlled. Moreover, human trafficking is characterized in policy notes as: forced and involuntary sex work; as a brutal crime; as a serious form of organised crime; as modern slavery; as a serious violation of human dignity; as a serious violation of the physical and mental integrity of victims; and as a violation of fundamental human rights (Aanwijzing Mensenhandel, 2013). This image of the nature of human trafficking shapes the formulated policies, solutions and regulations, as well as the way possible victims are treated. In the approaches to tackle human trafficking there is a strong focus on criminal prosecution, an increase of stricter penalties, on barriers to prevent human trafficking, and on the protection of victims. Recently, regarding the way human trafficking is addressed, the focus increased on filtering out vulnerable, non-independent and less self-reliant sex workers.

While the sex work policy aims to normalize sex work as work, the policy on human trafficking further regulates the scene by introducing special rules for sex workers and other people and companies involved in the industry (see also Outshoorn, 2012). While

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82 Retrieved April 2016 from https://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/mensenhandel/@86278/aanwijzing-1/
the goal of the sex work policy is to treat sex work as another type of work, in which sex workers have to register their business and pay taxes as other entrepreneurs do, brothel owners and sex workers face increasingly stricter requirements regarding their person and business. As part of the agenda to prevent or prosecute human trafficking, it is proposed to raise the minimum age for sex work to 21 and enforcement teams check the women while at work. While sex workers greatly value anonymity for reasons of stigma and negative consequences that are involved with openness about working in the industry, in several cities registration and mandatory intakes were introduced. These initiatives require openness about and sharing of personal information. Furthermore, these intakes are only introduced for sex workers, not for other (low skilled) jobs that are known for their risk of exploitation (for example, in the agricultural sector) and the involvement of migrants. In other words, only sex workers face the special requirements regarding language skills and self-reliance.

Although the goal of the sex work policy was to decriminalize sex work, recent bills are discussed in parliament in which clients who visit sex workers that turn out to be exploited are criminalized. Further, several initiatives were introduced to improve the identification of human trafficking, which focused on the distinction between independent (acceptable) sex work and assisted, exploitative or forced (unacceptable) forms of sex work. While this distinction is centred around the independence of the sex worker, our findings indicate that sex workers also value the assistance of third parties, who facilitate their work, housing, or transport.

While part of the criminal investigation of human trafficking aims to gain the cooperation of victims, we have seen how victims can be engaged in difficult or ambiguous relationships or migration trajectories; these situations affect the willingness by sex workers to cooperate in the prosecution of those who enable their travel and work, or those who may also be their partners—or at least providers of intimacy, protection and belonging.

Chapter 6 showed how the introduction of ‘the negative work advice’, an instrument to restrict possible victims from doing sex work, is aimed at clearing the sex industry of vulnerable women. Reactions by sex workers, however, showed that this often does not match with their idea of a solution to their complex situations.

**Different meanings**

This dissertation has shown that human trafficking features as presented in policy notes, such as forced and involuntary sex work, as brutal and organised international crime, as slavery, a violation of human dignity and of fundamental human rights, can differ from

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the more complex and ambiguous informal and intimate relationships that were found in practice. The empirical data showed how informal activities and intimate relationships can lead to situations of human trafficking. Although these services could be offered in an organised way, it is often interpersonal (work) relations, an absence of such organisation concerning informal services, and more local and gradual features that characterize human trafficking.

The dissertation also illustrated how the authorities have initiated more anti-trafficking regulations and measures to prevent human trafficking and to protect people from exploitation. Where pimps and boyfriends are seen as indicators for non-independent sex work, for sex workers these people also offer possibilities. The government’s intentions to offer help and protection, however, can mean control, discrimination and work restrictions for sex workers. Understandably the anti-trafficking policy is focused on ending situations of exploitation, on the prosecution of traffickers and on protecting and assisting vulnerable sex workers. However, the findings indicate that these are not always the solutions that are sought by exploited sex workers, suggesting a disjuncture between policy on the one hand and sex work realities on the other. The explanation of the different meanings that are identified in this dissertation makes clear that the way human trafficking is addressed does not connect well to its nature, and it provides answers for the questions of why this crime is not always reported and why women do not use assistance.

Where (exploitative) informal economic activities provide services and anonymity to sex workers, and where relationships provide intimacy, belonging and support, the gradual emergence of exploitation is not so simple to address.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This dissertation showed that the way human trafficking is addressed does not always match with the nature of the problem and with the perspective of the people who are seen as victims. Insights from this dissertation on the nature of human trafficking offer an empirical basis that can be used to better match policy and solutions to the problem and to the situations of sex workers.

The insights into the informal services that facilitate sex work can contribute to the search for improvements in the working conditions of women who sell sex. The services of pimps and other informal players are barely recognized within the current Dutch policy on the sex industry. The regulations are mainly focused on brothel owners and on sex workers themselves, and do not take account of the roles of pimps and other service providers. Only recently has there been a call in the Dutch parliament for more attention to those third parties.\textsuperscript{85} Also, a formal alternative for the offered services concerning the sex industry is often not available. The agreements sex workers make with informal service providers are rarely recognized within the current Dutch policy on the sex industry.

\textsuperscript{85} Kamerstukken II (Parliamentary Proceedings Second Chamber) 2015-2016, 33885, no. 9.
providers, and the working conditions that are a result of this, deserve more attention from the authorities, not by criminalizing them, but by acknowledging sex workers’ needs for these services and for the importance of anonymity. It is conceivable, for example, to look for more formal alternatives for services that enable sex work. For example, support agencies for sex workers could provide reliable services. Like other labour migrants who use employment agencies, these services could also be welcomed, especially by migrant sex workers. When these kind of agencies are part of the formal economy, they can be inspected and controlled by the authorities. An example is at Spot 46 in The Hague, an information centre for sex workers that offers contact with reliable accountants and legal advisers for sex workers.

The findings in this dissertation on the relational nature of trafficking and the parallels with domestic violence provide knowledge to help understand the various manifestations of human trafficking and the positions and attitudes of victims. The insights on ambivalent relationships and the context of an intimate relationship and shared household provides a more nuanced picture than that of forced victims, on the one hand, and independent sex workers on the other. This knowledge can explain victims’ attitudes towards cooperating with a criminal investigation and can therefore assist prosecutorial decision-making. The parallels with domestic violence and coercive control offer possibilities to look for the best practices in the way these issues could be addressed.

Although the Dutch policy does have an approach on so-called loverboys, where the relational aspect does play a role, this policy is focused on girls or minors, and in part on youth. The relationships that were found in the data occur in different age groups but were found mostly among adults. The image of the victim of a loverboy is that of a girl who started doing sex work after the relationship developed. This means that the image and the policy on loverboys does not cover the relational aspects of human trafficking. Therefore, I would argue that it is necessary to speak of the relational aspect of human trafficking. In the data we saw, for example, a woman (who was in her late twenties) encouraged by her husband (who was in his thirties) to work as a sex worker as much as possible, while he used violence against her and their child. This example does not fit into the image of the loverboy, but it does illustrate the core issues of the relational aspects of human trafficking, namely the attachment to the suspect through a relationship (and in this case also a child). It would be an improvement if, in practice, there were initiatives that could help people who face exploitation within relationships. Initiatives and mechanisms that are comparable to those of domestic violence might be adapted and applied to this target group.

While there are criticisms of policy, at the same time the Dutch policy on legalizing sex work offers the best options to improve the labour rights of sex workers. Given that there is a lot of attention on human trafficking, it is important to focus all efforts on the appropriate issues that take sex workers’ meanings into account. Otherwise the risk of collateral damage of anti-trafficking policy does more harm than good for sex workers, whose work is already difficult.
REFERENCES

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