# Challenging our Conceptions of Work: Sex Work Between Fiction and Reality

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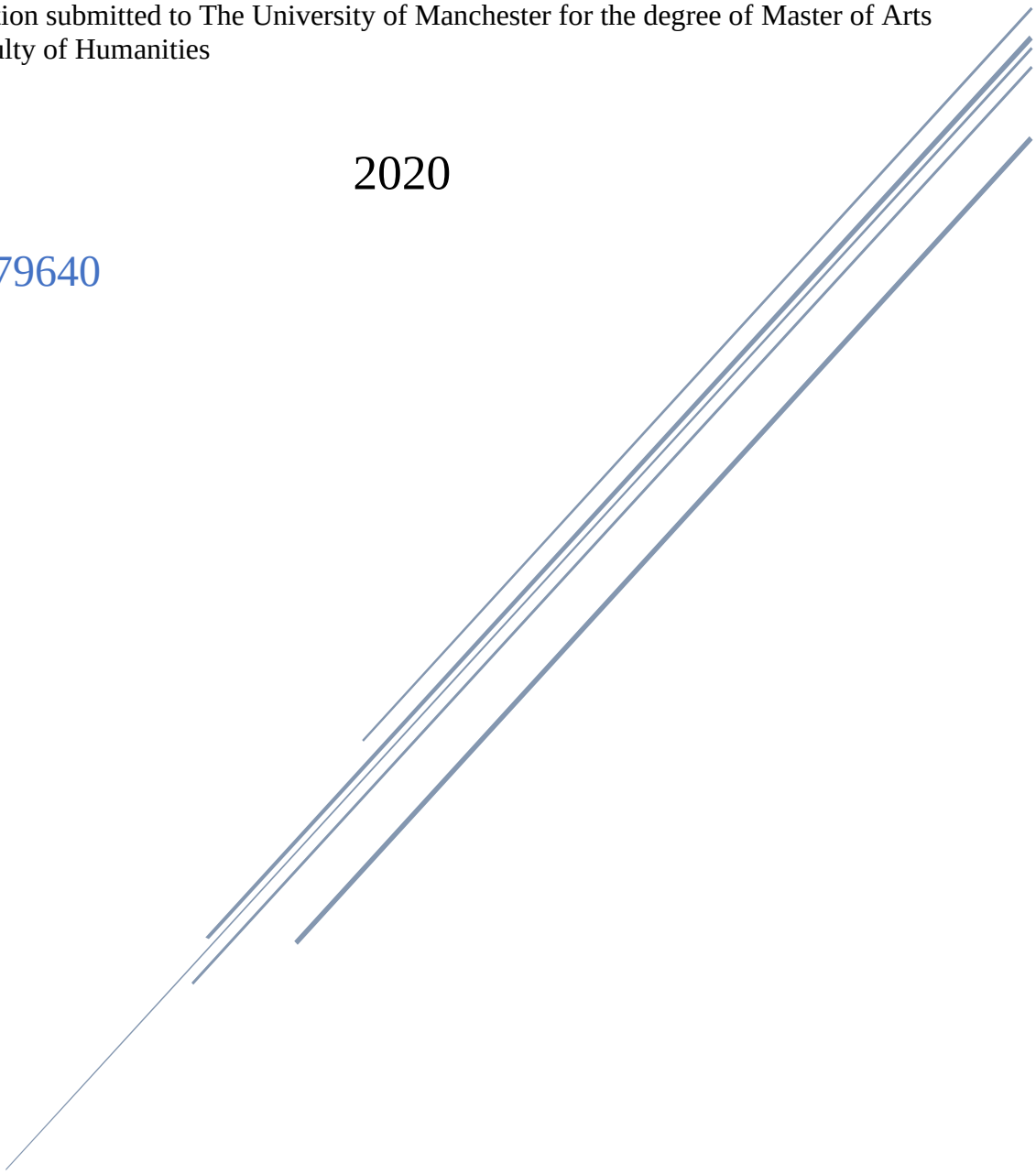

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I. ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the relationship between social perceptions of work and occupational reality utilising sex work as a case study. While public notions of 'real work' – i.e. the stereotype of formalised and often industrial wage labour – often exclude selling sex from the realm of work, the paper proposes a broad understanding of work/labour as a somewhat arduous but utility-generating activity. Arguing that debates around the legality, legitimacy, and morality of sex work have led to the neglect of research into working conditions, the paper demonstrates that, like in 'traditional' formal employment, working conditions have a fundamental impact on the wellbeing of sex workers. Popular culture analysis is used as an illustration for how common perceptions of work relate to actual working conditions in the sex work industry. Namely, ten internationally successful novels are assessed regarding what they reveal about social images of sex workers and their workplace; the results are compared to occupational reality of sex workers as examined by academic researchers. Findings include that real sex workers are characterised by more diversity and more agency than fictional ones. Strong differences can be observed with regard to demographics, workplace power dynamics, occupational health and safety, workplace violence, and occupational choice. Overall, the analysis suggests that sex workers' daily lives are impacted by the lack of research and the resulting caricatural image of sex work that is prevalent both among the general public and in academia. It can therefore be deduced that social conceptions of what 'real work' is have real socioeconomic consequences for the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality.

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## IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On 17 June 2019, Jessica Hyer publishes a post on Facebook's *Fallowfield Students Group* that soon turned into Manchester's first support organisation specifically for students working in sex work. Her post offers guidance and an open ear for student sex workers, or those working in related jobs. Yet, it attracts numerous people looking to provoke, poke fun, or belittle those who are trying to make a difference. One type of reply stands out – those who see sex work as 'easy money' and 'a lazy, convenient alternative to real jobs'. Someone tags their friend and comments: "if only we had thought about being sugar babies instead of working" (Whitwell 2019).

Separating 'real work' from 'other means of making a living' is usually not done in a neutral, analytic way based on explicitly stated criteria of what makes a job 'real'. Instead, it is a combination of both stigmatisation and mystification, 'non-work' is constructed as 'not honourable and yet intriguing', a temptation that is – jokingly – hard to resist (both hard to resist and, yet, naturally resisted). A certain type of sensationalism and even voyeurism surrounds public debates and representations of sex work, resulting in most people having a pretty clear image of a profession which is usually acknowledged as hidden, private, and invisible.

This paper aims to explore how social conceptions of work interact with reality – how accurate this public image of sex work is, how working conditions are commonly portrayed, and how these portrayals may even shape the lives of those working in the industry. I argue that power dynamics of the political economy are implicit in socially held ideas about work, and that these power dynamics are reproduced by fiction. Using the example of sex work, I demonstrate that working conditions are a crucial determinant of workers' wellbeing, even if they do not work in traditional, formalised, often industrial wage labour.

I start by establishing which theoretical underpinnings my analysis is based on. Drawing on Marxist and feminist literature, I illustrate the importance of working conditions for wellbeing (chapter 2.1) and how working conditions can be used as an analytic tool (chapter 2.2). Then I provide context to my chosen case study of sex work, explaining why it is a fruitful example of how perception and reality are connected and outlining its strengths and limitations for research in political economy (chapter 2.3). I explain how I use popular fiction and academic literature to gain insight into social perceptions of sex work and how they compare to real-life working conditions (chapter 2.4).

In chapter 3, I analyse popular representations of sex work by examining a variety of internationally successful novels. To create transparency about my choice of literature and to introduce the stories and characters relevant to this chapter, I provide a brief overview over sex work in fiction (chapter 3.1). Looking at how the demographics and workplaces of sex workers are portrayed in popular literature, I explore both implicit and explicit power dynamics that shape the daily lives of fictional sex workers (chapter 3.2). I then turn to what novels include about sex workers' health and safety, as well as experiences with violence, and what they leave out in this area (chapter 3.3). Additionally, I analyse how much occupational choice fictional sex workers have, including the opportunity cost of alternative jobs (chapter 3.4).

Chapter 4 compares the results from my analysis of fiction to the occupational reality of sex workers. Firstly, I outline some of the challenges of getting data, information, or direct testimony from sex workers (chapter 4.1). Then I describe how diverse sex workers and their

workplaces are compared to the fictional accounts I have encountered (chapter 4.2). I argue that conditions of health, safety and violence are more nuanced in real-life settings, and that fictional accounts limit descriptions to conditions usually found in street-based sex work (chapter 4.3). Finally, I show that while occupational choice of sex workers is limited, their decision to enter or remain in sex work is often based on careful considerations of costs and benefits, which is an aspect largely dismissed in fiction (chapter 4.4).

Overall, I conclude that real sex work is characterised by more diversity and more agency than portrayed in fiction. Instead of blaming individual authors for this misrepresentation, I argue that stereotypes about sex workers are related to socially prevalent stigma and can consequently also be found in some academic approaches to the topic. My analysis further demonstrates that the working conditions of sex workers can be analysed in a way comparable to how working conditions in other industries are analysed. This reveals that understanding the origins of social perceptions of work is necessary to challenge the power dynamics that govern the political economy.

## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations of my analysis of sex work. I will explain specifically why analysing working conditions matters, which approaches there currently are for studying work, why sex work is particularly useful as a case study for this project, and finally how I approach popular and academic literature to examine sex work.

### *2.1 The importance of work*

The idea that the type of work a person engages in forms the foundation of how well they are off can already be found in Aristotle's work – his discussion of *bios praktikos* (also discussed in philosophy as *vita activa*) versus *bios theoretikos* (*vita contemplativa*) in the Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle 2000: 1097b) is key to his theory of happiness. The idea has consequently influenced the thinking of philosophers and political scientists throughout the ages. Yet, thinking about the improvement of working conditions as a core task of society is deeply related to industrialisation: the separation of 'work time' and 'leisure time' (Argyle 1989: 11ff.; Aspin 1981: 30) did not exist until early industrial workplace legislation, and it facilitated the rise of the labour movement which pushed further improvements onto the political agenda.

Today, there is consequently a broad social intuition that the quality of people's work matters for their wellbeing. One understanding of this is summarised in Füllsack's analysis of the terms 'work' and 'labour', a linguistic distinction that stems from the activity both 'creating something useful' and 'being arduous' (2009: 9). Füllsack illustrates that despite work being associated with struggles, people feel the need to 'have something to do', to 'create', to

‘spend their time in a meaningful way’; as such, we care about long hours and workplace safety hazards, but also about unemployment and a lack of purposeful activity. Some scholars, such as Radin (1996) and Himmelweit (1999), have used the terms to describe different kinds of activities, with ‘labour’ referring to more and ‘work’ to less commodified activities, such as in care. In this paper, however, I will understand *all* ‘work’ / ’labour’ as being characterised by these two aspects, meaning I use the terms interchangeably for all tasks that have the potential to be arduous but utility-generating.

Work, due to its complex interrelation with other aspects of wellbeing – such as income, health, or education – offers insight into the wellbeing of individuals as well as of a social group, class, demographic, or society at large. It is of particular interest because although not every person is formally employed, people still engage in some activities that can be classed as work at most stages in their lives – this can be domestic labour, informal care work, or volunteering. The central role labour activities play in determining human wellbeing has been popularised by Marxist economics through the concept of species-being and the labour theory of value.

Firstly, Marx understands species-being notably not as something inherent like ‘human nature’ but something historically grown (Wartenberg 1982). He utilises the term to denote how humans are shaped by the historical and socio-economic conditions around them, connecting our ability to engage in planned, structured work to the potential for social de-alienation and fulfilment (Marx & Engels 1975: 277). This means the connection of human wellbeing to labour is something of immediate relevance to a dynamic capitalist society – at the heart of often-quoted revolutionary mechanisms like class antagonism lies the image of human beings as capable of planning and executing activities beyond what is necessary for immediate subsistence. This challenges popular conceptions of work as solely those activities

of formal employment. If the ability to participate in self-planned and structured activities is fundamental to humans, a loss of control over these labour processes leads to various forms of alienation. Capitalist division of labour, which takes tasks of planning and overseeing work away from the workers, results in workers becoming estranged from their labour, themselves, and other workers (Rohbeck 2006: 54).

The second way in which Marx emphasises the significance of work is rooted in the labour theory of value, which is commonly used in classical economics and represents the recognition of labour as central to economic meaningfulness. Labour power, especially if enhanced with technology, produces more value than it costs to reproduce it; this value-creating property makes labour central for the maintenance of the economic system (Rohbeck 2006: 25). The labour theory of value analyses the value of goods and services according to the socially necessary labour time that has to go into their production. Under capitalism, labour is treated as a commodity, which workers must sell to survive since they do not own other means of production. Since capitalists appropriate the surplus value generated by labour, they have an incentive to keep labour time high and wages low; this makes employment conditions the key determinant of the workers' wellbeing if measured, for instance, by leisure time and income.

The labour theory of value has been criticised from various angles. Marx disregards the possibility of explaining the commensurability of goods with their use values because they differ in quality; Böhm-Bawerk argues that the same logic could be applied to choosing labour to explain commensurability, claiming that labour also differs in terms of quantity and quality (Böhm-Bawerk 1949: 76-77). Böhm-Bawerk therefore attributes an inherent contradiction to Marx's labour theory of value. Further criticism evolved during the marginal revolution, when economists increasingly began to analyse value according to the subjective

marginal utility a consumer gets from obtaining additional units of a commodity (Steedman 1997).

Despite these criticisms, many implications of the labour theory of value remain relevant. For instance, trade unions in various countries still lead wage negotiations with the explicit aim to pay out a larger share of the generated surplus value to the workers, i.e. to re-appropriate surplus (Döhring 2017: 81). Due to the intuitive social importance of work, other scholars have since attempted to formulate conceptions of work not reliant on Marxist terminology. One example is Crawford (2009), who outlines experiences of alienation based on the long distance between modern-day workers and the product or service their work contributes to. Crawford describes how changing his occupation from a generic office job to repairing motorcycles full-time has influenced his attitude towards work; his conclusion of finding happiness and fulfilment only once the work process is under one's own control is visibly similar to the consequences of Marx's notion of work.

The fact that work is so widely recognised by people as something that determines their wellbeing is another argument for exploring working conditions not just for formally employed industrial wage labourers. The structure of someone's workplace relationships, while often being a symptom of social power dynamics, also produces such power dynamics. As such, work relations (of the worker with co-workers, their employer, their manager, their clients, workers of other companies, etc.) have the potential to either reproduce or change oppressive systems. However, the reproduction or alleviation of oppression is already implicit in the definition of work that is accepted socially. For instance, if work is reduced to formal employment, many types of planned, structured, arduous but value-producing activities are left out: unpaid domestic labour, voluntary or charitable work, or entire professions which are not universally seen as 'real work', such as sex work or internet-based entertainment. As a

result, the conditions people in these fields work under are not analysed as rigorously as in formal employment, and un-analysed conditions can hardly be improved, despite them having wellbeing implications. In the case of sex work, this lack of research is particularly severe – since the most prominent academic debates revolve around whether selling sex is (or should be) a legitimate economic activity, scholars researching sex workers' working conditions are automatically interpreted as standing on one side of this debate, even if they do not make any claims for or against the legitimacy of sex work. This likely discourages scholars from examining the conditions under which sex work is performed. It illustrates that the origins of popular conceptions of 'work' can have real-life economic consequences.

The Marxist tradition of work analysis takes a materialist stance, meaning that social beliefs about work must ultimately stem from the economic conditions of production. This has occasionally resulted in Marxists being accused of economic reductionism. However, the idea that the superstructure is necessary for the stabilisation of the economic base likewise has a strong tradition among Marxist scholars (e.g. Cohen 2000: 231ff.). Cohen himself uses the analogy of four unstable pillars which are finally held together by a roof, explaining that historical materialism does not deny that the economic base needs a superstructure to be maintained (ibid.). Consequently, this paper's topic of focusing on the perception of work, i.e. a part of the superstructure, does not break with the Marxist tradition of political economy. Instead, its key intuition – the perception of work being fundamental for the social organisation of work – stems directly from Cohen's analogy. Therefore, this topic expands Marxist analysis of work within its own paradigm.

### *2.2 Systematising the study of working conditions*

I have argued that because some types of work are not recognised as work, their conditions and wellbeing impacts are not analysed as rigorously as those of formal and often industrial types of work. This is partly related to the methods being used by (Marxist) political economy to evaluate work – these are often production-centric. One example is that studies of working conditions would historically often be conducted by going to a factory and observing or interviewing workers about their hours, their safety, their unionisation, etc. (e.g. Hammond & Hammond 1917). This type of research requires a confined workplace, preferably with a larger sample of workers, and generally the possibility to observe physical labour.

Feminist scholars have introduced the concept of social reproductive work (e.g. Federici 2009). Although the distinction between reproduction and production might be artificial – reproductive activities often have productive elements and productive activities often have reproductive aims – recognising reproductive activities as labour is an important step in the recognition of professions like sex work as work. Feminist political economy has conceptualised gender and the role of women with regard to the work they engage in; it offers a framework for analysing how certain types of work, especially reproductive ones, are feminised (e.g. Basten 1997). Yet, the field still lacks a way of systematically measuring the conditions of reproductive and often informal labour in a way that makes it comparable with (or distinguishable from) formalised labour in production. Consider, for instance, that observing 1000 domestic workers in different households requires a significantly different strategy or significantly more resources than observing 1000 industrial workers in a single factory; moreover, professions like sex work usually do not allow for observers due to the workplace being considered part of the ‘private’ and ‘confidential’ sphere.

For my analysis of working conditions in sex work I suggest a framework of several selected conditions which are particularly relevant to the field. This framework is heavily influenced

by theories on social reproduction. Social reproduction, as outlined for instance by Federici (2009), denotes those activities that are necessary to maintain a society's productive power; the organisation of it is symptomatic of certain power dynamics within society. While the focus is often on what work *produces*, my research examines what work *reproduces* – namely, specific living conditions, power structures, social inequalities and wellbeing distributions that are necessary for an economic system to be maintained. Working conditions lay the ground for productive and reproductive economic activity (for example, they are constitutive of how much a factory worker can produce within a certain time frame but also of how this worker organises childcare).

This framework encompasses various aspects, previously explored individually by various scholars, that can be used to measure the quality of a person's work. I divide them into three categories which make sense for my case study: a) power dynamics, b) health, safety, and violence, and c) occupational choice. These categories will guide my analyses of both fictional representations of sex work and occupational reality. In the following I outline which aspects I examine in these three groups. Two things need to be kept in mind for this framework. Firstly, it is not meant to be an exhaustive list of conditions but merely a selection based on my chosen case study. If one were to analyse, say, domestic labour or voluntary care, the selection would likely be different. Secondly, the three categories are highly interrelated; multiple aspects fit into more than one category and have implications that affect each other.

The first category of power relations encompasses various aspects related to power dynamics and potential oppression. The aim is to give an overview over the social position the workers find themselves in, giving insight into the power dynamics that likely determine other aspects of their work. As such, the category encompasses demographics such as age, ethnicity, and

gender since these have implications for how independent a worker is and which choices they have. It also encompasses their workplace and employment status, i.e. the degree of formality of their job, and the exact type of sex work they engage in. Moreover, I include workplace relationships, such as the relationship to the employer if existent, in this category.

The second category of health, safety, and violence aims to point out the specific impact sex work has on workplace health and occupational health. As Greenlees (2016: 460) summarises, "workplace health encompasses ill-health experienced at work but not necessarily caused by it and overlaps with occupational health, or ill-health caused by specific work processes" (ibid.). For instance, the normalisation of drug consumption during work may be classed as workplace health while the availability of protective equipment falls under occupational health. Violence encompasses direct, physical violence, such as experiences of rape or sexual harassment; however, derived from Galtung's model of violence (Galtung 1969), I also include structural and cultural violence which may manifest itself in form of verbal, emotional, or financial abuse. Galtung talks about structural violence, such as discrimination or harm due to unequal distribution of resources, and cultural violence, such as ideologies that legitimise structural and personal forms of violence. Such ideologies can be inherent in religion, education, science, language, or art. Any mental and physical health consequences also fall into this second category. These can but do not have to be related to drug use and alcohol consumption.

The third category of occupational choice includes some working conditions that are indirect and about the degree of freedom the worker has more generally. For instance, it includes alternative work options, also with regard to the worker's individual skillset, and the opportunity cost of taking up such work – i.e. income levels compared to other available jobs,

which may influence job satisfaction. Furthermore, I include the private and public safety networks of workers. Another concept relevant for this category is what Esping-Andersen (1990) describes as decommodification, i.e. the freedom from the pressure to sell one's labour power, since this determines which working conditions a worker is willing to accept. If decommodification, e.g. due to a good welfare system, is high, they may choose not to work or to work in a job with less income but better conditions. If decommodification is low, they may be economically forced to enter into work relations which are dangerous or unstable. Occupational choice also encompasses legislation regarding gender inequality and the legal freedom to take up formal employment.

### *2.3 Studying sex work: motivations and limitations*

The aim of this project is to document how, despite the industry not being seen as 'real work', working conditions are as fundamental to sex workers' wellbeing as they are to the wellbeing of people working in other industries. I have selected this industry because it meets several criteria that are crucial for a case study on social perceptions of work. However, studying sex work comes with hurdles and limitations. In this section I outline these limitations and explain why sex work is nonetheless particularly suitable for my project.

In political science, discussions of sex work prominently occur in political theory. It features topics such as exploitation (Sample 2003: 85), decriminalisation (Comte 2013), ethics around renting out one's body (Anderson 1990), legality versus legitimacy, and the role of sex work for emancipation (Comte 2013). Consequently, the debate is often led along the lines of whether sex work should (legally or ethically) exist or not. On the level of pop culture and

public discourse, this question is often answered by referring to vague intuitions of what 'real work' is, usually without specifying which definition of work is used and why this narrative was chosen. For instance, in an article published by *Evie Magazine*, the author writes that "validating prostitution as 'real work' is ignorant and harmful" (Dimuro 2019). My project will show that whether we ideologically want to class sex work (or 'prostitution') as real work or not, the conditions this economic activity is performed under are just as fundamental for the participants' wellbeing as in other jobs. Consequently, it would be counterproductive to put the question of legality/legitimacy over the study of the effects of sex work on the worker. Refusing to class some types of economic activity as 'work' inevitably leads to negligence of the study of the conditions under which people perform this activity, thereby failing to account for these people's wellbeing appropriately. My project is therefore not concerned with the question of whether sex work should exist or not but instead focuses on the wellbeing effects of an economic activity that currently exists.

I have outlined in section 2.1 that I adopt a broad understanding of work as a planned, structured activity that is fundamental to human life, that comes at a cost (such as energy, resources, or time), and that creates something (such as goods, services, or another form of utility); I have further explained how this is influenced by Marx's notion of work. Consequently, I adopt a Marxian understanding of exploitation based on the appropriation of surplus value (Marx 1999). Since my project is not concerned with the question of whether sex work differs from other kinds of labour, my research is not reliant on accounts of exploitation focused specifically on sex workers. Since Marx's notion of exploitation is deliberately broad and inclusive of all types of wage labour, my analysis of the specific working conditions in sex work is not concerned with judging these conditions as more or less exploitative than those of other forms of wage labour. Doing so would automatically make a

case for or against the legitimacy of this type of work. To avoid this, I limit any mentioning of existing exploitative structures to whether surplus value is being appropriated or not, for example by procurers or other employers.

The need for these specifications illustrates some of the research issues surrounding sex work. The requirement of theoretical and linguistic precision appears to be particularly high in this area due to the volume of different, often heavily opinionated approaches. Since it is almost impossible to study sex work without touching upon issues that are deemed 'sensitive' or 'personal', such as mentions of violence, it is especially important to carefully consider the research ethics of a given project. Thus, data is rather scarce and difficult to obtain (see also chapter 4.1). Research institutions usually deem victims of such violence 'vulnerable' (see, for example, University of Manchester 2020), meaning that a researcher might need specific training to work with them. Studying working conditions in this industry can quickly turn into a minefield of ethical issues due to its nature of involving situations that cannot usually be observed or controlled.

Despite these challenges and the limitations they pose, sex work is particularly useful for my project. The power dynamics that are revealed and reproduced by definitions of 'work' and 'non-work' can be examined particularly well with regard to this industry. Since sex work is often not seen as 'real work' and constructed as easy, lazy or even immoral, and since working conditions in sex work exhibit strong intersections with other indicators of wellbeing, like health or income, sex work is an ideal case study for an analysis of how perception and reality of work are linked. While there are other female-dominated fields that are devalued as 'non-work' or overlooked by research, sex work is a profession of which a lot of people have a very clear image in their heads; the perception of workers in other fields might be a lot less

concrete. Additionally, the percentage of sex workers who are female is with around 88% particularly high (Brooks-Gordon et al. 2015); according to data from the US Department of Labour (Elkins 2015), a larger percentage of women can only be found among registered nurses. Consequently, it is likely that sex work is among the industries which are most commonly 'feminised', i.e. seen as a 'women's field', which are often perceived as needing fewer skills and which virtually anyone could do (cf. Leslie et al. 2015).

Yet, sex work is only one example for such feminised and devalued professions. Similar analyses could be conducted with other types of activities that are commonly dismissed as 'not real work', most prominently fields within social reproduction. Industries in which atypical and precarious employment is common may also serve as examples; people who work multiple small jobs, for instance, may experience not being seen as a 'full', 'real' worker in each of their jobs. If the aim is ultimately to assess people's wellbeing based on their work, like I suggest in this paper, there are plenty of fields for which there is currently little research experience regarding working conditions. For this particular project, which also wants to examine the representation of work in popular culture and specifically literature, sex work is an ideal starting point; throughout the ages and genres, sex workers have featured in numerous novels, with many fictional sex workers becoming iconic and/or notorious displays of marginalised social realities.

### *2.4 Methodology*

Based on these theoretical foundations, and with sex work as a chosen case study, I formulate the following overarching research question:

*How does the popular conception of sex work relate to the material working conditions sex workers face?*

This can be further divided into the following three questions:

1. How are the working conditions of sex workers commonly perceived?
2. What do these working conditions look like in the lives of real sex workers?
3. How accurate is the image society has of sex workers?

Answering these questions involves two steps – firstly, an assessment of how sex work is commonly perceived, and secondly, a comparing analysis of the real working conditions in sex work. For this purpose, I propose a mixed methods approach, the first step being explored through content analysis and the second through literature review.

Assessing how the conditions in sex work are commonly perceived, i.e. which image people have of sex workers and the work they do, I analyse popular literature featuring sex work. I select ten internationally successful novels from a broad timespan, consequently novels that are considered 'classics' or 'modern classics'; as I outline in chapter 3.1, the amount of sex work in them differs. Choosing popular literature to gain insight into social stereotypes has three main advantages over alternative qualitative methods, like conducting interviews with members of the public or sex workers themselves.

Firstly, analysing popular culture avoids some of the complicated ethical challenges of researching sex work. Many aspects of work that I aim to discuss in this paper involve sensitive issues, such as workplace violence in form of rape and harassment, financial abuse, or drug addiction. Finding the right way to talk to people directly about these topics requires much experience and interdisciplinary expertise; moreover, confronting people with these topics can have triggering effects which are hard to control and which might influence the

research results. Secondly, influential works of fiction provide means of revealing popular images of sex workers that might be difficult to access otherwise. They can tap into less conscious stereotypes of sex work, which might remain hidden if researchers question people directly. Thirdly, looking at literature with an international impact over a longer time period enables researchers to get a grasp of stereotypes prevalent internationally and intertemporally. Trying to assess perceptions which are similarly widely held would require a particularly large and diverse sample of the general population to participate in the research.

Consequently, I look at scenes from novels featuring sex workers and assess what they say directly or indirectly about the working conditions as outlined previously, i.e. power dynamics, health and safety, and occupational choice. Specifically, I work out whether there are trends or repetitive representations but also potential differences among them.

Secondly, I compare the results of the analysis of sex work in novels to the occupational reality of sex workers to find out how social perceptions of sex work relate to real working conditions. I want to find out which differences and similarities there are and what this could mean for research and policymaking. Therefore, I am also looking for indications that social perceptions of sex work influence sex workers' daily lives.

To paint a somewhat accurate picture of sex work, it would be insufficient to limit oneself to one single study of it. As outlined earlier, researching working conditions in sex work has been neglected in the past; existing studies with rather small and local sample sizes are often too niche to serve as useful comparisons to literature which, as I argue, has had global influence on how sex work is perceived over decades or centuries. Consequently, I will draw on information from multiple sources to gain knowledge specifically about the types of working conditions commonly featured – or universally left out – in the selected novels.

Using a broad range of research is fundamental for capturing the diversity of sex workers' experiences.

I will limit my research to working conditions in the UK as an example of a 'Western' country, since the novels I have selected are also based in the West. Due to a lack of rigorous data collection on sex workers in the past, my sources for this second method largely refer to working conditions throughout the last few decades. While I attempt to account for the most apparent historical differences, my central argument assumes that the novels still impact social perceptions of sex work today; consequently, a comparison to modern working conditions is a valid way to analyse the link between perception of work and reality.

## III.: Fictional Representations of the Sex Work Industry

This chapter analyses how sex workers and their working conditions are portrayed in popular literature. I firstly provide a brief overview of sex work in fiction to introduce the material this chapter relies on. Then I analyse three groups of working conditions as outlined in the previous chapter, organised by *power relations*, *health and safety*, and finally *occupational choice*. Each of these sections highlights similarities, differences and peculiarities in how novels portray working conditions in the sex work industry.

### *3.1 Sex work in popular fiction: an overview*

I have chosen to select ten well-known and internationally successful books to include in my analysis. While they exhibit notable similarities, they differ highly in the amount of sex work descriptions they feature; some of them include sex work in their main themes, with sex workers being protagonists, while other fictional sex workers only appear briefly as side characters. Consequently, not all novels can contribute to all points of my analysis.

I have chosen novels which are so widely read that it is reasonable to assume they will inevitably exercise some influence on social perceptions of sex work. This is a different approach from Hapke (1989), who focuses on novels which are heavily centred around sex work and particularly the 'fallen woman' trope, such as *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* by Stephen Crane or *The Lawton Girl* by Harold Frederic. However, since many (if not all) of the works I have selected appear on mandatory reading lists across high schools and universities internationally, which cannot be said for many of the works Hapke analyses, they are particularly relevant for this project.

I have selected the following ten books:[1]

| **Author** | **Title** | **Year of Publication** | **Place of Publication** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Charles Dickens | Oliver Twist | 1837 | UK |
| Victor Hugo | Les Misérables | 1862 | France |
| James Joyce | Dubliners | 1914 | UK |
| Hermann Hesse | Siddhartha | 1922 | Switzerland |
| Margaret Mitchell | Gone with the Wind | 1936 | US |
| J D Salinger | The Catcher in the Rye | 1946 | US |
| Ken Kesey | One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest | 1962 | US |
| Sylvia Plath | The Bell Jar | 1963 | UK |
| Hubert Selby | Last Exit to Brooklyn | 1964 | US |
| Christiane Felscherinow (edited by Kai Hermann & Horst Rieck) | Christiane F ("We Children of Zoo Station") | 1978 | Germany |

*Les Misérables*, *Siddhartha*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* all feature a few scenes in which characters are explicitly identified as sex workers, their occupation being one of their main traits or identifiers. However, the portion of the plot concerned with their work is rather small and they often seem to serve as instruments to illustrate personality traits of other (often male) protagonists. As such,

- Fantine in *Les Misérables* brings out Jean Valjean's benevolent and caring side;
- Kamala in *Siddhartha* represents the materialistic world that the ascetic Siddhartha falls for;

[1] To provide an overview of the selected works, I have included the year of first publication in this table. Throughout my analysis I will be using more recent editions. Due to the lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, I was unable to attain English copies of numerous books. Consequently, mentions of the selected books mostly refer to German editions as listed in the bibliography.

- the treatment of Belle Watling in *Gone with the Wind* reveals certain behavioural codes for women in the Antebellum South;
- Holden's encounter with Sunny in *The Catcher in the Rye* serves as an illustration of his struggle with puberty and mental health;
- and finally, Candy and Sandy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* demonstrate that Billy Bibbit can overcome his shyness and fear of women.

These five novels are therefore useful representations of fiction which features sex work in a way stereotypical enough to conjure up social imagery of sex workers; such imagery likely goes unchallenged since it is not among the main themes of the novels.

*Oliver Twist*, *Dubliners*, and *The Bell Jar* do not explicitly feature sex work, and whether their characters engage in sex work is a matter of interpretation. Yet, I argue that they impact how sex work is perceived socially. Beckley (2010) has recently argued that Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, despite being called "a prostitute" in the 1841 preface by Charles Dickens, might never have engaged in sex work after all since the term "cohabitant prostitute" used to be applied to unmarried women living with their boyfriends (Mayhew 2005: 83). The possibility of Dickens not intending to describe Nancy as someone who has sex for money is supported by Wolff (1996: 235). However, she is often regarded as one of the first literary representations of the "tart with a heart" trope (Burger 2020: 22); since she has been (mis)interpreted as a sex worker for decades, Dickens might have shaped the social perception of sex work without intending to do so.

*Dubliners* has been interpreted as interwoven with sex work without mentioning it explicitly (Wirth-Nesher 1996: 172). Joyce uses imagery that is strongly associated with sex work, such as Mrs. Mooney being known as "the Madam" (Joyce 1956: 67) or Mr. Conroy only being aroused by his wife when she looks like a stranger leading him to a hotel room (Joyce 1956:

246). In *The Bell Jar*, hints to sex work are mainly implicit in one scene in which protagonist Esther considers stealing a tiepin with a diamond from a man who sexually assaulted her (Plath 2018: 121). The influence these three books have on social perceptions of sex work is therefore more subtle.

Finally, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *Christiane F* have become known for featuring notorious and straightforward descriptions of the daily lives of sex workers. While Tralala is often the only one focused on in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, the book's transgender community also engages in the provision of sexual services for money, drugs or presents, blurring the lines between sex work and romance. *Christiane F* features similar relationships, though this book is unique in this list as it is autobiographical, meaning the characters and their stories are not fictional. Yet, Christiane's life has become partly fictionalised various times, whether in the 1981 film adaptation or in the upcoming TV series produced by Amazon Prime (Conrad 2020). Consequently, both books have had wide social influence on how sex work is perceived.

I have shown that the extent to which the chosen books feature sex work differs significantly, but that they all provide insight into how authors have seen sex work and therefore into how they have reproduced the social perceptions of their time. It is important to keep in mind that my selection of novels is biased – it features books by predominantly white and exclusively Western authors, the majority of whom are men. Other scholars have focused on sex work representations in, for instance, Chinese fiction (Zamperini 2010) or African literature (Senkoro 1982). Therefore, this analysis cannot be exhaustive, and the books analysed are by no means the only works of fiction which have shaped social perceptions of sex work around the world.

*3.2 Fictional sex workers and workplace power relations*

I start my analysis with some of the most striking similarities between sex workers in my selected novels – their demographics and what they imply about the power dynamics sex workers face. Most of the books exclusively portray female sex workers. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is the only novel which explicitly also features transgender women engaging in sex work; however, Selby's portrayal of sexuality and gender is blurred, meaning that he uses the term "queen" to refer to characters who might be transwomen or homosexual men with a drag persona (Selby 2011: 31-32), so their gender identity is not entirely clear. *Christiane F* first introduces sex work through female and male characters like Detlef; in fact, Christiane at first takes pride in not having to engage in sex work herself but having male sex workers providing for her (Felscherinow 1978: 103).

Besides gender, the portrayed sex workers exhibit similarities in their age and ethnicity. Many of them are described as specifically 16-17 years old, such as in *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger 2010: 103), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Kesey 2020: 245), *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (Selby 2011: 73), *Christiane F* (Felscherinow 1978: 189) and *Oliver Twist* (Dickens 2005: 168); the rest is generally described as young. Most of them are either explicitly white or white-coded by describing them as blonde (Salinger 2010: 103; Kesey 2020: 256; Hugo 2013: 295) or pale (e.g. Dickens 2005: 397). Some characters have their ethnicity revealed by the way in which they talk about minority-ethnic people or by their role in race conflicts. This is the case, for instance, in Esther's conflicts with black staff members (Plath 2018: 195), in the way Christiane describes foreign or minority-ethnic clients (Felscherinow 1978: 292), or in the social position of Belle Watling in Georgia during the Civil War (Mitchell 2019: 273). The only character who can reasonably be assumed not to be white is Kamala in *Siddhartha*

as the story takes place in 6th century BC India; however, she is described as having very light skin (Hesse 1951: 54).

Gender, age, and ethnicity as described place sex workers in a very specific demographic position of power. One the one hand, they are constructed as somewhat vulnerable and in need of protection through the descriptions as young females. On the other hand, they are given some amount of social power due to their whiteness, mainly in that they may exercise control as potential love interests for predominantly white male protagonists during times in which interracial relationships would have been difficult or impossible.

The demographics of fictional sex workers hint at the power dynamics they encounter in the workplace generally. Such power dynamics are further shaped by the type and place of sex work. Kamala, for instance, seems to welcome men on her own luxurious property (Hesse 1951: 54); Belle works in her brothel and in bars (Mitchell 2019: 392); Sunny (Salinger 2010: 99) and Tralala (Selby 2011: 71) often work in hotels, the hotel as a sex work motif is also utilised in *Dubliners* (Joyce 1956: 246ff.); and finally, Fantine (Hugo 2013: 200) and Christiane (Felscherinow 1978: 118) are street-based.

The workplaces indicate a low degree of formality. Almost all of them work in traditional settings and clear-cut, albeit informal, types of sex work, with clear distinctions between workers, clients, and lovers. Some exceptions can be found regardless, for instance in the queer community of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. "Queens" like Georgette, Alberta or Regina have "johns", who are often somewhere between clients and lovers; they perform sexual services in exchange for dates in bars or restaurants (Selby 2011: 173), but these dates are interpreted as parts of genuine romantic relationships by "johns". A similar dynamic exists between Detlef and Rolf in *Christiane F* (Felscherinow 1978: 210). Another interesting blurring of such lines can be found in *Gone with the Wind* – when Scarlett O'Hara plans to marry Rhett Butler to

get out of financial hardship, she thinks to herself that what she tries to do differs in no way from what sex worker Belle Watling is doing, meaning she accepts strategic marriage as a form of what she calls “prostitution” (Mitchell 2019: 600).

Depending on the workplace, the employment relations of sex workers differ. Several authors add a procurer to the sex work setting; this person may be a pimp or madam in the traditional sense, or someone the sex worker has a romantic relationship with and who tries to profit off their work. Consequently, the relationships sex workers have with procurers is portrayed either as benevolent or deceitful; often, they incorporate elements of both, with procurers providing protection while also behaving exploitatively. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, pimp Maurice advertises Sunny’s services to Holden in the lift of a hotel (Salinger 2010: 99); without her knowledge, he names a lower price to get Holden to agree and is willing to fight for the money. Tralala in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* mentions that whenever members of the gang around Vinnie organise for her to sleep with a soldier, they refuse to hand over her fair share (Selby 2011: 70). At the same time, when she gets into trouble, they beat up clients for her (Selby 2011: 72).

McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* profits from arranging for Candy to sleep with Billy, his profit being a few bottles of liquor (Kesey 2020: 285); while Candy seems to have romantic feelings for him, he is openly called a pimp by the narrator (ibid.). A similar relationship is implicit in *Oliver Twist*; Fagin and Bill fulfil a social function of offering protection and romance while simultaneously profiting off the money Nancy makes, whether through thievery or sex work (Dickens 2005: 467). In *Dubliners*, Joyce offers a slightly more ambiguous take on this theme; the “Madam”, Mrs Mooney, arranges a marriage for money between her daughter Polly and her lodger Mr Doran. Joyce emphasises that she treats this as

"business", once more conjuring up sex work imagery (Norris 2003: 101), but since the person in question is her own daughter, she seems to have her best interests at heart.

I have shown that while the exact power relations of sex workers differ, common themes draw a specific picture of workplace power dynamics. Most sex workers are portrayed as in need of protection despite some degree of agency, particularly regarding romantic relationships. This is reflected both in their demographics and in their relationships with procurers. The type of sex work and where it takes place appear to be crucial for workplace relationships. As I will show in the following section, it is also interrelated with health, safety, and the kind of violence fictional sex workers experience.

### *3.3 Health, safety, and violence in fictional sex work*

Workplace health and safety conditions, including vulnerability to violence, are the most explicitly mentioned working conditions of literary sex workers. Notably, descriptions of occupational health are rare; even transgressive authors avoid talking about those aspects of sex workers' health that are directly related to the sex act rather than to the general environment they work in.

A striking example for an unclear distinction between workplace health and occupational health in the sex work industry is the role of drug and alcohol consumption. The novels present the relation between drugs and sex work often as a causality dilemma similar to 'the chicken or the egg' – some characters engage in sex work to fund their drug addiction while others take drugs to cope with the mental strains of the job, and sometimes one turns into the

other. Most notably, almost all described sex workers engage in heavy drinking. Candy and Sandy mix alcohol with medication found in the mental institution (Kesey 2020: 318), Georgette and her friends mix gin, Benzedrine and finally morphine or heroin (Selby 2011: 34, 55), Nancy is first introduced with strong signs of alcoholism (Dickens 2005: 95), Esther drank more daiquiris than she could count (Plath 2018: 117), Belle is seen heavily intoxicated (Mitchell 2019: 392), Fantine's breath smells of liquor (Hugo 2013: 200) and Christiane describes her journey from cigarettes, alcohol, cannabis and LSD to heroin. Sunny (Salinger 2010: 103) is the only one who repeatedly refuses Holden's cigarettes.

Experiences of physical violence are also prevalent. While experiencing violence is often implied to be part of sex workers' daily lives, authors sometimes highlight particularly brutal experiences with long-lasting consequences for the sex workers of their stories. The most notorious happens to Tralala in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (Selby 2011: 84ff.). Starting with Tralala getting drunk in a bar, her ability to consent already being diminished, the scene quickly turns into gangrape with over 50 men present, and finally culminates in a violence excess during which Tralala gets seriously injured; it remains unclear whether she survives these injuries. Nancy is physically abused and murdered by Bill Sikes (Dickens 2005: 497). Fantine has an encounter with a man who attacks her by putting snow in her dress (Hugo 2013: 200), which leads to illness and finally death.

Christiane provides details of a man being prosecuted for sexual abuse of children (Felscherinow 1978: 274); since some of the sex workers she describes are as young as 12, a lot of the sex work happening at Zoo Station could be classed as rape. She also describes another form of sex work specific rape, however, when she explains that some of the clients pay less than what was agreed (Felscherinow 1978: 119). Using the concept of conditional consent, for example consent tied to the condition of payment of a certain sum of money, sex

workers' organisations class underpayment as rape (Miren 2019; Support for Student Sex Workers 2019). This also happens in *The Catcher in the Rye*; pimp Maurice told Holden a lower price than what Sunny demanded, so Holden refused to pay more than that (Salinger 2010: 105). Holden did not actually sleep with Sunny; if he had done so, this encounter would have been rape from Sunny's perspective. Since Maurice told him the wrong price strategically to get him to agree to the deal, similar situations likely occur to Sunny regularly.

Esther in *The Bell Jar* has a very specific experience with physical violence. She is not a sex worker; yet, when her acquaintance Marco sexually assaults her, she tries to keep his diamond tie pin as 'payment' for this encounter (Plath 2018: 119-121). This is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly, while in other novels the sex worker's occupation makes them vulnerable to violence, the violent encounter here comes first; Esther only considers accepting payment for sex once the incident begins. This plays into a theme known from *Gone with the Wind* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, which is the blurring of what 'sex for money' really means. Secondly, when Esther previously holds his tie pin to look at it, Marco says: "Maybe later on I can provide her with a service […] that is worth a diamond" (Plath 2018: 116). He thereby implies that he might try and earn his diamond back by sleeping with her. Marco jokingly puts himself in the position of providing sex for payment, which foreshadows Esther's reaction to the assault later on; he seems to have an attitude to sex work that is notably similar to the one described in the very first paragraph of this paper.

A theme of sex work being associated with physical violence – particularly with murder, injury, and rape – is apparent throughout the books. However, other forms of violence also play an important role in the daily lives of the portrayed sex workers. Most experience some kind of verbal or emotional abuse. Street harassment occurs, for instance, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; Candy is watched and catcalled by a group of men (Kesey 2020: 244)

while the patients stand by, too shy to intervene. This disappoints her so much that she even considers joining the men who had harassed her instead. Fantine in *Les Misérables* is verbally abused before being attacked physically (Hugo 2013: 199). Siddhartha shows himself surprised that Kamala is not scared of him, explaining that he could force her, kidnap her, or hurt her (Hesse 1951: 58); while the reader might perceive this as rhetorical, it sounds like an implicit threat and Siddhartha seemingly enjoys playing with masculine power. Esther quickly recognises Marco's misogyny even before he starts insulting and objectifying her (Plath 2018: 120).

Johan Galtung conceptualised violence as having not just active, concrete sides, like the one mentioned above, but also passive and underlying sides (Galtung 1969: 169ff.). These forms of violence are universally prevalent among sex workers in novels. An example for structural violence is the lack of therapy capacities for underage drug addicts that Christiane experiences (Felscherinow 1978: 223); this forces her into sex work. Another example is Fantine being fired for having a child (Hugo 2013: 189). An example for cultural violence against sex workers is the use of sex work related slurs against women. This happens, for instance, in *Dubliners*, when Corley calls a woman he is seeing a "fine decent tart" (Joyce 1956: 57). While it is necessary to account for historical differences in how specific words were used, their misogynistic implications have usually existed for centuries. Consequently, they are an expression of cultural violence.

Violence and other workplace health hazards inevitably have consequences for physical and mental health. As mentioned previously, occupational health concerns specifically related to the sex act are rarely mentioned; consequences of drug abuse, i.e. workplace health consequences, are more commonly found. An exception is *Christiane F*. Christiane mentions towards the end of the book that she did not expect her engagement in sex work to have

consequences for her physical or mental wellbeing; yet, she struggles to have sexual relationships with men long after leaving the scene (Felscherinow 1978: 324) due to her sex work experiences. She also mentions that most sex workers catch sexually transmitted diseases since many clients refuse to wear condoms (Felscherinow 1978: 139).

For many of the portrayed sex workers, it is reasonable to assume that both drug abuse and violence have harsh physical consequences. If Tralala survives the injuries described during the gangrape scene, they likely last for the rest of her life. The attempted rape against Esther is pivotal in her mental health crisis described throughout the rest of the novel. Christiane's heroin addiction repeatedly leads to jaundice; she describes several suicides of other addicts and sex workers. Fantine's life on the streets and the attack against her lead to her death. With workplace health of sex workers being as poor as described, some of the demographic similarities mentioned in the previous section make sense – fictional sex workers might be young because their described working conditions are so bad that growing old becomes unlikely.

### *3.4 Occupational choice in the sex work industry*

With health and safety conditions being as harsh as described, the question of occupational choice arises. The degree of occupational choice fictional sex workers have is derived from descriptions of the economy in the books and from the historical contexts of the novels. Consequently, there are larger discrepancies in this category than in the previous ones. Nevertheless, some trends can be found.

Many of the novels portray other kinds of work as either unavailable or inaccessible to sex workers. Authors choose a variety of instruments to reveal this, for instance by showing how arduous other means of making a living are. This is the case in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, which features a long strike at a New York factory. The conflict reveals that although the workers have some ability to protest bad working conditions, the factory management is able to exploit the strike to further their own aims since the union cannot support the workers for long enough to have significant bargaining power (Selby 2011: 102). While Tralala struggles to keep her income from external control by male gang members, it is shown that women in formal employment face the same problem in their marriage – the money they bring home is appropriated by their husbands (Selby 2011: 182). The difficulty of factory work is also described in *Les Misérables*; while sex work is straightforwardly described as "slavery" (Hugo 2013: 197) due to a lack of control over one's own circumstances, Fantine had similarly little control over her situation when she was in formal employment.

Another instrument is a reference to the characters' skill levels or abilities to pursue other careers. Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind* is described as successful with her mills only because she excels in mathematics and accounting (Mitchell 2019: 650); the only other successful businesswoman is sex worker Belle. Yet, even Scarlett would not have been able to survive without marrying Frank Kennedy for his money, which indicates the low availability of options for women in Atlanta. Nancy in *Oliver Twist* has been with Fagin from a young age, revealing that she lacks education or training to engage in anything other than petty crime. In *Christiane F*, the options are mainly limited by the amount of money needed to fund heroin addiction; as such, even skilled workers have to give up their job and engage in sex work (Felscherinow 1978: 197). The only character who has explicitly-mentioned skills and opportunities to earn the money she needs is Esther in *The Bell Jar*; however, she increasingly finds herself unable to pursue her career due to her mental health (Plath 2018: 36), which could have contributed to her willingness to exchange sex for payment.

Many fictional sex workers do not have options other than sex work to make money. However, if those options do exist, there is opportunity cost involved in taking them up; often, the opportunity cost is too high to make different economic activity feasible. The main way to measure such opportunity cost is income, i.e. how much money someone would lose if they switched from sex work to a different job. Another contributing factor is job satisfaction – while some aspects of other jobs may be desirable, such as better health and safety, sex workers may be unable or unwilling to give up the convenience of their job.

The income mentioned for fictional sex workers differs dramatically, often not just between books but even within books. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Maurice claims that Sunny charges "$5 a throw, $15 a night" (Salinger 2010: 99), though eventually they demand twice as much from Holden. A glance at American average incomes in 1946 (Sawyer 1948: 6) shows that since Sunny works every night (Salinger 2010: 104), her weekly income lies way above average even if the lower price is charged and even if Maurice appropriates a significant portion of it. Since her work hours might be less regular and more precarious than those of a full-time employee elsewhere, her actual annual income might be much lower; yet, the ratio of income per hours worked would make her opportunity cost high. Fantine is in a similar situation, with her sex work income being low but above the wage she was paid in the factory (Hugo 2013: 196). The main problem of sex work income seems to be irregularity; both Tralala and Nancy need to engage in theft to get by (e.g. Selby 2011: 78). However, plenty of sex workers are shown to make large sums if business goes well. This applies to Belle Watling, who was able to donate a large sum of money to the hospital during the American Civil War (Mitchell 2019: 275), but also to Christiane, who describes the amount of money heroin addicts need. Christiane made around 4000 D-Mark a month through sex work, which is comparable to a manager's salary (Felscherinow 1978: 194); other addicts she knew needed

up to 850 D-Mark a day for heroin. Other fictional sex workers are paid in presents or drugs (Hesse 1951: 59; Selby 2011: 77).

This indicates that the opportunity cost of taking up another job is often very high, measured by income. In terms of job satisfaction, the situation is less clear. Sunny (Salinger 2010: 103) seems to be under a lot of stress, Candy (Kesey 2020: 255) is visibly fed up with her clients, Christiane (Felscherinow 1978: 194) remains disgusted by her job. Others, however – such as Kamala, Belle, and Tralala – do not seem to have negative feelings towards their occupation. As a result, it can be said that occupational choice of fictional sex workers is limited by the high opportunity cost in terms of income, which keeps even those sex workers in the industry who would prefer making money elsewhere.

The opportunity cost of taking up a different job is only one aspect of economic coercion into sex work. Another aspect is how much pressure there is in the economy to sell one's labour power. This can be analysed through the existence of both the public and the private safety net of sex workers – if there is a functioning welfare state and a solvent family or spouse, they experience high decommodification, i.e. much freedom from the pressure to sell their labour power through sex work.

In almost all the books, the described decommodification is very low. This is evident in *The Catcher in the Rye* since Sunny has to work every night (Salinger 2010: 104), in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* since Sandy immediately returns to sex work after a very short marriage (Kesey 2020: 314), in *Oliver Twist* which is set before any amount of workers' protection could properly develop (Aspin 1981: 30), in *Dubliners* where the lower middle class is desperate to maintain a somewhat comfortable lifestyle (Joyce 1956: 52ff.), in *Christiane F* since the public healthcare system is overwhelmed by the exploding numbers of drug addicts (Felscherinow 1978: 223), and in *Les Misérables* because Fantine cannot expect

anyone else to care for her child (Hugo 2013: 197). An exception is Esther in *The Bell Jar*, whose survival is relatively secure due to her stipends and her mother's home. Notably, most novels present sex work as a last resort for people who otherwise have no financial help to hope for.

This also applies to the private safety net of sex workers. While many of the novels feature male characters with a strong desire to help sex workers, almost all of them eventually fail to truly make a change. Interestingly, several of those characters were victims of sexual abuse. This applies to Holden (Salinger 2010: 208), Stotter-Max (Felscherinow 1978: 125), and Billy (Kesey 2020: 311). In some cases, temporary financial safety is provided by a love interest, like in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* when an officer falls in love with Tralala (Selby 2011: 78), or in *Gone with the Wind* with Rhett Butler lending money to Belle so she could open her bar (Mitchell 2019: 696). However, all these characters are presented as exceptional in sex workers' lives. Their social environment is dominated by people who exploit and abuse them; attempts to help them serve the purpose of maintaining their labour power so that profit can be extracted from their work, meaning their wellbeing would become irrelevant as soon as they became unable to sell sex. This shows that decommodification is overall very low, partly because the only protection they have is tied to their ability to work.

## IV: Occupational Reality in the Sex Work Industry

This chapter compares the results from the analysis of fiction to working conditions in reality. After outlining problems around the narrow focus of academic research on sex work, I assess how accurate the portrayals of demographics and power dynamics, health and safety, and occupational choice are.

### *4.1 Data and research on sex work in the United Kingdom*

As Sanders et al. (2016: 133) explain, "it is only recently that discussions around the quality of work and job satisfaction of sex workers have been brought to the research agenda". While there has long been an interest in discussions around the morality and legality of sex work, research into sex workers' working conditions is rather scarce and scattered. For this reason, I was unable to find suitable individual surveys or data sets comprehensive enough to offer a comparison to the descriptions of the novels. When trying to gain insight into the working conditions in the sex work industry, it seems necessary to collect information from as many sources as possible; if primary research is available, it is usually not conducted with representative samples and therefore requires contextualisation by other sources. This is related to a large part of the sex work industry being invisible, especially when it comes to historical accounts of sex work. Laite (2011: 26) states that it is almost impossible to gain information about historical sex workers who "did not come into contact with the criminal justice system, or any reform and rescue association". Of course, research limited to sex workers who did come in touch with such institutions would inevitably exhibit a strong bias.

While I try to account for historical differences in sex workers' working conditions, I therefore prioritise giving a detailed overview over the diverse occupational reality of sex workers, which is better documented in recent sources. Yet, Corbin (1990: 53) explains that demographically, the typical historical sex worker was "very much like most other women", and Laite (2011: 26) adds that historically, sex workers did not fit into a homogenous stereotype, indicating that many of my conclusions based on modern academic sources also apply to the historical situation of sex workers.

Another issue is that many of the sources that do exist have a narrow focus on conditions in street-based sex work and human trafficking; Mai (2012: 571) argues that this focus is facilitated by "political and social intervention elites" trying to "maintain the moral high ground". This results in the construction of a dichotomy between some sex workers as vulnerable victims of coercion and the 'others' who do not deserve protection due to their immoral occupational choices (ibid.). Trying to find sources on a variety of sex workers' working conditions therefore requires critical reading and following up on individual sources.

Professor Teela Sanders from the University of Leicester has made significant contributions to compiling both primary and secondary research specifically on sex workers' working conditions in the UK. Her work is a crucial starting point for gaining an overview, but also for finding further literature. She mentions that research in recent years has focused largely on street sex workers, drug users, and those in the criminal justice system (Sanders et al. 2009: 182); this highlights the difficulty but simultaneously the value of trying to offer a broader picture. The following sections, which compare the lived reality of sex workers with how working conditions of the industry are portrayed in the novels, attempt to use a broad range of research which reflects the need to dedicate appropriate attention to the diversity of the industry.

*4.2 The diverse reality of sex work*

In 3.2, I have outlined that fictional representations of sex workers' demographics and workplaces were exceptionally homogenous to an extent that immediately appears unrealistic. Many of the books were published before globalisation made cross-border migration accessible, hence the homogenous representations may have been less inaccurate upon publication than they are today; yet, the ongoing popularity of the books likely results in them shaping stereotypes about who sex workers are, what their workplace looks like, and which power dynamics they experience.

Firstly, demographics of sex workers are a lot more diverse than the novels suggest. Sanders et al. (2009: 40) explain that it is not possible to determine exact and reliable numbers for the gender distribution among sex workers. While it is accurate that the majority of sex workers are female, a Home Affairs Select Committee report (2016: 2.17) suggests that among indoor sex workers, more than 17% identify as male and more than 2% as transgender; this means the trans community is likely overrepresented among sex workers. Most fictional accounts seem to ignore male and transgender sex workers entirely, however. As for age, while some sources refer to sex workers having entered the industry before the age of 18 (e.g. Cusick et al. 2003), the Home Affairs Select Committee report (2016: 2.20) suggests that the average starting age is between 20 and 24. Notably, the report adds a paragraph (2.21) on the problems around exploitation of children aged 16 or 17; those were the ages most commonly featured in the novels. Since young people aged 16 or 17 are legally able to consent, it is difficult to track down and persecute exploitative relationships. As this group appears to be massively

overrepresented in fiction, the question arises whether authors intended to emphasise the particularly vulnerable situation these sex workers are exposed to; whether intentionally or not, their young age helps to construct fictional sex workers as particularly innocent 'perfect victims' (cf. Marcus et al. 2012). Sanders et al. (2009: 43) also point out that street-based sex workers tend to be younger than those who work indoors.

In fiction, the interplay of vulnerability and agency is highly dependent on fictional sex workers being white and having seemingly grown up in the country they live in. There was not a single migrant sex worker in the novels I have examined. Research indicates that the percentage of migrant sex workers, particularly migrant women, has been rising steadily since the 1990s (Agustin 2006). This seems to be confirmed by smaller, more specific studies; Malek et al. (2013) find that among male sex workers in London, the percentage of people born in Latin and South America – who make up about 31% of participants as of 2012 – has increased the most. While these specific developments may be recent, Laite (2017) describes how anti-trafficking campaigns blurred the lines between sex trafficking and women's labour migration in the early 20th century. She argues that the discourse of this time period was pivotal for the erasure of labour from the discussions around sex work (Laite 2017: 41), showing that the debate around migrant sex work is by no means new. This indicates that the novels oversimplify the demographics of sex workers and that they also distort the social power relations these demographics imply.

The novels exhibited more diversity with regard to the types of sex work portrayed; as Sanders et al. (2009: 42) outline, there is a general distinction between street-based sex work and indoor-based sex work, which can occur in brothels, flats, saunas, bars, etc. These two types appeared in the novels, too, although street-based sex work appears to be mildly

overrepresented. In reality, the majority of sex workers is indoor-based (Sanders et al. 2009: 40); yet, since street-based sex work is more visible, it has received more attention by scholars and the public. Over the last decades, street-based sex work has decreased continuously (Sanders et al. 2009: 41), which means that at the time of publication, the novels may have been closer to reality.

Some types of sex work are not mentioned in the books due to the market having changed since they were written. The most important development is internet-based sex work. Sanders et al. (2016) outline how digital technologies have reshaped working conditions and agency in the industry. Large parts of internet-based sex work are relatively invisible to people who are not involved in it; this means that the public has so far had little impetus to change its perception of sex work as a 'traditional' street-, brothel-, and hotel-based activity.

Another distinction made in academic literature is the one between independent and employed sex workers. While some sex workers may benefit financially from independence, other prefer the protection of employers and nearby colleagues (Sanders 2009: 43). The most striking difference to fictional sex work is the relationship between the professional and the private sexuality of sex workers. In the novels, (male) procurers and clients often had a somewhat romantic and often exploitative relationship to the (female) sex worker; the sex worker was constructed as a vulnerable victim without much agency and the lines between work and private sex life were frequently blurred. While manipulation and grooming of course exist in reality, sex workers "treat prostitution as work and not as an expression of their sexuality or sexual desires" (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007: 136). Researchers emphasise that sex workers very much see themselves as having a private life like everybody else (Day 2007: 1), which indicates that the stereotype of 'sex work as an identity' is a problematic social stereotype, not merely a stylistic device employed by authors. Many of the work arrangements

described in the novels would fall under ‘sugar dating’, where the distinction between labour and leisure can be less clear than in other parts of the industry. In reality, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule (e.g. Day 2007: 177).

Overall, this shows that while sex workers’ power dynamics are still a result of agency and vulnerability, the fictional origins of these two factors differ from the real ones. In fiction, agency and vulnerability are both constructed on the pillars of youth, femininity, whiteness, and innocence, while in reality they exist precisely because of diversity. Multiple scholars indicate that it has taken a considerable amount of time for this diversity to be recognised in academia; with research previously focusing on cis-female and street-based workers, it is apparent that the similarities in fictional representations are not merely coincidental but instead a product of the authors’ social environment.

### *4.3 Health, safety, and violence in sex work*

Fictional accounts of sex workers’ health focused on workplace health issues, such as drug consumption and vulnerability to extreme violence. Other aspects of sex workers’ health, like the prevalence of illnesses and risky sexual behaviour, are largely unmentioned. Hence, in this section I will firstly assess how realistic the portrayal of drug consumption and violence against sex workers is. Secondly, I will look at what the novels leave out.

When it comes to the link between sex work and drug use, fictional accounts were unclear about which way the causality runs. Sanders et al. confirm that this is similarly unclear in reality (2009: 51). Various studies indeed indicate a strong correlation between sex work and drug consumption (e.g. McKeganey & Barnard 1996); however, as explained by the English

Collective of Prostitutes (2019), it is not possible to ascertain the exact number of how many sex workers use drugs. There is indication that drug dependency is significantly lower among indoor-based sex workers than among street-based sex workers (Galatowicz et al. 2005); drugs frequently mentioned include alcohol, heroin, LSD, cannabis, and crack. While the novels appear to be relatively accurate when it comes to the relationship between drug consumption and specifically street-based sex work, the role that drugs play in the average sex worker's daily life appears to be overestimated. According to Gaffney (2007), the consumption of Class A drugs has increased over time. Historical sources emphasise the strong prevalence of alcohol consumption (Sanger 1859: 541); however, all estimates of real numbers are lower than the impression gained from the novels.

Apart from drug consumption, the novels stereotypically referred to sex workers being victims of harsh violent attacks, including injury, rape, murder, harassment, and other forms of abuse. The relation between fiction and reality appears to be very similar to the one regarding drug consumption. While sex workers do experience high degrees of violence comparable to the types described in fiction, this is much more common among street-based workers than among indoor-based workers (Sanders et al. 2009: 49). In particular, one must note that female sex workers are much more likely to become victims of violence than women in other occupations; according to Ward et al. (1999), their mortality is twelve times higher than among other women their age, and occupational homicides are a frequent cause of death. Campbell & Kinnell (2000: 12) mention that 76 percent of sex workers in a Sheffield study experienced work-related violence. Yet, while the novels portrayed almost every single encounter with clients or pimps as violent in some way, the majority of real-life sex work occurs without physical violence (Sanders 2009: 50), partly because sex workers take action to put safety measures in place. This is relevant as it deconstructs the idea of a vulnerable,

helpless fallen woman without any agency, whose protection could only be guaranteed off the streets. Instead, it reveals that violence could be prevented by improving working conditions, facilities, and legislation. It is not something that has to be accepted as an inherent part of sex work but is largely dependent on other working conditions, such as location, drug use, employment arrangements and even details of the sex act.

Structural and cultural violence in fiction are predominantly focused on structural and cultural violence *against women* rather than *against sex workers* specifically, with the exception of sex work related slurs. In reality, many accounts of structural and cultural violence are related explicitly to the stigma surrounding sex work. One example is that sex workers are less likely to access services surrounding drug addiction (Sanders et al. 2009: 52) because they worry about judgement. Another example is that female sex workers facing severe financial hardship are particularly hard to reach for health promoters (Eccles & Clarke 2013: 36); less protection from preventable diseases is a key type of structural violence. In some cases of non-occupational physical violence against sex workers, scholars suggest that workers may have become victims of violence due to the stigma surrounding sex work. Additionally, legislation which constructs sex workers as spreaders of disease (cf. Sanders et al. 2009) can be cultural violence as it legitimises other forms of discrimination and social exclusion. Some scholars even suggest that the existence of sex work itself is an expression of Galtung's notion of structural violence (Lee & Persson 2016: Ch. 14); again, however, this argument focuses more on structural violence on the basis of gender / sexuality rather than on the basis of sex work. Consequently, although the novels mainly highlight gender, class, and age as reference points for structural and cultural violence, sex workers in reality also experience occupational structural violence specifically due to being sex workers.

Finally, sex workers' health can be expressed by the mental and physical consequences of their work. This pushes the discussion towards occupational health rather than just workplace health. The novels sporadically talked about mental health consequences of sex work; the physical consequences, however, have been reduced to consequences of either drug consumption or violent encounters. They largely ignore physical health directly related to the sex act, such as sexually transmitted infections or injuries.

In this category, it is again street-based sex workers who exhibit poorer health than those working in other settings. Mellor and Lovell (2011: 317) talked to street-based sex workers who universally describe suffering from depression; some include anxiety and symptoms of PTSD. Many recent studies focus on the prevalence of HIV among both male and female sex workers (e.g. Sethi et al. 2006; Cooper et al. 2001); the prevalence of AIDS led to increased public attention for sex workers' health, but it reached pandemic levels after the publication of the novels and goes therefore unmentioned in them. However, other health conditions related to sex work have been prevalent and well-known for much longer. Creighton et al. (2008) mention tuberculosis, syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and trichomonas; moreover, they document 'risky' sexual behaviour, such as unprotected sex with clients and a lack of reliable contraception, which further leads to unwanted pregnancies. While some health issues of sex workers may stem from drug use rather than sexual intercourse (Sethi et al. 2006: 362), this does clearly not apply to all health issues. Poor mental and physical occupational health are further exacerbated by barriers to health service access (Mellor & Lovell 2011: 319).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, various countries have prohibited sex work entirely, despite workers advocating for the provision of services with hygiene concepts (Kopatzki 2020; Schaschek 2020). This has forced many workers to offer services illegally, which may increase vulnerability to infection. The organisation of the unprecedented lockdown raises the question how vulnerable sex workers have been to pandemics and epidemics in the past,

especially when attention to their wellbeing was considerably lower than today. It is likely that sex workers' vulnerability to such illnesses has been underestimated in the past; workers were more likely constructed as spreaders of disease rather than victims of it, which is one explanation for why this aspect of occupational health is ignored by fiction.

### *4.4 Occupational choice in reality*

Although they have some differences, both fiction and reality paint a picture of harsh working conditions in sex work. There must be reasons for why sex workers remain in their occupation regardless – in fiction, these reasons came down to the inaccessibility of other jobs, high opportunity cost of taking up such jobs if existent, and extremely low decommodification. I will now examine whether this is an accurate representation of the economy that sex workers find themselves in.

The theme of insufficient education and skills to pursue other careers is apparent in the academic literature. Often, this falls together with bad working conditions in other jobs. For instance, O'Connell Davidson (1998: 71) mentions a sex worker who would like a different job but "did not attend school beyond the age of fourteen and has no educational qualifications at all" and whose only alternative would be "low-paid, monotonous factory work". Alternative jobs are particularly inaccessible to homeless people and those who struggle with drug addiction. As established, these criteria apply predominantly to street-based workers and often their work may be classed as survival sex work, i.e. sex work for the immediate provision of food, housing, or drugs. Economic need is the key motivation for other sex workers to enter into sex work, too (Sanders et al. 2009: 46). Historically, legal

struggles for women to enter formal employment, or to do so under equal conditions to men, are to be considered as a factor that may push women into sex work. Cruz (2018) argues that migrant sex workers in particular, even those who were not trafficked or coerced, experience very little freedom to make choices.

While these situations without alternatives exist, and while an individual might feel more or less economic pressure regardless of their financial status, there is some indication that there is an increase in middle-class women entering sex work (Bernstein 2007), that some people may supplement other kinds of income with sex work (Sanders et al. 2009: 46), and that people engage in sex work to pay for their education (Roberts et al. 2007); these people may have more control over their working conditions than survival sex workers. This indicates that entering sex work despite the generally harsh conditions may often not be a matter of missing alternatives but of too high opportunity cost.

In the novels, opportunity cost was described as very high due to sex workers earning much money compared to their labour time; their income from sex work is described as high enough to make the irregularity of income and the harsh conditions a price worth paying. Such a decision is made after assessing the costs and benefits of sex work (Sanders et al. 2009: 46). Consequently, there are sex workers whose salary exceeds the amount they would have if they were average-earning wage workers. O'Connell Davidson (2007: 90) describes an extraordinarily successful sex worker who earns between £1,500 and £2,000 a week, having much control over her working conditions and earnings. However, this seems to be exceptional. While her rate is £100 for penetrative sex, the rate in local parlours lies between £25 and £40, while local street-based workers charge between £15 and £25. Comparing this to the novels, for instance the numbers given in *The Catcher in the Rye*, fictional sex workers seem to be in the upper half of this spectrum – Sunny and Maurice would charge $5 for "a

throw", which could be slang for either penetrative or oral sex; this amounts to roughly $70 today, or £53.

This shows that while sex workers may indeed earn more per hour worked than they would in another job, fictional accounts may be too optimistic in terms of their earnings; additionally, fictional representations do not account for sex workers lowering their prices / changing their conditions in times of financial hardship (Eccles & Clarke 2013) or for the cost of working, particularly in illegality (Day 2007: 127). Overall, this shows that while the opportunity cost of taking up alternative jobs is similarly high as in fiction, the monetary gains of remaining in sex work are considerably lower in reality.

Since most real-life sex workers do not gain much from remaining in sex work, decommodification must be rather low to explain why people remain in the industry. They have to experience much pressure to sell their labour power at all stages of their lives. While overall decommodification today is likely higher than during the publication time of most novels due to the post-war development of the welfare state, it might remain high for certain groups of the population.

The UK is commonly classed as having a rather liberal welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990: 89) – this means that welfare is predominantly organised through the market. While there may be exceptions, such as the NHS, the overall structure of the British welfare state facilitates both higher income inequality and low decommodification compared to other European states (Esping-Andersen 1990: 90). This is supported by scholars working on sex work, for instance by Cruz (2013), who argues that there is insufficient inclusion of sex workers in labour legislation, resulting in a total lack of protection of sex workers from the labour market. O'Connell Davidson (1998: 194) claims that "the English welfare system barely assures a subsistence to single adults, and is even more inadequate in respect of lone

parents". Single parenthood is particularly likely to pressure women into sex work due to a need of money and time for childcare (Sanders et al. 2009: 46). Some sex workers list their fear of their children being taken away and benefits being cut as reasons for their reluctance to access support services (Mellor & Lovell 1996: 319); this indicates the problematic consequences of welfare being tied to conditions and illustrates why sex workers feel much pressure to sell their labour power in this way.

Overall, the unique combination of high pressure to sell their labour power, few possibilities of alternative work, and high opportunity cost of taking up such work results in sex workers having a rather small degree of occupational choice. Yet, it is noteworthy that the decision to pursue sex work and live under better conditions than without sex work appears to be a more active one in reality – there are *some* other options, at least for indoor-based workers, but these options are economically inefficient, which increases pressure for people to choose sex work. In relation to fictional accounts of occupational choice, this draws a similar picture to the results of section 4.2 and 4.3: firstly, the real situation is a lot more heterogenous and complex than the fictional representation, and secondly, real sex workers exercise significantly more agency than fictional sex workers.

## V.: Conclusion

This analysis has revealed subtle but significant differences in working conditions of sex workers in fiction versus what the daily lives of sex workers look like in reality. In all analysed categories, real sex workers are more diverse and on average possess more agency. While it is to be expected that occupational reality is more nuanced, the analysed novels exhibited a degree of homogeneity so strong that it hints at social stereotypes rather than just the shortcomings of individual authors.

Specifically, the diverse demographics of real sex workers and the variety in their workplace settings shows that the stereotype of a vulnerable, exploited young girl is at least questionable. This stereotype plays a role in the construction of a 'perfect victim' when it comes to drug consumption and violence as described in the novels. It leads to the erasure of other aspects of sex work, such as occupational mental and physical health, and anything in which sex workers make active choices rather than being subjected to masculine control. Although decommodification in both fiction and reality is rather low, the decision to engage in sex work is often made based on opportunity cost rather than absolute coercion. While 'survival sex work' and coercion in form of trafficking exist, reducing sex workers to this category is an inaccurate representation of reality; most sex workers have a separate private life, sometimes even a separate professional life besides sex work, meaning sex work is by far not their only source of identity.

The apparent misrepresentation has implications for how sex work is perceived socially. This is due to literary representation being a reflection but also a reproducer of stigma and mystification. A narrow view of working conditions that are mainly found in street-based sex

work influences academic researchers to focus on a small subset of workers while neglecting others. This, in turn, also influences policymakers and the public debate in a direction that focuses on inevitable vulnerabilities of sex workers while ignoring the improvement of preventable deficits in workplace safety. Moreover, social stigma may influence the behaviour of employers, clients, and support networks in touch with sex workers; if potential predators perceive workers as having little agency, they might see sex workers as particularly easy targets and therefore act even more violent or exploitative than they normally would.

My analysis of the representations of sex work is, however, only a starting point in the study of working conditions. While there are many other aspects about sex work that could be analysed, such as unionisation / workplace participation, state regulation, intra-industry hierarchies and client relationships, there are also numerous other works of fiction that could provide additional insight. In particular, fiction written by women, non-white authors, or members of the LGBTQ+ community may draw a different picture from the one I have encountered.

Furthermore, the disparity of fiction and occupational reality could exist in other industries, too. Relating social perceptions of a certain job to the real people working in this job could help to elucidate the power dynamics that influence work-related inequalities. This type of analysis is particularly relevant for other feminised professions, such as people working in care or those performing household labour; stereotypes about these professions likely influence how willing people are to take them up and how they treat workers in such jobs. It is noteworthy that literature or fiction more generally are not the only sources of perceptions of work. Other starting points could be cinema, documentaries, newspaper portrayals, or political speeches.

Highlighting the differences between perception and reality of sex work challenges some of the power dynamics that researchers, policymakers, and the general public may otherwise take as given. Understanding the origins of stigma and mystification cuts through a circle of occupation-based oppression by preventing research into working conditions from being exclusionary and narrow. This could be a valuable tool for academics, policymakers and also the artists themselves to take an active step towards appropriate representation and therefore more accurate knowledge of the political economy. If working conditions and wellbeing are to be improved, they need to be known first; acknowledging people's livelihoods as 'work' is a necessary prerequisite for the assessment of social inequalities.

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