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Nonrecognition as violence: The stakes of abolitionist agendas and the invisibilization of sexual labor in Chile

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Abstract

Sexual labor in Chile remains criminalized despite organized sex workers' demands for recognition. Drawing on interviews with autonomous sex workers, advocacy groups, and feminist debates on sex work, this article argues that the Chilean state's abolitionist agenda is the primary cause of the material and symbolic precarity experienced by sex workers. While sex workers view their labor as a means of economic empowerment and as offering better conditions than other informal jobs, its invisibilization systematically exposes them to different forms of violence. Drawing on ethnographic research and interviews with the sex workers' union, the article examines how nonrecognition operates as violence, tracing the links between the absence of a regulatory framework and the multiple forms of violence that sex workers experience in their everyday lives. Uncovering the material and symbolic consequences of the state's abolitionist approach illustrates that recognition is not merely a labor rights issue but a crucial intervention against cultural and structural violence. By demonstrating how legal and symbolic nonrecognition operates as a mechanism of marginalization and oppression, the article underscores the need for regulation and shifts responsibility onto the state. Grounding the concept in the lived experiences of sex workers, the article illustrates the inseparability of recognition from economic redistribution, showing how its absence leads to material precarity. It contends that legal and social recognition would fundamentally enhance the lives of sex workers by ensuring safer working conditions, securing better

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earnings, and challenging stigma to foster cultural transformation toward building a more inclusive society.

Keywords
Sexual labor, abolitionism, violence, recognition, precarity

Introduction

The prevalence of abolitionist agendas—which conceive sexual labor as an inherently degrading occupation and sex workers as victims in need of rescue—has significantly contributed to the violence that sex workers face in Chile and throughout Latin America (Doezema, 1998, 2010; Lamas, 2017; Tarantino, 2021; Williams, 2016). Abolitionist discourses deny sex workers their right to choose sexual labor as their occupation, based on a preconceived understanding of sex work solely as exploitation, which allows men to exert power over women (Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997; MacKinnon, 1987, 1991). In Chile, the absence of regulations recognizing sex workers and safeguarding their rights exposes them to structural, symbolic, and direct violence across different sectors of the sexual markets (Fundación Margen, 2020; Ortiz, 2019, 2025; RedTraSex, 2017). Nonrecognition hinders sex workers from paying taxes and accessing social protections available to other workers, such as housing subsidies, childcare, and retirement benefits. It reinforces the stigma attached to their occupation, which makes sex workers face discriminatory attitudes from peers, partners, family members, and institutions. Such stigma fuels discrimination, can incite violence, and may be used by aggressors to justify violence (Fundación Margen, 2020, 2020; Ortiz, 2025; RedTraSex, 2017). Most importantly, the illegal status of sexual labor puts sex workers at risk of institutional violence, enabling law enforcement to exercise unchecked authority in a society where accountability for their actions is not consistently upheld and public trust in police institutions has rapidly declined since the 2019 social revolts (Aguilera, 2020; Amnesty International, 2020; Carter, 2019).

Sex workers negotiate their relationships with clients and experience the embodied aspects of their labor in various ways. In Chile, sexual services are provided in a range of settings and under different conditions: public spaces, online platforms, or concealed behind a legitimate business, ranging from coffee shops to beer gardens and massage parlors. However, abolitionist views assume that sex work is solely exploitation, disregarding the various forms that sexualized services can take within the sexual market and the meanings assigned by workers to their occupation.[1] According to the sex workers' union, their most significant challenge is police harassment and institutional violence, a vulnerability exacerbated for immigrant sex workers, who endure racialized exclusions and abuse from police officers under an anti-trafficking legislation (RedTraSex, 2014, 2017). Although independent sex work and trafficking are fundamentally different, the impact of international agencies, institutions, and advocacy organizations in the Latin American region often treats sex trafficking as a singular, interconnected issue with

detrimental effects on all sex workers, intensifying discrimination and opening opportunities for authorities and criminal organizations to infringe upon sex workers' rights (Doezema, 1998, 2010; Lamas, 2014, 2017; Tarantino, 2021; Williams, 2016).

Organized sex workers have long advocated for their right to provide services in safe, dignified conditions, free from police harassment and extortion. *Fundación Margen*—an NGO linked to the sex workers' union—and allied organizations have fought for decades for the recognition of sexual labor and the most fundamental rights of sex workers. Despite the harmful consequences of nonrecognition, there has been insufficient attention to the violations of sex workers' human rights, aside from research conducted by the sex workers themselves, which remains largely unknown to academic institutions and society at large. Further, the state continues to overlook the various forms of violence that sex workers continuously face. When abuse occurs, most cases go unreported due to fear of repercussions (Fundación Margen, personal communication, 2020). As sex workers remain marginalized, institutions and feminist organizations are not held accountable for their exclusion or the violence sex workers face as a result of this dismissal.

Organized sex workers remain isolated. Their demands have not been amplified by larger feminist organizations, which have gained substantial power and public visibility in the last decade (DW, 2018; El País, 2018; Zerán, 2018). While feminist movements have strongly advocated for reproductive rights and the elimination of all forms of violence against women, they have not publicly supported the claims of sex workers, even though institutional and gender violence is a constant threat to them, both cisgender and transgender women. Different organizations representing specific interests do not collaborate enough in supporting each other, which underlines the difficulties in fostering solidarity among different social movements (Fundación Margen, personal communication, 2020).

Recognition, stigma, and violence

This article explores the implications of denying legal and symbolic recognition to sex workers, focusing on the various forms of violence that result from the criminalization of spaces for the consumption of sexual services. Organized sex workers' demands for social protections and the right to work in safe conditions align with discussions in feminist and political philosophy about the importance of a politics of recognition for the social viability of non-conforming subjects, those whose gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, or other aspects of their social identity fall outside of the socially constructed norms and expectations. Since social norms dictate which lives are deemed valuable and which are seen as disposable, non-conforming subjects exist outside socially accepted categories, making them vulnerable to precarity. Thus, recognition is crucial for the survival of gender, sexual, and racial minorities, as being recognized can be the difference between life and death for them (Butler, 1990; 2009a; 2009b).

Understanding the harmful consequences of sex work's criminalization underscores the urgency of recognizing sexual labor as work—an essential claim of organized sex workers that resonates with discussions on the link between struggles for redistribution and struggles for recognition (Butler and Athanasiou, 2015; Honneth and Fraser, 2004).

The multiple forms of violence that sex workers endure in their everyday lives—structural, symbolic, institutional, and sexual—illustrate what authors have described as the entanglement of everyday, structural, and normalized violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). The systematic denial of rights that sex workers face constitutes an example of structural violence: the product of economic, political, medical, institutional, and legal systems that exert a disproportionately negative impact on excluded groups and communities (Ibid.). This structural dimension is sustained and normalized through symbolic violence, which, as Bourdieu claims, is an invisible form of violence that operates through misrecognition, recognition, or mobilizing feelings in response to cultural norms and social expectations, particularly around gender and sexuality (2009, pp. 1–2).

In addition, sex workers experience institutional violence, understood as the violence exercised by state agents—particularly the police—through practices of harassment, arbitrary detention, extortion, and coercion (Fundación Margen, 2021; RedTraSex, 2017). Institutional violence is not only systematic, but also permitted and facilitated by social institutions with explicit rules and formal status within a culture, like the police force (Curtin and Litke, 1999). For sex workers, it is closely linked to sexual violence, manifested as acts of harassment, abuse, and rape that are frequently perpetrated by the very authorities tasked with guaranteeing protection. This constant abuse by police is facilitated by the invisibilization of sexual labor, which renders sex workers unable to report crimes or access justice without exposing themselves to further stigma, criminalization, or retaliation (Fundación Margen, 2020, 2021; RedTraSex, 2017).

Since the 1990s, Chile has experienced a visible increase in South–South migration, with flows mainly from Latin American countries. Migration policy has been shaped by bordering practices that do not simply regulate mobility but actively produce precarious, racialized, and subordinated workers within local labor markets (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Stefoni et al., 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Scholars have emphasized how these migration processes are deeply gendered, marked by the feminization of migration flows and the production of precarized workers, concentrating immigrant women in sectors such as domestic work, caregiving, and sex work (Acosta, 2011; Arriagada and Moreno, 2011; Carrère and Carrère, 2015; Stefoni, 2004). Research has also highlighted how racism and sexism intersect to shape the everyday experiences of migrants, situating them in subordinate positions within Chile's labor markets and public spaces (Carrère and Carrère, 2015, 2021; Tijoux and Palominos, 2015). Therefore, the violence experienced by migrant sex workers should be understood from an intersectional perspective, that is, as shaped by the interlacing of multiple exclusions—class, race, gender, and nationality—that co-produce vulnerability and inequality (Crenshaw, 1989). However, this article focuses specifically on the consequences of the denial of recognition and the invisibilization of sex work. To fully understand the exclusions that sex workers experience in Chile, we must consider racism and other axes of exclusion, but those dimensions have been addressed elsewhere.

Violence in all its forms results from nonrecognition, stigma, and legal exclusion. Drawing from Honneth's theory of recognition, disrespect—the denial of sex workers' dignity and rights—produces social invisibility and moral injury that can lead to the

collapse of individual identity (1995, pp. 131–132). As Goffman notes, stigma marks certain groups as "tainted" or "discounted," reducing them from ordinary individuals to those conceived as less than fully human (1963, p. 3). This social devaluation is central to understanding how sex workers are excluded from recognition and subjected to intersecting forms of violence. By exposing the effects of Chile's abolitionist agenda, this article emphasizes the urgency of sex workers' demands. Furthermore, revealing the invisibilized labor conditions—challenged by nonrecognition rather than the nature of sex work itself—underscores the state and society's obligation to sex workers. By foregrounding the links between nonrecognition and violence, this article shows the urgent need for legal and social protections that guarantee sex workers' rights, supporting their demand for the recognition and regulation of adult and autonomous sexual labor.

Methodology

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted in Santiago's coffee shops between 2015 and 2019 and follow-up interviews with the leaders of *Fundación Margen*—an NGO advocating for the rights of sex workers—between 2020 and 2023. In the more sexualized coffee shops of Santiago's historic center, I first met a business owner through a family connection, who introduced me to her employees. Using snowball sampling methods, I recruited new informants in neighboring cafes and followed workers after they opened their own business in a nearby commercial arcade. Everyone's participation was voluntary, and I assured them of confidentiality. I contacted the NGO through public channels and arranged meetings with its directors, Herminda González and Nancy Gutiérrez, while working on my doctoral dissertation. I have kept their names, as they are public figures, do not exercise sex work nowadays, and have chosen to be named. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I started participating in their fundraising events, as the crisis had a significant impact on sex workers. Over time, after building rapport, I started participating in social gatherings, seminars, and workshops. When invited to speak about sexual labor in academic spaces, I have included organized sex workers in these venues.

Fundación Margen has closely collaborated with primarily cisgender female workers, particularly those on the streets, prioritizing their vulnerability; however, they also support women working indoors. Its founders are in their early sixties, while their closest collaborators are significantly younger, ranging from their late twenties to forties. Together, they conduct fieldwork weekly, both during the day and at night, distributing information and materials to prevent sexually transmitted infections (hereafter, STIs), providing emotional support, and, sometimes, offering hot chocolate, coffee, and sweets to help working women through the cold nights. Without state support, they raise funds and organize workshops, celebrations, and educational programs to benefit their community and raise awareness of their right to work in safe and dignified conditions. The organization actively presents the demands of sex workers and advocates for their rights within governmental institutions and international agencies. Through their activism, they possess the most knowledge about the labor conditions of sex workers in both indoor spaces and on the streets, along with insights into the personal lives of the workers.

My approach is grounded in feminist debates on embodied ethnography and situated knowledge (Dashlberg, 2021; Haraway, 1988; Tantia, 2021). Rather than aspiring to neutrality, I acknowledge how my position—as a middle-class, cisgender Chilean woman returning from years abroad—shaped access, interactions, and interpretations (Alcoff, 1998). Building rapport required navigating class, gender, and racial differences, and my fieldnotes reflect an evolution from feeling out of place to being welcomed into social and work-related spaces. This reflexivity is central to avoiding objectification and recognizing knowledge as co-constructed between researcher and participants.

During fieldwork, I spent considerable time in coffee shops, engaging in daily activities with autonomous sex workers and business managers. This endeavor involved a wide range of research techniques, from "being there" as a silent witness to integrating diverse activities with different degrees of participation (Guber, 2001). Participating in social gatherings and family celebrations allowed me to access the often-invisible life within coffee shops, the labor conditions, and the experiences of sexual labor as described by sex workers themselves. Due to the nature of workspaces—hegemonic heterosexual spaces—this study focuses on cisgender women and cisgender male clients in heterosexual settings, which coincides with the organizing priorities of *Fundación Margen*. As I argue elsewhere (2025), sex work in Chile, as in other countries throughout Latin America, takes diverse forms and is carried out under radically different conditions; therefore, it is not possible to generalize the experiences of coffee shop workers to all modalities of sexual labor. The exclusions faced by cis female workers differ from those experienced by transgender sex workers, especially in a highly stratified and segregated sexual market. While men and trans women work in other niches—such as street sex work, saunas, escort services, and underground brothels—they are not present in Santiago's coffee shops, which function as spaces for the consumption of exclusively heterosexual sex. For this reason, male and transgender sex workers' accounts are not included in this study.

As a reflection of these exclusionary processes, the coffee shops where I conducted fieldwork were also segregated by nationality. Chilean business owners often refuse to hire migrant workers, especially those racialized in a context marked by racism and transnational inequalities. These dynamics explain the exclusion of migrant women from Santiago's coffee shops, where Chilean owners often avoided hiring foreign workers, and contextualize the racialized segmentation I observed in the city's sexual markets.

My initial access—facilitated by Chilean business owners and workers who opened their doors to me and introduced me to other employees—also shaped the composition of my sample: most of my interlocutors were Chilean cisgender women, while migrant workers were largely absent from the coffee shops I frequented. The reliance on Chilean gatekeepers thus allowed me to witness candid discriminatory discourses, but also limited the scope of my observations, allowing me less access to the experience of racism in workspaces. This partial view reproduces the racialized segmentation of Santiago's sexual markets and does not reflect the diverse gender and sexual identities, cultural and social statuses, and employment modes present within the Chilean sexual markets.

The chilean state and the invisibilization of sexual labor

Throughout its history, sexual labor has raised concerns for the Chilean state and upper class, who have viewed it as a social issue and a threat to public health. Since colonial times, prevailing ideologies have categorized certain social classes and racial groups as sexually distinct and inferior to the "normal" standards upheld by the elites, fostering perceptions of "aberrant" sexualities (Espinoza-Ibacache and Íñiguez-Rueda, 2018; Salazar, 2000). Sex workers have been viewed as far removed from the ideals of virtue held by conservative sectors and the moral expectations for decent women and the Christian family structure. The exclusion of non-conforming sexualities—understood here as practices and identities that deviate from heteronormative and patriarchal norms—has historically been linked to various forms of violence and exclusion framed within a European understanding of difference, a central legacy of colonialism (Dorlin et al., 2020; McClintock, 1995).

Whereas the state has fought against its practice, sex work has always been deeply ingrained in the social practices of the working class. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was an essential part of a conviviality and social organization model that included the informal exchange of sexual services, among many other interactions (Gálvez, 2022a; Salazar, 2000). Due to wars and the decline of the peasant economy, many women moved to the outskirts of major cities and entered the entertainment industry to survive. The state provided widows, single mothers, and unmarried women with plots of land where they started businesses offering food, entertainment, lodging, and, in some cases, sexual services. With the rise of industrial capitalism, the expansion of cities and ports, the growth of international trade, and the influx of foreign traders and sailors, sex work evolved into a more formalized and monetized activity, relocating to brothels in the capital and port cities (Salazar, 2000; Salazar et al., 2002).

Following the economic crisis of the 1920s, many industrial workers lost their jobs and had to reinvent themselves to maintain their autonomy. A significant number of middle and working-class women began offering sexual services, joining an occupation already well established among the proletariat. Among the precarious jobs available to urban working-class women—including washing, ironing, domestic service, and industrial work—sexual labor was the one that offered the best pay, greater independence, and more free time. In times of political and economic crisis, sex work provided working and middle-class women with the opportunity to become independent and be part of a social network (Gálvez, 2022a). By 1920, one in every four women practiced sex work in Chile, and "prostitution"[2] emerged as a national public health problem (Salazar, 2000; Salazar et al., 2002). The growing visibility of sex workers in factories, public spaces, and domestic settings raised concerns among the elites, prompting them to treat sex work as a social issue and a moral ill. Early state norms were tied to the medical-hygienist discourse of the time, which portrayed the "prostitute" as a menace to society, blaming them for the rise in sexually transmitted infections (Espinoza-Ibacache and Íñiguez-Rueda, 2018; Gálvez, 2014, 2022a).

Stigmatizing moral and scientific narratives surrounding the "prostitute" as the paradigm of sexual and moral deviance became ingrained, fostering hegemonic discourses

against sex work. Such dominant ways of thinking, reinforced by state, medical, and religious institutions, define legitimate sexualities while excluding and disciplining what is deemed deviant. In addition to the fear of STIs, these moral concerns have justified state control. Since 1896, successive public health laws have aimed to regulate, control, or entirely prohibit sexual labor. In 1931, an abolitionist public health code was enacted banning brothels and any other spaces dedicated to sexual services, and it has been upheld to this day (Gálvez, 2014; 2022a). Consequently, sex work has been displaced to clandestine brothels or spaces associated with legitimate activities, such as nightclubs, canteens, beer gardens, saunas, massage parlors, beauty salons, and coffee shops (Godoy, 2011; Ortiz, 2025; Rajević, 2000). State regulations forbid formal workspaces, relegating sex workers to public or underground spaces and focusing exclusively on sex workers, dismissing clients.[3] As some authors claim, state regulations foster a double standard aimed at disciplining women who defy patriarchal and hegemonic norms and partake in non-normative sexual practices (Espinoza-Ibacache and Íñiguez-Rueda, 2018).

The current legislative framework is contradictory and ambiguous. While it permits the self-regulation of sex workers, it also upholds control practices that delegitimize their labor and criminalize their workspaces (Ibid.). The legislative history of sex work highlights successive efforts that have failed to achieve the expected results. Despite prosecution from authorities, sexual labor has not disappeared or diminished, as it provides better working conditions than other jobs available for unskilled workers and remains deeply embedded in the social practices of the population and masculine modes of sociability (Gálvez, 2022a; Ortiz, 2025; Salazar, 2000). Hence, workspaces often cluster in cities and neighborhoods with a significant presence of male labor, such as mining cities and shipping ports throughout Chile, as well as near commercial districts, offices, and services in the capital (Barrientos et al., 2011; Ortiz, 2025).

Instead of abolishing sex work, state efforts have rendered sexual labor invisible, placing workers in a vulnerable and dangerous position and allowing other actors to profit from their work. Organized crime has taken control of the streets, extorting sex workers who must pay daily fees to ensure their safety. Identity controls and the prohibition of workspaces enable abuses by civil police officers, uniformed police, and municipal inspectors, as explained by workers and the leaders of *Fundación Margen*. In their efforts to support sex workers by providing legal and material aid, they have heard firsthand accounts of how police officers frequently harass workers and solicit bribes in either monetary or sexual forms. Moreover, the installation of policies criminalizing migrants, along with the implications of Law 20.507—which penalizes human trafficking—puts migrant sex workers at significant risk of police violence, leaving them vulnerable to arbitrary extortion or detention based on mere suspicion of trafficking. It also exposes sex workers to the operations of criminal organizations, as the illegalized status of sex work hinders victims from seeking help or pursuing justice (Fundación Margen, 2020, 2021).

Abolitionist agendas and the invisibilization of sex work

The meanings assigned to sex work have been examined in the embodied services literature and feminist discussions on sex and sexuality, typically divided within an

empowerment/oppression dichotomy. Radical feminist approaches conceive sexual labor as an inherently patriarchal form of exploitation that devalues sex workers, erodes their dignity, and objectifies them. To end oppression, they propose abolishing sex work and punishing consumers, disregarding workers' choice to sell their services while the consumption of sex remains unchallenged (Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997; MacKinnon, 1987, 1991). On the other end of the spectrum, pro-rights feminisms recognize the expressions of agency in sex workers' practices, celebrating their labor as a means of emancipation and reappropriating sexuality to reclaim its potentially subversive nature (Chancer, 1998; Duggan and Hunter, 2006; Lamas, 2017; Tarantino, 2021).

Beyond this binary, situated ethnographies on sexual labor across the global South have demonstrated the numerous ways that sexual labor occurs, along with the different scenarios, conditions, and diversity of client-worker relationships (Brennan, 2004a, 2004b; Cabezas, 2011; Ortiz, 2025; Rivers-Moore, 2012). Arguing that sex work cannot be addressed as a unified and stable phenomenon, these works have highlighted how sexual labor can pose challenges for sex workers, along with presenting opportunities for economic emancipation, solidarity, companionship, friendship, and, sometimes, love (Brennan, 2004b; Cabezas, 2011; Williams, 2013). Empirical research throughout the postcolonial world has focused on the stratification of sexual markets, stemming from the unequal access of workers and clients to social, cultural, and bodily capital (Bernstein, 2007; Hoang, 2011, 2015; Ortiz, 2025). Some case studies examine how governments and civil organizations direct their efforts to spatially and socially regulate sex work despite rising profits that have attracted a growing number of workers into the sex markets (Lamas, 2017; Ortiz, 2025; Rivers-Moore, 2012). Others have noted the complexity and ambiguity in relationships where monetary exchange is tied to other forms of material support, intimacy, and care, highlighting the various ways that workers and clients negotiate money, emotions, security, and sexual pleasure (Brennan, 2004; Cabezas, 2011; Rivers-Moore, 2010; Williams, 2013).

Throughout Latin America, abolitionist agendas have become increasingly prevalent as a response to anxieties that do not reflect the experiences or demands of sex workers (Fundación Margen, 2020; Lamas, 2014, 2017; Tarantino, 2021). Consequently, the state remains the main instigator of the violence that sex workers must endure. It is precisely the state that arms perpetrators and grants them the authority to assault women, thereby institutionalizing social injustice (Dorlin, 2019). In Chile, abolitionist views have materialized as norms that render sex work invisible. This invisibilization, together with laws that can be interpreted and applied indiscriminately and arbitrarily enable state authorities to harass and assault sex workers. The police lack sufficient preparation in protecting human rights, and often, abusive behaviors remain unaccountable, which partly explains officers' offensive conduct.[4] In a country where the police have been responsible for severe human rights violations and are known to have unprofessional and corrupt members among their ranks, giving them excessive power exposes sex workers to extortion, direct violence, and sexual abuse (Fundación Margen, 2021; Ortiz, 2025; RedTraSex, 2017).

State officials' actions occur in a legislative context with overlapping and ambiguous regulations. This ambiguity situates sex workers in a very precarious and unsafe position,

as the police and other public authorities may resort to these regulations to deploy raids and anti-trafficking operatives, exert arbitrary ID checks, demand monetary bribes or unpaid sexual services, or detain sex workers (Fundación Margen, 2020, 2021; RedTraSex, 2017). Article 41 of the Public Health Code prohibits "brothels" or any other space where sex workers congregate to provide sexual services, relegating sex work to the streets or clandestine spaces. Authorities use this provision to shut down spaces where women are caught providing sex services, often using a bag of condoms as "evidence" of illegality or when workers are found with their nipples uncovered, ultimately cutting off their source of income (Ortiz, 2025; Fundación Margen, personal communication, 2020). Police also rely on Article 85 of the Criminal Procedural Code, which states that police officials must, without prior order from a prosecutor, discretionarily request the identification of any person when the authority believes that they may have committed or attempted to commit a crime or are preparing to commit a crime. In Chile, as well as other unequal societies, preventive identity controls can disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups and reinforce stereotypes and discrimination (Irarrázabal, 2015). The expansion of police powers through "preventive control" abilities has raised concerns about constitutional and international human rights guarantees, especially for minorities (Carter, 2019). A moralistic and obsolete law, Article 373 of the Criminal Code, stated that those who offended "decency" or "good customs" with acts of grave scandal would face the penalty of imprisonment.[5] Since what constituted an offense remained open to interpretation by authorities, the law encouraged abusive and arbitrary actions against sexual minorities—such as sex workers, LGBTQI + individuals, and anyone else with nonconforming sexualities (El Mostrador, 2007; La Tercera, 2007).

In clandestine indoor spaces and on the street, women work in highly insecure conditions because of their occupation's illegalized status and the excessive power wielded by authorities. Municipal inspectors and police can close down coffee shops and covert apartments that offer sexual services, and this authority enables them to harass and extort sex workers in indoor spaces frequently. Topless women attending to clients, along with finding preservatives or alcohol consumption without a liquor license, serve as sufficient evidence to shut down workspaces. Field reports widely note that police systematically enter coffee shops and harass sex workers with identity checks and coerce them into providing unpaid sexual services known as the 'pass'—*la pasada*. Similarly, police officers constantly demand bribes and sexual services from sex workers on the street. "If women want to keep working, they have no choice but to comply with the authorities," explains the speaker of *Fundación Margen*.

They believe that because they are police officers, they can do anything. Since the social uprising occurred, the cops have been working extremely hard and need to relax; they go to the cafes to ask for a 'pass,' and, to keep their jobs, the women prefer to give the police a 'free pass.' Are the women going to press charges? Will the authorities take action if a sex worker accuses a police officer?

Organized sex workers report that most police officers lack awareness of the legitimate status of sexual labor. The power their uniform gives them leads them to believe they have the right to abuse sex workers and immigrant women. When an assault occurs, victims often refrain from pressing charges, fearing retaliation, being dismissed, or facing further

abuse from the authorities. The sex-trafficking law allows officers to harass immigrant women suspected of selling sexual services. "At the coffee shops in downtown commercial arcades, cops stop by every ten to 15 min to hassle workers. If the gals do not give them the free 'pass,' they detain them for up to 6 hours or take their money" (Fundación Margen, personal communication, 2020).

Nancy Gutiérrez, the organization's president, notes that immigrant women, particularly those with irregular status, face more significant threats. "Cops feel entitled to tell them: 'This time I will let you go, but you must give me something in return.' Some flee to their home countries, fearing detention or deportation." Nancy and Herminda are the key leaders and founders of *Fundación Margen* and the sex workers' union. For over three decades, they have been working together, raising funds, educating state institutions, police, and society, promoting sexual health through territorial work, and fighting for the rights of sex workers. They have been fulfilling the state's role in safeguarding the population's safety without compensation. Their testimonies convey a sense of hopelessness about the insecurity all sex workers experience every day because of their occupation's illegalized status.

When conducting fieldwork in the coffee shops of downtown Santiago, stories of police abuse were common and ordinary. Veronica, a sex worker and manager, told me with disgust about two cops who entered her coffee shop and ordered her to "suck their cocks" at gunpoint.[6] Another example of the frequent violence they endure involves an officer who became so obsessed with a woman working in a neighboring coffee shop that he stopped by every day asking for a "free pass" and abused her until she could no longer tolerate it and ultimately quit. These attacks occurred in indoor spaces, which are generally considered much safer than the street. The harassment that sex workers face on the street from the police and criminal organizations is unimaginable. One of the mafias' most profitable businesses today involves human trafficking and extorting street workers, who are coerced into paying significant daily fees to avoid harm and to secure their families' safety. These acts of violence go unreported because the mistreatment they endure at the hands of the police prevents them from filing charges. Organized sex workers fear retaliation, as they have reason to believe that some police officers are connected to criminal organizations (Fundación Margen, personal communication, 2020).

There are significant inconsistencies between the laws as imagined and the actual impact on sex workers and immigrants. In theory, the Chilean anti-trafficking law serves as a positive tool for protecting immigrants from forced labor.[7] However, cops often do not intervene against criminal organizations, while migrant women—some underage—visibly work on the streets, and the anti-trafficking law is instead used to criminalize, harass, and abuse racialized, autonomous workers (RedTraSex, 2014, 2017). The police have legal authority to enforce order—including migration and border enforcement—under laws and institutional norms, and operate in contexts where oversight mechanisms have been found deficient. Reports document how police officers claim proof and evidence, investigative abuses go unsanctioned, and their testimonies are rarely contested, which helps explain how abusive actions evade accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Justice Studies Center of the Americas, 2020). However, abolitionist feminists are concerned with prosecuting clients and rescuing workers from labor that is already

performed under precarious conditions due to its invisibilization. This undermines sex workers as political subjects since their claims are dismissed, and instead, someone else puts forward a demand on their behalf.

Organized sex workers are disappointed at the lack of support from progressive sectors. They claim that the state is never aligned with their interests; the Left is not either. The feminist movement and labor movement have historically approached sex workers not as political subjects but as victims in need of rescue, seeking to reintegrate them into households where they would resume the reproductive roles assigned to their gender (Gálvez, 2022b; Hutchison, 1998). Political candidates often seek the support of organized sex workers during campaigns, but later, they forget about their struggles and continue criminalizing sex work after winning elections. The dismissal of sex workers' demands by progressive sectors is viewed as a result of the prevalence of abolitionist ideals (Fundación Margen, personal communication, 2020). While some isolated efforts have emerged from representatives of the Left and have been pushed in Congress, all intents have fallen through the cracks of parliamentary bureaucracy and have been forgotten, as the struggles of sex workers do not represent a priority for representatives (Direción de Estudios Corte Suprema, 2018; Fundación Margen, 2020, 2021). Interviews with organized sex workers reveal the vast gap between authorities' proposals and their demands, highlighting the distance between governments' visions and sex workers' interests. They also suggest that to reach a successful legal framework that effectively protects sex workers, their demands must be considered.

Although autonomous sex work and sex trafficking differ radically, international agencies have tended to address them as one inseparable problem with damaging consequences for all sex workers (Doezema, 2010; Lamas, 2017; RedTraSex, 2014; Williams, 2016). Since the 1990s, UN-supported programs have imposed anti-trafficking agendas throughout the globe. As Jo Doezema asserts, the global North has been fixated on the representation of the "Third World prostitute" as a "suffering body," and it has been utilized as a potent symbol to advocate for radical feminist interests without taking into account the perspectives of sex workers themselves (Doezema, 2001). The advancement of neoliberal policies has influenced gender politics, the prevalent carceral turn in the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Europe. In the US, abolitionist agendas have shaped policies aimed at gender equality, which are entwined with punitive perspectives, overlooking the implications of abolitionism for sex workers (Bernstein, 2012). This punitive shift has affected development programs by international agencies, extending its influence across Latin America (Lamas, 2014, 2017; Tarantino, 2021).

Seeing all sex workers as suffering victims reasserts imperialist relations of domination and does nothing to support their struggles (Doezema, 2001). The sprawl of anti-trafficking agendas has resulted in serious material and life-threatening consequences for sex workers, as seen in the number of autonomous sex workers detained for "trafficking." Viewing all sexual commerce as trafficking does not protect workers but instead denigrates and victimizes them. This perspective misrepresents the significance of sexual labor for the workers themselves, reinforces conservative views about sex and sexuality, and obstructs the implementation of laws that would protect the rights of sex workers (RedTraSex, 2014; Tarantino, 2021). The devaluation of sex work complicates building a

politics of recognition, which could significantly contribute to alleviating the precarious position of sex workers under the country's abolitionist agenda.

Evidence from other regions shows how different legal frameworks materially shape the possibilities for recognition, protection, and harm. Research on the consequences of decriminalization in New Zealand demonstrates that removing criminal penalties and treating sex work as labor has improved sex workers' working conditions: their ability to refuse clients, negotiate safer conditions, and access basic labor and citizenship rights (Abel et al., 2010; Armstrong, 2021). By contrast, a review of legal frameworks across European Union member states found that criminalization, client-criminalization, and tightly regulated legal systems result in increased violence, reduced access to healthcare, displacement from public spaces, and additional vulnerability for migrant sex workers (Oliveira et al., 2023). Findings suggest that European regulatory and abolitionist approaches function as modes of non-recognition—producing structural injuries—while decriminalization offers a necessary, though insufficient, foundation for expanding sex workers' rights and safety.

Despite the improvements in safety and working conditions brought on by decriminalization regimes, sex workers continue to face stigma, unequal access to rights, and exclusion from formal labor protections. Current regulation approaches across the EU—prohibition, abolition, or regulation—perpetuate marginalization by repressing visible street work but failing to address off-street and hidden spaces of exploitation (Hubbard et al., 2008). While considered a significant improvement, evidence shows that, without dismantling migration controls, labor-market exclusions, and policing regimes, decriminalization alone cannot ensure full recognition, protection, or rights for sex workers, and racialized and migrant sex workers in particular remain highly vulnerable (Hubbard et al., 2008; Oliveira et al., 2023).

The stakes of unrecognition: The uneven allocation of violence and precarity

After three decades of activism, the leaders of *Fundación Margen* continue to advocate for the rights of younger generations of sex workers, doing so without receiving a salary or even the minimal pensions granted to formal workers upon retirement. For practicing and former sex workers, their invisibilization results in limited opportunities and the inability to access the social protections available to other unskilled yet formal workers (Fundación Margen, 2020; Ortiz, 2025; RedTraSex, 2017). Organized sex workers demand recognition to be considered as workers and receive the same benefits as formal workers, such as access to retirement pensions, public health, housing subsidies, and childcare. However, structural violence is not only material. It also includes workers' devaluation, attacks their dignity and self-worth, and undermines the value that society gives them. It systematically underlies everyday social exchanges and impacts individuals' bodies, subjectivities, and social interactions (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004).

In a conservative context regarding gender and sexual norms, some sexualities are considered worthy of recognition, while others are not, and non-conforming subjects bear the brunt of stigma. As Goffman (1963) observed, stigma discredits individuals by

marking them with a "spoiled identity," making them less than full members of society. His analysis illuminates how sex workers face social discredit and the burden of negotiating stigma in everyday interactions, whether by concealing their work, making it visible, or resisting its consequences. This logic of systematic discredit operates within what Butler (1990) calls the dominant sex/gender system, or "heterosexual matrix," the normative framework that renders bodies and desires intelligible only when they align with heterosexual norms. Within this matrix, the figure of the "prostitute" lies at the bottom of social hierarchies, and the institutional framework that renders sex work invisible, continues to foster this marginalization, denying sex workers the chance for recognition. The power of social norms lies in their ability to be followed or internalized, affecting sex workers' self-worth and how others perceive them. Thus, along with material precarity and structural violence, symbolic violence represents a grievance for sex workers, as they do not conform to the expectations of a "correct" or "pure" sexuality according to the national imaginary.[8]

The exclusion of all non-normative sexualities—those identities and practices that fall outside those that are socially accepted—profoundly impacts the social and emotional spheres of sex workers. It compels them to adopt various strategies to cope with stigma, as demonstrated by my research in coffee shops (2025). In the lower-status coffee shops specific to Santiago's foundational center, institutional violence and self-denial are sex workers' most critical challenges. It is common for women to hide their work from their families and close social circles due to fear of discrimination. The stigmatization of their occupation leads many workers to "live a lie," fabricating other jobs to justify the wages that often support extended families. The stigmatization of sex work relegates workers to invisibility, a status enforced by the state and its institutions through the prohibition of brothels and other spaces dedicated to selling sexual services. Sex workers' exclusions do not displace the gender inequalities faced by women in Chile, such as the mandate to "be a good mother"[9] and perform the majority of reproductive work at home—norms that often conflict with the stigma associated with sexualized labor. This dislocation usually leads to guilt; therefore, motherhood serves as the primary justification for the sexualized labor women perform in coffee shops Furthermore, sex workers whose sexual desires and practices do not conform to the heteronormative mandate[10] face increased scrutiny and discrimination.

The distinctions between material and symbolic violence are often blurred (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). Stigma and the resulting devaluation of sex workers encourage various forms of violence, including gender-based and sexual violence, as perpetrators may feel justified in abusing someone they believe is unworthy of respect (Goffman, 1963). Stigma is a significant catalyst for violence, stemming from historically interconnected systems of oppression rooted in social, racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies. The denial of recognition to certain groups that do not conform to social norms enables, unleashes, or protects the use of direct violence (Butler and Athanasiou, 2015). Individuals embodying stigmatizing attributes (such as gender, sexual, ethnic, and racial differences) continue to be excluded in a nation that fears the poor, sees itself as white, and whose national imaginary is dominated by rigid sexual and gender norms (Galaz et al., 2018; Tijoux, 2011, 2016).

Although opposing narratives arise from organized sex workers that emphasize pride in sexual labor as legitimate work and embrace all sexualities and gender identifications, stigma continues to prevail in non-organized contexts that involve more vulnerable independent sex workers. These contrasting findings underscore the importance of organizing and strengthening power by building coalitions of sex workers based on their shared demands. This task is challenging because cisgender and transgender workers experience labor, discrimination, and violence in different ways. As a result, they often express different, sometimes conflicting demands.

Interviews with union activists and data collected by themselves as members of a Latin American network of organizations advocating for the rights of sex workers (RedTraSex) highlight the extent to which structural and police violence permeates their lives (Fundación Margen, 2020, 2021; RedTraSex, 2017). The consequences of unrecognition—to deprive subjects of their human condition and life possibilities—underline the power of social and symbolic norms. The rejection of certain bodies and sexualities is a form of dispossession resulting from the process of determining the distribution of recognition and vulnerability among a population. As Butler notes, subjects' lives depend on understandings of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, and the process determining the allocation of recognition is itself a manifestation of power since the denial of it constitutes a form of oppression that will inevitably cause suffering (2009b). As they explain, "…if prevailing norms decide who will count as a human or as a subject of rights, then we can see that those who remain unrecognized are subject to precarity. Hence, the differential distribution of recognition norms directly implies the differential allocation of precarity" (Butler in Butler and Athanasiou, 2015: p. 89). The power of dispossession—or the denial of recognition—emerges from its capacity to construct certain subjects, communities, or populations as unintelligible, that is, outside the normative frames through which lives are recognized as human and socially viable, and thereby to deny them their life possibilities (2015).

The interdependency between recognition and the distribution of precarity and violence, as described by Butler and shown by sex workers' experiences, forefronts the debates on redistribution versus recognition as driving goals for social justice. Whereas social justice discourses had focused solely on redistribution as a solution to inequalities for over one hundred and fifty years, towards the end of the twentieth century, demands for cultural recognition started to gain central importance. For Nancy Fraser, demands based on class interests vanished after the rise of "identity politics" aimed at including marginalized groups (Fraser, 1995; Fraser in; Honneth and Fraser, 2004). Judith Butler disputes the understanding of cultural demands as sources of fragmentation and the neglect of class struggles and pursuing material redistribution. They further argue that this perspective assumes questions of sexual and racial recognition can be separated from the fight for economic justice and that the latter should take precedence (1998). Both struggles are fundamentally intertwined for Butler. Further, economic marginalization often stems from identity-based exclusions, and, conversely, a politics of recognition has material consequences, enabling material redistribution (Butler and Athanasiou, 2015).

Despite structural distinctions in how cultural and material approaches interact and which should take priority, articulating a politics of recognition and redistribution has

been highlighted as the sole alternative to present conditions (Butler, 1998; Butler and Athanasiou, 2015; Fraser, 1995; Honneth and Fraser, 2004). While social inequality and economic precarity should take center stage in state programs, embracing cultural and embodied differences cannot be dismissed, as demonstrated by the consequences of abolitionist policies toward sexual labor in Chile. Recognition would bring both material and symbolic reparations and significantly impact all aspects of sex workers' lives. A politics of recognition can enhance the safety of sex work and redefine the nature of that work by infusing symbolic value, a necessary step toward creating a more inclusive society. More concretely, recognizing sexual labor as work would incorporate it into the formal labor market and ultimately contribute to accessing social protections and building a politics of redistribution for autonomous, adult sex workers.

Conclusion

For sex workers—cis and trans; Chilean and migrants—violence is not limited to isolated incidents. Instead, it manifests as a scenario where social structures and an abolitionist legal system keep perpetuating violence. The harassment and abuse that sex workers confront have become normalized due to their powerlessness against authorities and the invisibility of sexual labor in Chile. However, the multifaceted violence that sex workers endure is often dismissed in public debates, state institutions, feminist movements, and Chilean society. Despite the systemic abuse of power, this type of violence remains silenced, which itself constitutes another form of violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004).

The illegalized status of sexual labor exposes workers to exploitation and violence from police and other actors, mainly criminal organizations that have gained influence and control over working-class neighborhoods across Chile (Meersohn et al., 2023; Pizarro and Arriagada, 2021; Ramírez, 2025). Because of nonrecognition, direct violence interacts with socioeconomic inequalities and systematic exclusions in access to social protections, adequate housing, health and educational services, public spaces, infrastructure, and job opportunities. Ultimately, the lack of a regulatory framework recognizing sexual labor as work reinforces the stigma that marginalizes sex workers.

Drawing on an ethnographic study of sexual labor in Chile, interviews with organized sex workers, and data on sexual labor and institutional violence (Fundación Margen, 2020, 2021; RedTraSex, 2017), this article highlights the critical importance of recognizing and regulating adult, autonomous sexual labor. The persistence of stigma and symbolic violence reveals how nonrecognition produces moral injury, social invisibility, and material dispossession. Following Honneth's conception of recognition, these dynamics evidence how the denial of recognition undermines self-realization and wellbeing, legitimizing violence against sex workers. Situating the multiple dimensions of violence within debates on redistribution and recognition underscores their interconnectedness for achieving social justice and for sustaining the viability of sex workers and other non-conforming identities and sexualities (Butler, 1998; Butler and Athanasiou, 2015; Fraser, 1995; Honneth and Fraser, 2004). The social construction of intelligibility—what counts as a coherent or legitimate identity—and its effects on non-conforming subjects, as

articulated by Butler (2009b), further illuminate how sex workers' exclusion from normative frames of recognition intensifies their vulnerability and institutional abandonment. Butler and Athanasiou's (2015) theorization of dispossession as a result of an uneven allocation of precarity among a population contributes to how sex workers are rendered simultaneously invisible and exploitable: unrecognition as subjects of rights while exposed to heightened forms of state and social violence.

Understanding how structural violence intersects with symbolic, institutional, and sexual violence clarifies the magnitude of sex workers' grievances and the urgency of their demands, since such grievances stem from nonrecognition, rather than the nature of sexual labor itself. This underscores the importance of legal and symbolic recognition in further marginalizing excluded groups, emphasizing its significance in the pursuit of social justice. Critiquing the state's abolitionist agenda exposes its detrimental effects and calls for a rethinking of the state's approach to sex work, opening pathways for legal frameworks and social policies that recognize and value sexual labor, effectively protecting the rights of sex workers.

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Ethical considerations

This study, "Nonrecognition as Violence: The Stakes of Abolitionist Agendas and the Invisibilization of Sexual Labor in Chile," was reviewed and approved by the Brooklyn College Institutional Review Board, under approval number 2015-1326, with Continuing Review approved until May 2023, after which no additional data was collected. All research procedures adhered to ethical guidelines for human subject research.

Consent to participate

All participants provided informed consent before taking part in this study. They were informed about the research objectives, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study, including interviews with sex workers and union members, are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements with participants. As per Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, verbal consent was obtained for all interviews to ensure participants' comfort and safety. Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and the commitment to protecting participants' privacy, the data cannot be shared. However, de-identified excerpts relevant to the study's findings may be available upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval and consent restrictions.

Notes

1. The abolitionist approach views prostitution as a patriarchal institution that embodies gender violence and is incompatible with the dignity of sex workers. Consequently, it opposes the legal and symbolic recognition of prostitution as a means to eliminate its practice, ignoring the demands of sex workers. The term "abolitionism" originates from the International Abolitionist Association, which was founded by Josephine Butler in the UK to combat "masculine vice" through social purification campaigns. In Chile, laws do not directly penalize adult and autonomous sexual labor, but they criminalize brothels and any spaces dedicated to the sale and consumption of sexual services (Gálvez, 2022a).
2. Within the discussions about sexuality in the United States between 1980 and 1990—known as the 'sex wars'—some feminists rejected the term 'prostitution' because of its criminalizing connotations and replaced it with 'sex work,' an expression that considers it like any other type of embodied labor. Similarly, the stigmatizing character of the word 'prostitution' has been addressed by other research about sexual labor in Chile. Hence, I use 'sexual labor,' 'sex work,' or other non-stigmatizing terms, except when citing public policy or texts employing the word 'prostitution' (Vidal, 2002).
3. According to Article 41 of the *Chilean Health Code*, brothels and any establishments dedicated to sexual services are prohibited. See Ministry of Health. (1931/2022). *Chilean Health Code* [Código Sanitario], Art. 41. Santiago, Chile: Ministry of Health. Retrieved from https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=5595.
4. Chile has a long history of human rights violations by the police. Most notably, illustrated by systematic repression during Pinochet's military dictatorship (1973-1990), when *Carabineros* and the National Information Center (CNI) arbitrarily detained, tortured, executed, and disappeared thousands of the regime's opponents. More recently, during the 2019 social uprising, the police were responsible for massive human rights violations, including ocular mutilations,

torture, sexual violence, and homicides by state agents. Due to impunity and lack of structural transformations, police violence continues affecting protesters, indigenous communities, and marginalized sectors (Aguilera, 2020; Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2019).

5. Article 373 of the Criminal Code (1874) stated that "Those who, in any way, offend modesty or good customs through acts of serious scandal or significance, not expressly included in other articles of this Code, shall incur the penalty of minor imprisonment in its minimum to medium degrees." A legal modification repealing Article 373 was introduced in Congress in 2007. Chile. (1874/2007). *Código Penal* [Criminal Code], Art. 373 (repealed). Santiago, Chile: Congreso Nacional de Chile. Retrieved from https://bcn.cl/jr9t0Q.
6. Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.
7. Law No. 20,507 (2011) "criminalizes illicit trafficking of migrants and human trafficking, and establishes rules for its prevention and more effective criminal prosecution. These include making it an offense to facilitate or promote the entry into the country of persons so that they may engage in prostitution, transporting, harboring or receiving persons for purposes of sexual exploitation, and sanctions for those who associate to commit these crimes. The law also provides protections for victims, including the right to temporary residence (for at least 6 months), whether to pursue judicial actions or to regularize their stay." Chile. (2011). *Ley N° 20.507: Tipifica los delitos de tráfico ilícito de migrantes y trata de personas y establece normas para su prevención y más efectiva persecución criminal*. Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile. Retrieved from https://bcn.cl/2k2m9.
8. Charles Taylor defines a 'social imaginary' as "…the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations." Ordinary individuals, Taylor asserts, "imagine" their social contexts and carry them by memorizing images and narratives. As a common understanding, it legitimizes certain social practices (2007, p. 23).
9. Sonia Montecino, in *Madres y Huachos: Alegorías del mestizaje chileno* (1991), argues that Chilean culture imposes a cultural mandate that defines women primarily through motherhood. The figure of the Virgin Mary embodies this ideal of purity and self-sacrificing maternity, serving as a normative symbol that reinforces the expectation that women must be "good and devoted mothers" within the national imaginary.
10. Following Judith Butler, heteronormativity is part of a cultural matrix that shapes sexual and gender norms. Under such norms, certain kinds of sexual practices and gender identifications do not "exist"—they are considered abject—when they do not follow the heterosexual connection between physical sex and sexual desires (1990, p. 24).

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