

Concept Paper

Stigma Power and the Specificity of Sex Work: An Intersectional Analysis

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Abstract

This concept paper advances stigma power as a central analytical mechanism for understanding how patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy, and cis-heteronormativity operate with particular intensity against sex workers. Integrating Link and Phelan's stigma power with Bourdieu's symbolic violence and Foucauldian productive power, the framework theorises stigma as a mechanism institutionalised through law and enforced by institutions, which produces measurable consequences that include violence, exclusion, and health harms. Analysing the intersecting axes of gender, sexuality, race, migration, and class across three qualitative studies (SWMH, SEXHUM, VICSW), the article demonstrates why labour-rights reforms, including decriminalisation, are necessary but insufficient. Dismantling stigma requires not only removing sanctions but actively contesting the actors exercising stigma power and interrupting the stabilising mechanisms that reproduce it. This requires policy that acknowledges stigma's existence whilst working to dismantle it, rather than eliding its reality through liberal mainstreaming or strengthening it through criminalisation or rescue frameworks. The framework explains why decriminalisation is associated with better access to rights and health; why all criminalisation including the so-called Swedish model correlates with increased violence; why stigma persists under optimal legal conditions; and how intersecting marginalisations produce differential vulnerability. Policy implications emphasise pairing decriminalisation with peer-led anti-stigma work, institutional reform, migrant rights, and funded support for sex worker self-organisation.

Keywords: stigma power; sex work; decriminalisation; intersectionality; stigma stability; anti-stigma policy



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1. Introduction

Sex work remains one of the most contested fields in contemporary feminist, sociological, and policy scholarship. Decades of research have examined its economic dimensions, legal regulation, gendered and racialised character, and relationship to migration and trafficking (e.g., [1–5]). This scholarship has advanced understanding of sex work as labour embedded in global power relations and has underpinned advocacy for decriminalisation and rights. Yet stigma has remained theoretically underdeveloped. It is acknowledged as central by sex worker organisations since the 1970s [6,7] and identified empirically as the primary source of harm [4,8] but is rarely theorised in ways that account for both structural sources and intersectional complexity.

The contemporary stigmatisation of sex work has deep historical roots. Since the mid-nineteenth century, sex workers have been constructed through overlapping frameworks of moral deviance, public health threat, and criminal pathology. The Contagious Diseases Acts in Britain (1860s), Progressive Era vice campaigns in the United States, and international white slavery panics established legal and institutional mechanisms that persist today [9,10]. What has changed is the language—explicit moral condemnation now operates through medicalised ‘rehabilitation’ rhetoric and humanitarian ‘rescue’ frameworks—but the structural exclusion remains remarkably stable. No matter how many empirical arguments researchers advance demonstrating harm from criminalisation, sex work remains criminalised or heavily regulated in most contexts. This persistence demands a theoretical explanation.

Sex work generates persistent political polarisation [11]. Rather than adopting categorical stances, this analysis addresses sex work’s complexity and the intersecting power relations of gender, sexuality, race, migration, and class. What often occurs is the analysis of sex work through exclusively one lens (e.g., as violence against women), leading to inadmissible simplifications [3,11]. Instead, experiences in sex work are often as diverse as people’s social positionings.

This article makes three theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualises sex work stigma as stigma power: a mechanism through which patriarchal, racialised, and cis-heteronormative orders are reproduced through institutional and symbolic practices. Second, it integrates Link and Phelan’s [12] concept of stigma power with Bourdieu’s [13] symbolic violence and Foucauldian [14] productive power, demonstrating how stigma both subordinates sex workers and produces the subject position of the sex worker. Third, drawing on intersectional analysis across three qualitative studies, it demonstrates how stigma power operates through constitutive transformations of gender, race, migration status, and class, producing differential exposure to violence and access to labour rights.

This article addresses a central conceptual question: How does stigma operate as a structural and intersectional form of power in sex work, and why are decriminalisation and labour-rights reforms necessary but insufficient without complementary anti-stigma interventions? We argue that understanding stigma as power—not merely attitude or prejudice—explains why legal reform alone often produces displacement rather than elimination of harm, why violence against sex workers persists across diverse legal regimes, and why intersecting marginalisations produce qualitatively different rather than quantitatively stratified vulnerabilities.

The article makes three interconnected arguments. First, sex work’s specificity stems not from sexual labour itself but from stigmatisation processes generated by moralising sex within patriarchal, cis-heteronormative, and racialised orders, modulated by class. Second, stigma operates through four intersecting axes: gender, sexuality, race and migration, with class as a cross-cutting dimension determining access to capital and modulating stigma’s intensity. Third, stigma power appears strongly associated with violence against

sex workers, requiring theoretical and political attention alongside labour rights. Stigma power appears strongly associated with male violence against sex workers—not because stigma kills instead of men, but because it creates conditions under which male violence becomes normalised, licenced, and unpunished.

Following this introduction, Section 2 outlines methods. Section 3 examines labour frameworks' limits and develops the stigma power framework. Section 4 through Section 6 apply this framework across the axes of gender and sexuality, class, and race and migration respectively. Section 7 synthesises these analyses through intersectional co-constitution, demonstrating how categories transform each other rather than simply adding. Section 8 provides a discussion, and Section 9 concludes with policy implications that centre on anti-stigma work as essential rather than supplementary.

2. Methods: Concept Paper Approach

2.1. *Nature and Purpose of This Article*

This is a concept paper that develops and refines a theoretical framework for understanding sex work stigma as stigma power. It does not present new empirical findings or conduct new data analysis. Instead, it constructs a conceptual synthesis by integrating existing theoretical traditions (Link and Phelan's stigma power, Bourdieu's symbolic violence, Foucault's productive power, and intersectionality) and illustrating this framework through previously published qualitative evidence from three major studies. The aim is theory-building: to construct an analytical framework that explains why sex work generates particularly intense stigmatisation, how this operates through intersecting axes of power, and why legal reform alone proves insufficient.

2.2. *Framework Construction Process*

The conceptual framework emerged through three iterative stages. First, we identified limitations in existing labour-economic and violence-against-women frameworks for explaining sex work's specificity (Section 3.1). Second, we synthesised theoretical resources—Link and Phelan [12] for conceptualising stigma as power requiring institutional capacity; Bourdieu [13,15] for explaining symbolic violence and embodied internalisation through habitus; Foucault [14] for theorising power's productive dimension in constituting subject positions; and intersectionality [16–18] for analysing how categories transform rather than add. Third, we tested this synthesis against empirical patterns documented across diverse legal regimes, national contexts, and social positions, refining concepts through confrontation with evidence.

2.3. *Role of Empirical Studies*

This article develops a theoretical framework for analysing sex work stigma, drawing illustrative evidence from published qualitative research across three major studies: SWMH (Sex Work and Mental Health: Germany, Italy, Sweden, United Kingdom; 118 participants) [19], which resulted in one final report and several conference presentations; SEXHUM (Migration, Sex Work and Humanitarian Intervention: Australia, France, New Zealand, United States; 221 participants) [5,20–28], which resulted in multiple peer-reviewed publications and two co-creative ethnographic films; and the VICSW study (Understanding the health and wellbeing of sex workers in Victoria, Australia; 31 participants) [29–31], which resulted in one final report and two peer-reviewed articles.

All quotations are reproduced from peer-reviewed publications or final reports where they previously appeared. The first author was an investigator on all three studies. The original projects received ethics approval from institutional ethics boards. The SWMH study followed a community-led protocol hosted by Hydra e.V., Berlin, Germany.

The article presents a theoretical synthesis illustrated through published testimonies. Quotes were selected to demonstrate theoretical concepts across diverse positionalities including gender, race, migration, and class, and across the national contexts represented.

These studies were selected because they: (1) span eight national contexts enabling comparative analysis across legal regimes; (2) include diverse participants across intersections of gender (cis women, trans women, non-binary people, and cis men); sexuality; race and migration (white nationals, Eastern European migrants, Black African migrants, Asian migrants, Indigenous people, and Latina migrants); and class positions; (3) explicitly examine institutional encounters (healthcare, police, and immigration enforcement) where stigma power operates; and (4) involve sex worker community partnership and co-authorship, centring knowledge produced by those experiencing stigma. Testimonies were selected to illustrate theoretical mechanisms across diverse positionalities. Selection criteria included: (1) demonstrating recurring patterns across contexts; (2) clarifying specific mechanisms of stigma power; (3) revealing intersectional transformation; and (4) capturing workers' own analytical frameworks. Testimonies function as illustrative evidence that helps develop and refine the conceptual framework. They demonstrate how theoretical concepts manifest in lived experience but do not, by themselves, prove causal relationships.

2.4. Methodological Limitations

As a concept paper, this article does not conduct new empirical analysis, implement systematic coding procedures, or establish causal effects through experimental or longitudinal design. Its contribution lies in conceptual synthesis and theory-building. The framework requires empirical testing through participatory action research, longitudinal studies tracking how legal reforms affect stigma over time, comparative institutional ethnographies, and quantitative measurement of stigma power's associations with health, violence, and economic outcomes. The empirical studies draw from Global North contexts; application to settings where sex work occupies different economic, cultural, or legal positions requires contextual adaptation.

2.5. Collaborative Authorship and Positionality

The development of this article reflects collaborative knowledge production across multiple projects, contexts, and forms of expertise. Co-authors include academics, activists, and community organisers who bring diverse experiences of migration, gender, sex work and sexuality across the eight national contexts examined. Several co-authors participated as research team members in the original studies (SWMH, SEXHUM, VICSW), contributing to study design, data collection, analysis, and community engagement. Others joined during the theoretical synthesis, bringing analytical frameworks developed through sex worker organising and scholarship. This collaborative approach honours the principle that those most affected by stigma power hold essential knowledge for understanding and challenging it. The analysis presented here emerges from sustained exchange between academic research and community-based expertise, reflecting the legacy of sex worker-led movements that first named stigma as the central mechanism requiring theoretical and political attention.

3. Conceptual Framework: Stigma Power and Sex Work

3.1. Sex Work, Labour, and the Limits of Economic Analysis

Labour frameworks correctly position sex workers as waged workers facing structural constraints shaped by classed, racialised, and gendered divisions [2,32,33]. O'Connell Davidson [2] demonstrates that all wage labour involves selling embodied labour power. The separation of the labourer from their body is a liberal fiction. In prostitution, this

fiction is exposed. The productive political move is building alliances across workers across different labour sectors to challenge the fiction itself.

Sex work shares with other forms of labour the fundamental characteristic that workers are confronted with the necessity of obtaining money to provide for themselves and possibly for the livelihood of others. Under capitalist conditions, absent a universal basic income, the possibility of freeing oneself from wage labour is not equally available to all but depends heavily on social origin, gender, sexuality, migration history, race, class and other factors [2,3].

Yet this raises a question that labour frameworks alone cannot answer: why does sex work attract a particularly intense, compound, and historically persistent stigmatisation not shared by other forms of precarious labour? The answer appears to lie not in the economic structure but in the relationship between sex, as a deeply moralised domain, and the social orders of gender, sexuality, and race [7,34]. As Sanders [35] argues, violence against sex workers is not inherent to the work itself but produced through the dynamics of space, governance, and stigma that structure how and where sex work occurs. Economic analysis alone cannot account for the particular violence sex workers experience [4,8].

To analyse sex work's complexity and draw conclusions for progressive policy, it is essential to name what distinguishes this work: social stigma.

3.2. *Stigma Power: Theory and Framework*

3.2.1. Defining Stigma and Stigma Power

Stigma has been identified by sex worker organisations as the central problem distinguishing sex work from other labour [6,7]. Recent studies consistently find stigma to be the principal source of harm across settings [4,8,36]. Grittner and Walsh [8] and Benoit et al. [4] map stigma across structural, interactional, and intrapersonal pathways. Bjønness et al. [37] advance understanding of stigma's relational character, demonstrating how stigma in sex work is conditioned by differences in time, place, citizenship, gender, sexuality, class, and race. The framework proposed here deepens this analysis by foregrounding stigma's political dimension.

Sex work stigma works to ensure that sex workers are not sufficiently respected in society and in interpersonal relationships to prevent them from switching to other professions [38] and it promotes the maintenance of relationships of violence, dependency, and exploitation [4,36]. Sex workers experience this stigma to different degrees and in different ways, but it affects them all. What distinguishes this social disadvantage is that it is both degrading and exclusionary, and inscribes a victim position. Sex workers are often denied their own capacity to act and make decisions, which expresses a further, direct, violent power relationship towards the 'marginalised' [1]. Very often, others speak for them, supposedly to 'save' them [39]. Garofalo Geymonat et al. [40] demonstrate that stigma also operates through 'epistemological stigmatisation'—the mechanism denying epistemic authority to both sex workers and researchers [41], rendering knowledge production on sex work particularly difficult whilst privileging anti-sex work frameworks that dismiss empirical evidence.

Sex work stigma creates a vicious circle: because of its existence and effect, sex work differs from other jobs, and therefore the stigma must be named, criticised, and fought. However, emphasising the difference between sex work and other jobs threatens to reinforce the stigma. It is precisely for this reason that understanding where stigma originates and how it interacts with other social exclusions is essential.

Building on Goffman's [42] foundational conceptualisation of stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting, reducing a person from a whole and usual individual to a tainted, discounted one, Link and Phelan [12,43,44] reformulate stigma in political terms

by underlining its embeddedness in power dynamics. For them, stigma requires labelling, negative stereotyping, the separation of ‘us’ from ‘them’, status loss, discrimination, and, crucially, power. Stigma does not simply happen to people. It requires and confers power. It ‘takes power’ to stigmatise effectively, in the sense that capacity is required both to construct stereotypes that are broadly endorsed and to enact discrimination producing material consequences. Conversely, stigma also confers power by confirming and naturalising dominant social visions, rendering hierarchies inevitable and invisible. Drawing on Bourdieu’s symbolic power, the capacity to impose a legitimised vision of the social world, they argue that stigma is a structural mechanism for the reproduction of social order [12].

However, Link and Phelan’s framework [12], whilst politicising stigma, retains a somewhat unidirectional conception in which powerful actors stigmatise powerless subjects. This risks missing what Foucault [14] theorised as power’s productive dimension. Power does not merely repress but actively produces subjects, identities, and resistances. Power circulates rather than being held. It operates through subjects, not simply upon them. Integrating this insight, stigma power not only subordinates sex workers but also constitutes ‘the sex worker’ as a particular subject defined simultaneously by victimhood requiring rescue, criminality requiring punishment, pathology requiring treatment, and deviance requiring management. These subject positions are not pre-existing categories to which stigma attaches but are produced through stigmatising discourses, institutional practices, and legal frameworks.

This productive dimension helps explain phenomena that Link and Phelan’s framework [12] alone cannot. Why do sex workers themselves sometimes reproduce stigmatising hierarchies by distancing themselves from street workers, migrant workers, or drug-using workers? Not simply because they have ‘internalised’ oppression but because the identity category ‘legitimate sex worker’ is produced in contradistinction to ‘victim’, ‘trafficked person’, or ‘survival worker’ [4,45]. Claiming legitimacy requires participating in these distinctions [46]. Power produces the very forms of resistance to it [14].

Sex work stigma operates through a set of combined and seemingly contradictory constructions: the helpless victim, with inflections of blame for naivety; the unwitting perpetrator of patriarchy; the addict feeding their habit; and the dishonourable pervert [47]. These coexist intersectionally and hierarchically. The dishonouring aspect appears to legitimise violence. Victim stigma is used to justify paternalistic intervention reproducing power relations. Anti-sex-work feminism [48–50] reinforces both constructions simultaneously by confirming sex work as degrading whilst denying workers’ agency. Advocates of the Swedish model of client criminalisation¹ explicitly identify further stigmatising sex workers as a desired deterrent [55].

Critically, stigmas compound themselves. Sex workers simultaneously navigate sex work and victim stigma, intersecting with stigmas of mental health, drug use, migration, and queerness [36]. Mental health stigma and drug use stigma operate in a particularly pernicious combination: sex workers are frequently assumed to necessarily have mental health problems, which are themselves stigmatised [56], whilst drug use is assumed of sex workers just as sex work is assumed of some drug users, creating circular stigmatisation that prevents disclosure in healthcare settings [31,57].

3.2.2. Stigma Stability Framework

Charlesworth and Hatzenbuehler [58] theorise durability and adaptive reproduction as systemic properties of stigmatisation. Stigma stability helps explain why legal reform often produces displacement rather than elimination. The frameworks are not merely compatible but mutually reinforcing. Stigma power identifies who benefits and performs stigmatisation and who can resist it. Stigma stability explains how practices are institu-

tionalised and reproduced across changing environments through three key mechanisms: policy reframing (explicit moralism becomes ‘trafficking concern’), institutional habituation (established practices persist despite legal change), and adaptive stigmatisation (new enforcement methods emerge). In other words, while stigma power identifies who exercises stigma and who resists it and with what effects, the stigma stability framework explains how stigmatising systems persist and adapt over time, even after legal reform. Together, dismantling sex work stigma requires removing sanctions and interrupting these adaptive processes.

Media plays a critical role in stigma stability through both sensationalist coverage and representational erasure. News coverage of sex work overwhelmingly frames workers through victim or deviant narratives, rarely presenting sex workers as rights-bearing subjects or credible sources on their own lives [59]. When sex workers are murdered, media coverage frequently emphasises their occupation over their humanity—headlines identify victims as “prostitutes” rather than by name, implicitly suggesting their deaths were predictable consequences of “risky lifestyles” rather than failures of state protection [57]. This framing reproduces the “ungrievable” subject position that legitimises violence. Simultaneously, media platforms algorithmically suppress sex worker speech through content moderation policies that conflate sex work with trafficking, removing educational content, harm reduction information, and community organising whilst permitting anti-sex work advocacy [60]. These practices exemplify stigma stability’s adaptive mechanisms: as explicit moral condemnation becomes less culturally acceptable, media institutions reproduce stigma through “trafficking concern” whilst systematically denying sex workers access to platforms for counter-narratives.

3.2.3. Moral Recognition and the Consent/Exploitation Binary

Even where sex workers gain legal recognition—through decriminalisation, licencing, or labour rights—they typically lack moral recognition: recognition as autonomous subjects on equal footing with legal, medical, and political authorities [61]. This distinction is fundamental. Legal recognition grants conditional access to rights whilst maintaining stigma’s exclusionary force. Sex workers may possess legal work permits yet face healthcare refusal, banking discrimination, child custody loss, and dismissal when reporting violence—all expressions of denied moral recognition. As Tremblay [61] argues, drawing on Taylor’s recognition theory, denial of moral recognition produces material wounds—corroding self-worth and reinforcing patterns of self-stigma.

The whore stigma’s persistence rests substantially on a false binary between consent and exploitation [34]. Dominant frameworks position sex workers as either fully consenting entrepreneurs (the ‘happy hooker’ requiring no protection) or completely exploited victims (incapable of consent, requiring rescue). This binary erases the reality that consent and constraint coexist: workers navigate structural limitations whilst exercising agency within them, being neither purely autonomous nor wholly coerced [62–64].

Foucault’s analysis of power illuminates why this binary persists [14]. Power does not operate through simple domination but produces the very terms through which subjects understand themselves and their possibilities. The consent/exploitation binary itself is a product of power, establishing the conceptual categories through which sex work becomes thinkable. By insisting one must be either consenting or exploited, the framework forecloses recognition of how structural inequality shapes all labour under capitalism whilst workers retain decision-making capacity.

Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence extends this insight [13,15]. The consent/exploitation binary functions as symbolic violence when sex workers themselves adopt these categories, distancing themselves from ‘real victims’ to claim legitimacy or

identifying as exploited to access services. Neither self-definition escapes the violent binary that positions all sex workers as problems requiring management. The binary's power lies precisely in how it is embodied through habitus: sex workers internalise these categories not through false consciousness but through the lived experience of institutions that sort people accordingly, granting recognition only to those who perform the 'correct' subject position.

Empirical research with sex workers consistently demonstrates that workers themselves distinguish between exploitation common to capitalist labour relations (unfair wages, extracted fees, lack of protections) and the specific harms produced by criminalisation and stigma. This was a central finding of the SEXHUM project across Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States [5,20,21,23–27], where workers across diverse national, racial, gender, and migration positions articulated sophisticated analyses distinguishing labour exploitation common to capitalist economies from the compounded exploitation produced specifically by criminalisation, deportability, and stigma. Tremblay's [61] qualitative research with Canadian sex workers reaches convergent conclusions: workers identified exploitation as inhering in unfair fees, extracted wages, and conditions of vulnerability produced by criminalisation, rather than in sexual labour itself. These empirical patterns challenge the consent/exploitation binary by demonstrating that workers articulate analyses the binary cannot accommodate—recognising structural exploitation whilst maintaining capacity for consent within constrained options.

3.2.4. Habitus and Internalisation

Bourdieu's [15] concept of habitus explains how dominant beliefs about gender, respectability, sexuality, class, and race are incorporated into bodies through ways of moving, speaking, relating, and imagining possibilities. Habitus is the mechanism through which symbolic violence operates without explicit coercion, experienced as natural. Sex workers participate in stigma's reproduction not through false consciousness but through the embodied internalisation of stigmatising visions—the dominant ways of understanding sex workers and their place in social hierarchies.

Research on sex work and mental health documents workers encountering practitioners who treat sex work as the pathological root of mental health difficulties, deny agency, or approach the subject with voyeuristic curiosity [19,29,31,36]. Consequently, disclosure becomes a calculated and often unsafe act [31]. Rather than accessing better care, disclosure often means worsened treatment, moralising, or assumptions about inability to consent. Disclosure management functions as stigma management, an embodied practice of self-protection in environments where stigma power remains intact regardless of the legal regime.

Stigmatised subjects often protect themselves by stigmatising others deemed worse: indoor workers from street-based workers, dancers from those who sell full-service sex, and nationals/locals from migrant sex workers [4,65]. This illustrates how stigma power operates through, not simply upon, stigmatised subjects.

Stigma power describes who exercises stigma; symbolic violence and habitus explain how it becomes embodied; and productive power explains how the subject of the sex worker is constituted through these processes.

4. Gender, Sexuality, and Cis-Heteronormative Stigma Power

The following Sections 4–6 apply the conceptual framework developed in Section 3 to empirical material across three axes: gender and sexuality, class, and race and migration. These sections illustrate how the theoretical concepts operate across diverse social positions and national contexts. The testimonies demonstrate mechanisms through which

stigma power functions but should be read as illustrative evidence supporting conceptual development, not as comprehensive empirical documentation. Section 7 then synthesises these analyses through intersectional co-constitution.

This section examines how stigma power operates through gender and sexuality as intersecting mechanisms of subordination. Sex work stigma polices the sexuality of all those positioned outside normative masculinity, including cis women, trans women, non-binary people, and gay and queer men, by marking sexual transgression as the boundary of acceptable conduct and organising penalties around that boundary [66]. The madonna/whore binary is a durable instrument of patriarchal and cis-heteronormative power that delegitimises sexual self-determination [67]. As Pheterson [7] argued, the 'whore stigma' disciplines not only those selling sex but all women (and feminised subjects) transgressing gendered sexual norms, whilst also policing the boundaries of cis-heteronormative masculinity.

Sex work stigma is rooted in misogyny and the madonna/whore dualism that establishes women's essence, role, and place in Western society [9,67]. To be labelled a 'whore' means occupying the extreme ('evil') end of the spectrum of 'being a woman' [7], expressing both contempt and disempowerment. When women use sex self-determinedly as part of employment, they are either morally despised as immoral or considered victims incapable of acting [1,10,48]. Those appearing self-confident are often accused of being privileged and harming other women. Due to sex work stigma, sex workers find themselves in an ambivalent position confronted with contradictory attributions by various social groups and—regardless of which position they take—must justify their professional activity. Exercising an activity that forms the basis of degradation and oppression of the female gender inevitably leads to stigmatisation, from which it is very difficult to be freed. Sex workers are often reduced to their profession.

Anti-sex work feminist frameworks reproduce sex work stigma through the very act of claiming to contest patriarchy [48]. By insisting that women selling sex are victims incapable of agency, they reinstate the division between proper women deserving solidarity and duped women deserving rescue, thereby relegating sex workers to object status [1]. Anti-sex work feminism [48] thus exercises stigma power by mobilising the symbolic authority of predominantly white, hegemonic feminist discourse to entrench a stigmatising vision whilst erasing the experiences of trans women, non-binary people, and men who sell sex.

Davies [49] observes that whilst feminist movements have produced global campaigns toward prostitution abolition, no comparable movement exists for marriage abolition despite both institutions' patriarchal foundations. The stigma power framework illuminates why: marriage, practiced across all social strata rather than concentrated amongst already stigmatised subjects, escapes the mechanisms that render prostitution politically hyper-visible. Where marriage gains legitimacy through gradual reform—what Davies terms 'superficially increased benignity'—stigma stability's policy reframing operates differently. In this respect, it is important to note that forced marriage has emerged as a racialised exception, enabling victim constructions of migrant women requiring rescue whilst leaving marriage itself unexamined [68,69], paralleling sexual humanitarianism's filtering operations [39]. Stigma power thus operates not only to subordinate stigmatised subjects whilst generating their collective resistance. It also contributes to the production of differential political legibility: hegemonic feminisms target stigmatised practices (prostitution) whilst unmarked institutions (marriage) remain invisible as sites of oppression—demonstrating that stigmatised subjects do generate collective resistance.

4.1. Intersectional Intensification: Gender, Sexuality, and Compounded Stigma

An analysis of gender relations regarding sex work stigma must address cis-heteronormativity. The social subjects who are often criminalised or pathologised because of their sexuality include not only cis women, but also queer cis men and trans persons [70]. The SWMH study found that 22% of the 118 respondents were trans or non-binary [19]. The VICSW research found that 26.5% of the 31 participants identified outside cis female categories, and, crucially, 74% identified as other than cis-heterosexual [29]. In SEXHUM, trans women constituted 26% of all sex worker participants [5]. Whilst this cannot be taken as statistically representative of the actual composition of sex workers by gender or sexuality, the testimonies in these studies illustrate the intersection between marginalisation within cis-heteronormative hierarchies, exclusion from mainstream employment, and entry into sex work as an available survival avenue.

Sex work is disproportionately practised by those already stigmatised within cis-heteronormative orders, revealing how sex work stigma operates not in isolation but through intersecting systems of gender and sexual regulation. The so-called cis male ‘gigolos’ are much less affected by sex work stigma, probably because heterosexual cis and trans women have neither comparable economic power nor a similarly strong sexual subject position in society as cis men [70].

For cis women, who constitute the majority of sex workers, sex work stigma constructs sexual commerce as evidence of failed or deviant femininity requiring correction, rescue, or punishment. As documented in the VICSW study, cis women sex workers described how disclosure triggered immediate pathologisation of decision-making capacity. For instance, research participant Vanessa², an Asian migrant cis woman recounted being lectured about how dangerous her job was and being threatened to be reported to police if found having an STI when seeking sexual health screening [29], whilst Daria, a migrant cis woman from Eastern Europe, described several psychiatrists insisting sex work was incompatible with mental health, contradicting her lived experience [31]. These encounters exemplify how sex work stigma operates as gendered regulation: institutional authority defines legitimate femininity, and sex workers are positioned as falling outside its boundaries, requiring rehabilitation into proper womanhood.

For trans women, stigma intensifies through compounding mechanisms that deny both gender identity, mental health and occupational legitimacy simultaneously. In the SWMH study in Germany, Isabella, a migrant trans woman from Eastern Europe, described the layering: ‘with me and the other trans people it is even more difficult because often we have double lives with our families because many trans people dare not be themselves. And the sex work is added’ [19]. In the US, Tiffany, a migrant Caribbean trans woman talked about mental health stigma compounding with her trans identity: ‘I lived in Texas for a little while, and my doctor was very stigmatising. She told me, “You have gender identity disorder. You need counselling. You’re mental. You’re lying to yourself.”’ [21].

Trans women are often automatically assumed to be engaged in prostitution, as hardly any other work seems imaginable for them in transphobic societies [71]. Linda, a First Nation trans woman working in street-based sex work, interviewed in the context of the VICSW study, explained the specific relation between trans identity and sex work: ‘Most people assume that [I am a sex worker] about me because I’m trans [...] There’s that much other marginalisation already that [medical staff] basically just throw [sex work] to the list.’ [29]. Andrea, a trans migrant woman of colour in Germany, interviewed in the context of the SWMH study, described how compounded marginalisation channels workers into sex work whilst simultaneously intensifying stigma once there: ‘I’m a trans woman of colour with a migrant background and my mental health stuff doesn’t allow me to seek out office-work type jobs. My social ramifications [identities] don’t allow me to have a job that would

fit normal standard qualifications' [19]. Her account reveals how transphobia, racism, and mental health stigma operate as exclusionary mechanisms from mainstream employment, making sex work one of the few accessible income sources—yet sex work stigma then compounds with these existing marginalisations to produce heightened vulnerability.

The way sex work stigma operates to reproduce gender norms is made explicit through the way trans women are subjected to sex work stigma and transphobia for not being 'real' women and 'exempt' from victim stigma. Dominique, a US-born biracial trans woman interviewed for SEXHUM in the US testifies: 'People think that we do it for fun, for the thrills, not because we have to do it. When you see a biological female who's a prostitute, and a transwoman prostitute, you're more likely to feel bad for the biological female, because "she was forced." The trans person is seen as doing it for other reasons. There's more sympathy for biological females. Even in terms of law, even with cops, they're more likely to be lenient with biological females than with trans girls. I don't need you to feel bad for me, but it's a double standard' [20]. These considerations by Dominique demonstrate how transphobia and sex work stigma operate synergistically to produce categorical exclusion from both normative femininity and from the protections (however often counterproductive) extended to 'real' women [20].

The SEXHUM study documented how anti-prostitution law enforcement operationalises compounded stigma through the practice of arresting trans Latina women simply for 'walking whilst trans' [72], meaning that they were stopped and criminalised on the assumption that any trans woman of colour in public space was engaged in sex work [5]. This is intersectional sex work stigma operating in crystalline form: not as a response to commercial transaction but as direct stigmatisation of gender non-conformity, racialisation and migration status, policed through anti-prostitution apparatus.

The SEXHUM study documents the most severe manifestations within carceral systems ostensibly designed to protect trafficking victims. In the United States, Nayara, a Latina migrant trans woman, recounted arrest trauma following a police sting to arrest sex workers in New York: 'When the police arrested me, there was a lot of violence and discrimination in the station. . . They used my real name rather than my female name. . . At the station, I was in the same cell with another trans woman and a man. . . It was very traumatic—all of it. . . It affected me mentally and psychologically' [21]. The deadnaming itself functioned as gendered violence denying trans women's gender identity whilst criminalising them.

The compounded stigma facing trans women sex workers of colour creates heightened vulnerability not only to institutional violence but to violence from clients and the public. The SEXHUM study documented that arrest practices targeting trans Latina women for 'walking whilst trans' not only criminalised their presence in public space but exposed them to violence by signalling to potential perpetrators that these women exist outside legal protection [5]. When police systematically target and arrest specific populations, this communicates impunity to those who might perpetrate violence against them. The intersection of transphobia, racism, anti-migrant rhetoric and sex work stigma produces a subject position marked as inherently violable.

For gay and queer cis men who sell sex, stigma operates differently but remains rooted in cis-heteronormative regulation. Within the SWMH research, Qim, a Swedish cis man of colour recounted how his therapist pathologised both sexuality and sex work: therapists 'connected [sex work] with being gay, "too much sexual appetite," goal was "to make me a survivor"' [19], imposing cis-heteronormative frameworks that constructed his sexuality and work as problems requiring intervention rather than recognising his autonomy.

However, both the SWMH and the VICSW studies documented a significant exception to pervasive stigma: LGBTQ-specific services and community organisations were notably

more accepting and supportive of sex workers [19,29]. Workers reported that queer community health services, trans-specific support organisations, and LGBTQ peer networks provided non-stigmatising care and recognised sex work as legitimate labour. This pattern suggests that communities organised around challenging cis-heteronormativity may be better positioned to challenge sex work stigma, having already developed political analyses linking multiple forms of sexual and gender regulation.

Nevertheless, conceptualising ‘being a sex worker’ as a sexual identity would be problematic, since sex work is an economic activity under neoliberal capitalism, not an identity claim. Whilst some workers draw empowerment from identifying with their work, designating this as the only ‘correct’ position risks reproducing the ‘happy’ versus ‘unhappy’ sex worker binary [3,73,74]. Treating sex work as identity inadvertently reinforces the stigma logic that ‘you are what you do’, whilst also adopting the liberal ideology of self-realisation through work. Positioning empowerment and pleasure as the normative sex worker stance functions to automatically strengthen its inverse—the figure of the ‘unhappy whore’ as victim—thereby reproducing rather than challenging the representational framework that traps sex workers between these polarised positions. A progressive approach should instead aim to free sex work from stigma entirely, enabling workers themselves to determine what their work means to them—whether identity, self-realisation, economic necessity, or simply a job among other jobs.

Workers express agency in diverse ways, reflecting their structural positions. Yael, a Swedish cis woman working as an escort in Sweden, reported empowerment through the autonomy gained from sex work:

‘Through this job I have learned so much about myself, seeing my own worth, that I am actually really good at stuff! And appreciated. (. . .) The fact that I have the right to my own body feels good. It makes me feel powerful. It puts me in a better mood [19].’

Conversely, Charlotte, a Southern European migrant working as an escort in the United Kingdom, located wellbeing in material conditions such as access to housing beyond the work itself [19]. As Butler [62] argues, subjects are formed through subjection—agency is produced through the same power structures that constrain it. What of desire itself, the erotic and pleasure dimensions that frameworks treating sex work purely as labour or violence both obscure? Hoang’s [63] research demonstrates that workers deploy, negotiate, and sometimes genuinely experience desire within commercial encounters and name pleasure as a reason to stay in sex work [75]. Power, pleasure, agency, and constraint coexist without one negating the others.

4.2. Clients: Differential Stigma Power and Violence

Client criminalisation demonstrates the asymmetric operation of stigma power. Whilst customers who are cis men occupy dominant social positions and face minimal material consequences from stigma, criminalisation systematically increases sex workers’ violence exposure [67]. Research documents considerable heterogeneity in client behaviour, with many respecting negotiated boundaries [76]. Yet criminalisation stigmatises all clients as ‘sex-hungry perpetrators’ whilst constructing workers as victims, intensifying the very stigma it claims to address [4,77]. Cis male sexual subjectivity remains culturally dominant. Whilst clients may be stigmatised—represented as sexually rapacious perpetrators in abolitionist discourse—this stigma operates fundamentally differently from sex work stigma. Individual men may experience shame if discovered purchasing sex, but the category ‘men who purchase sex’ does not face systematic institutional exclusion in the way ‘women who sell sex’ does. Crucially, men are granted sexual self-determination as a matter of course and are not reduced to this single aspect of their personhood [64,78]. The (typically heterosexual, white) cis male subject position remains practically untouched

by prostitution laws: men retain access to employment, housing, banking, parenting rights, and social legitimacy regardless of their sexual purchasing practices. Sex workers, conversely, face institutional discrimination across all these domains. Client impunity for violence largely persists, with police systematically failing to protect sex workers who report violence [51,79–81], demonstrating that whilst individual clients may face moral condemnation, they do not experience the structural violence and exclusion that constitutes stigma power.

Increasing prohibitions and state enforcement in the field of prostitution produce limited change in fundamental patriarchal relations [82]. The subject and power position of the (predominantly heterosexual and white) cis man in society remains practically unaffected by such measures, because he is routinely granted a right to sexual self-determination and is not reduced to this aspect of his personality.

Client stigmatisation harms workers more than clients. Criminalisation drives the industry underground, prevents screening, and deters clients concerned about legal consequences whilst concentrating demand amongst those willing to accept legal risks [51,52,67,83]. The empirical evidence is stark. In France, following the 2016 law, ten workers were murdered in six months and workers reported a 42% increase in violence [52]. Violence has continued to escalate: the NGO Médecins du Monde documented a six per cent increase in community reports of violence against sex workers in 2024 compared to 2023, including seven sex workers murdered, all of them migrants [84]. In August 2024, Lanying, a sixty-year-old Chinese sex worker, was found stabbed to death in her Belleville apartment. Ting Chen, coordinator of Les Roses d’Acier representing three hundred and twenty Chinese workers, described arriving at the scene: ‘We were in front of her apartment when the firefighters arrived. It was terrible, the women beside me collapsed’ [83].

In Ireland, violence against sex workers increased following the 2017 client criminalisation [85] while access to justice was inhibited [80]. McBride et al. [86] found that in Canada, violence against migrants and racialised sex workers increased and went increasingly under-reported following the introduction of client criminalisation. In Norway, violence decreased for white workers but increased for Black African migrants, revealing how criminalisation’s effects are racially stratified and intersectionally related to migration status [87]. These patterns demonstrate that stigma power appears strongly associated with male violence against sex workers. Men commit the murders, but stigma power appears to be the structural mechanism creating conditions under which male violence becomes routine rather than exceptional, positioning workers as ‘rapeable’ and ‘killable’ [7], appearing to license violence whilst denying justice, and ensuring perpetrators face minimal consequences.

Sex work criminalisation in all its forms, including the Swedish model, fuels violence and lack of police protection through stigma power: in recent comparative research across 11 European countries [79] with diverse legal frameworks that criminalised different aspects of sex work (ranging from full criminalisation to regulation), sex workers reporting violence to police consistently encountered misrecognition (being treated as undeserving victims), responsibilisation (being blamed for their own victimisation), and punishment (being arrested or threatened with deportation when seeking help), a pattern Dziuban terms ‘policed abandonment’: sex workers are hyper-visible as targets of surveillance and control yet rendered invisible as subjects deserving protection and care [79].

5. Class as a Cross-Cutting Dimension

Having illustrated how stigma power operates through gender and sexuality (Section 4), this section examines class as a cross-cutting dimension that modulates stigmatisation across all axes. The empirical material presented here functions as illustrative

evidence demonstrating how the conceptual framework operates in practice: economic position transforms stigma's material effects whilst never dissolving stigma itself.

Class is a structural position determining access to capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic [13]. This modulates the intensity of stigmatisation across gender, sexuality, race and migration. Class shapes sex workers' experiences in three main ways: it structures entry into sex work through labour market exclusion, determines the resources available to mitigate stigma (such as housing, privacy, and private healthcare), and strongly conditions exposure to violence through the spatial and legal organisation of the sector. High-earning workers offset some dimensions by affording privacy, better healthcare, and avoiding criminalised street work [3]. Lower-earning workers cannot. Yet offsetting is partial and precarious. Sex work stigma attaches to the work itself. The possibility of exposure remains a source of anxiety even for economically secure workers [3,88].

Bourdieu's habitus [15] is class-specific. Working-class and middle-class habitus produce different forms of embodied practice, different strategies of stigma management, and different relationships to institutional authority. The SWMH research documents this clearly. Sex workers with higher qualifications and greater economic resources were better able to access non-stigmatising healthcare by paying for private practitioners. Working-class sex workers relied on public services where they faced greater institutional stigma [19]. In the United Kingdom, Charlotte explained: 'My mental health is really, really bad when I have housing issues' [19]. In Sweden, Helga offered a structural analysis: 'Mental health is tied to finances in many ways' [19]. These accounts reveal how economic precarity compounds occupational stigma, not because sex work is inherently harmful but because poverty prevents access to material resources that support wellbeing.

The health consequences of class stratification are evident across contexts. In Germany, where sex work was regulated through labour rights during the SWMH data collection period³, the vast majority of participants accessed mental health services and many found non-judgemental support either through specialised peer services or sympathetic private practitioners they could afford. By contrast, in Sweden's Swedish model context, workers who could pay privately sometimes found supportive care, but those relying on public systems encountered pervasive stigma [19]. Nora, a cis Eastern European woman who had migrated to Sweden with her parents as a young child, was living in a car at the time of being interviewed and described the mental health impacts of housing precarity: 'Does it affect your mental health? Of course it does! Not ever having a safe place!' [19]. The VICSW study found that street-based sex workers, who are overwhelmingly working-class, often homeless, and frequently drug-using, were positioned by service providers as having priorities other than sexual health, despite their own testimonies that sexual health remained central to them [29]. This appears to be class stigma compounding with sex work stigma: the assumption that working-class sex workers are too chaotic, too damaged, or too desperate to care for their own wellbeing.

Class position also determines exposure to violence. Street-based sex workers, who are overwhelmingly working-class, often homeless and migrant, and frequently drug-dependent, face significantly higher rates of violence than indoor workers [89]. This is not inherent to street-based work but is produced through intersecting mechanisms: criminalisation prevents screening and forces work into isolated locations; poverty prevents access to protective resources including security, legal support, and safe housing; and compounded stigma (working-class, drug-using, street-based, history of migration) positions these workers as maximally excludable from police protection. When working-class street workers report violence, they face dismissal or blame from police who treat violence against this population as predictable rather than criminal [52,83,90,91]. Economic precarity thus translates directly into violence vulnerability through the operation of stigma's power.

In the SEXHUM study, class shaped workers' relative positions within and outside sex work. Sasha, a European migrant in New Zealand, articulated how economic exploitation structures all labour: 'I wasn't forced, except for the fact I needed money, but we all need money so we could all say we are forced to work' [24], questioning how economic necessity affects all workers whilst sex work is uniquely pathologised. Anastasia, a Caribbean migrant army veteran trans woman in the United States, described how the lack of state support following military service created homelessness and economic desperation: 'The army helped me. . . But when you got out, they didn't provide anything. I was homeless. No housing. Nothing. No mental health provider. No money. No help in any way' [21]. Her account demonstrates how class position, shaped by inadequate veteran support, transphobia preventing mainstream employment, and housing precarity, determines vulnerability within sex work whilst also shaping why sex work becomes necessary as a survival strategy.

Class also determines the practical consequences of criminalisation. Licensing regimes create class hierarchies within sex work: licensed brothel workers with some legal protection versus unlicensed workers with no protection, criminalised status, and increased barriers to accessing health services. The Victorian licensing regime exemplified this. Asian migrant workers in unlicensed massage parlours faced deportation risk, police raids, and exclusion from healthcare. Australian citizens as well as migrants working in licensed brothels had at least formal access to services [29]. This is not merely a legal distinction but a class one too. Economic capital and migration/citizenship status determine who can access the licensed sector and therefore who receives even minimal state protection.

The SEXHUM study documented an intersectionally stigmatising class- and migration-status-related stratification through deportability and debt arrangements. In Australia, the Mother Tac system, where older Thai women facilitated migration and collected debts from newer workers, created temporary class subordination. Thai workers like Lia and Tilly worked under contracts requiring repayment of forty-five thousand Australian dollars. During this period, they had minimal control over working conditions and retained only client tips. Yet their experiences are better made sense of as 'bounded exploitation' within available options for migration [39]. Following debt repayment and upon obtaining rights to work, they both worked independently, demonstrating class mobility within sex work itself [23]. In the United States, Skylar, a US national Black cis woman, described how anti-trafficking interventions failed to address economic need: '\$5 a day and a yoga class is not going to fix that!' [21]. The structural economic conditions necessitating sex work remained unaddressed while she faced renewed criminalisation.

Critically, class position can shift within sex work itself. Several participants in the VICSW study described moving between modalities depending on their economic circumstances, housing status, and mental health, from private work when housed to street-based work when homeless [29]. The SWMH study similarly documented this fluidity. In Italy, many workers moved between street-based work, indoor work from home, and club work depending on housing security, documentation status, and economic need [19]. Sex work thus functions simultaneously as a class position, and precarious service labour, and as a site where class mobility can occur in either direction.

The whorearchy, the internal hierarchy within sex work that organises respectability and stigma, is itself substantially a class hierarchy, though always intersecting with race, gender, citizenship status and modality of work [45]. Bourdieu's [13] analysis of class and respectability helps understand the way sex workers with greater economic and cultural capital are better able to position themselves as 'legitimate' or 'professional', distancing themselves from more stigmatised modalities of sex work: high-earning digital content creators on platforms like OnlyFans, as well as erotic dancers, distance themselves from sex

workers selling sexual services. Independent escorts distinguish themselves from brothel workers. Indoor workers distinguish themselves from street-based workers. And national workers distinguish themselves from ‘trafficked’ migrant workers. Each act of distancing reproduces intersectional judgements, modulated by class, about who deserves stigma and who might escape it. The SWMH study documented these hierarchies explicitly. In Sweden, Renee noted: ‘Multi-stigma is an important issue. . . I am very low on the hierarchy of sex workers and of drug users and both groups look down on the other’ [19], revealing how class intersects with drug use to create positions of maximum stigmatisation within already-stigmatised populations.

Yet as the empirical record consistently shows, no position within the whorearchy offers escape from sex work stigma itself, only differential exposure to its effects. The high-earning creator still fears professional exposure, outing or doxxing [88,92]. The independent escort still manages disclosure to family and healthcare providers. Class plays a strategic role in modulating stigma’s intensity but does not dissolve it and always operates intersectionally with other dimensions such as gender, migration status, etc.

6. Race, Migration, and the Victim Stigma

Building on the analyses of gender, sexuality (Section 4), and class (Section 5), this section examines race and migration as constitutive dimensions of stigma power, not additions to gendered dynamics but forces that fundamentally transform them. The illustrative evidence drawn from SEXHUM, SWMH, and VICSW demonstrates how racialised victim stigma produces qualitatively different subject positions across national contexts, supporting the conceptual framework’s central claim that stigma operates through constitutive transformation rather than additive stratification.

Sex work stigma appears systematically racialised. The historical construction of non-white and colonised bodies as hypersexual means that the figure of the prostitute or sexually available woman has often been more readily attributed to Black, Indigenous, Asian, and other racialised women than to white women, for whom the boundary between madonna and whore is constructed quite differently [1,10,17,34]. This racialised dimension is not an addition to gendered logic but constitutive of it. Gender and race appear mutually reproduced through the same stigmatising processes.

Critical Whiteness studies in European contexts require attending to hierarchies of Whiteness constructed through religion, ethnicity, migration, national identities, and territorial disputes, not only through colonial slavery and segregation [27,86,93,94]. Racialisation in Europe emerges from the convergence between colonial racialisation and European migration processes [95], producing conditional Whiteness for Eastern and Southern European migrants who occupy ambiguous positions: racialised as culturally backward, feminised, or criminal within Western Europe whilst maintaining proximity to Whiteness unavailable to Black, Asian, and other racialised migrants [96]. This produces stratified victim stigmas: Eastern European women constructed as culturally prone to trafficking [97], Southern European women as hypersexual yet still White, and non-White migrants as categorically Other.

That sex work is largely carried out by migrants has definite economic and racist causes [98]. The fact that migrant sex workers are often only conceived of and presented in public discussion as victims of human trafficking and not as subjects with their own will has to do with the interaction of racism, class and gender relations, and sex work stigma, from which the image of the migrant, weak-willed and uneducated ‘victim woman’ and the migrant criminal ‘perpetrator man’ emerges [39,99]. This racialised construction of victimhood operates through implicit hierarchies: national/white sex workers are positioned as potentially agential subjects capable of decision-making, whilst migrant/racialised workers

are constructed as categorically incapable of consent or self-determination [5,22]. This is a racist prejudice and colonial pattern [1,10]: the oppressed, less (if at all) capable of acting, non-white female subjects must be protected and saved from their own oppressive men. Race and migration status do not simply intensify sex work stigma but fundamentally transform it. Racialised migrant sex workers as well as specific groups of white migrant workers⁴ are not only stigmatised as deviant but are frequently constructed as ideal trafficking victims, a construction that simultaneously justifies state intervention and denies workers' agency.

In the contemporary context of sex work, the most significant expression of racialised stigma power is what Mai has termed sexual humanitarianism [39], the set of discourses, institutional practices, and legislative frameworks that mobilise concern for the vulnerability of migrant sex workers as justification for increasingly repressive migration controls and criminalising approaches to sex work. SEXHUM's comparative research across Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States provides extensive empirical documentation of this mechanism at work [5,20,22].

The sexual humanitarian paradigm operates through a specific construction of victimhood that is both racialised and generically feminine. It imagines the paradigmatic victim as the uneducated, naive, racialised cis woman, typically Asian or Black, controlled by male traffickers from her own ethnic community. This construction serves multiple ideological functions simultaneously. It reproduces and legitimises racialised stereotypes of non-white masculinity as criminal and non-white femininity as passive and in need of rescue [99]. It frames anti-trafficking interventions in ways that align seamlessly with anti-migration agendas, since the rescue of trafficked migrants and their deportation to their countries of origin become virtually indistinguishable in practice [39]. It renders invisible both the structural causes of vulnerability, including poverty, border regimes, and labour market exclusion, and the agency of migrant sex workers themselves.

SEXHUM's research in France provides detailed documentation of these dynamics. Following the 2016 law criminalising the purchase of sex, SEXHUM and Médecins du Monde documented how Chinese cis women and Nigerian cis women, the groups most frequently framed by sexual humanitarian discourse as ideal silent victims, were simultaneously over-targeted by immigration controls and effectively excluded from the exit programmes the law purported to offer them, since their continued engagement in sex work was taken as evidence that they were not genuinely willing to stop [22]. The victim status was simultaneously used to justify intervention against them and denied to them once it might have entitled them to protection. Giametta and Chen's [101] ethnographic research further documented how, for Chinese migrant sex workers, client criminalisation increased reliance on third parties for translation, housing, and client screening—the very 'pimping' arrangements the law claimed to eliminate. Victim stigma simultaneously denies agency and enforces individual responsibility, reproducing rather than challenging exploitation. Meanwhile, trans Latina women, who were disproportionately exposed to violence and exploitation but did not conform to the sexual humanitarian template of the ideal victim, were marginalised and harmed by both the protective and the repressive dimensions of the law [5]. Significantly, these dynamics were also identified and explicitly addressed by the protagonists themselves during the co-creative filmmaking process of CAER⁵, developed in the context of the SEXHUM project with members of the Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo in Queens, New York. Through a series of collective writing workshops, participants chose to centre the film's narrative on police persecution, anti-immigrant bordering, and the struggle to obtain humanitarian protection, while simultaneously challenging dominant conflations between sex work and trafficking and asserting their own understandings of agency, rights, and survival [102].

Australia provides a complementary illustration through the lens of the racialised, sexualised, and gendered politics of modern slavery discourse [23]. SEXHUM's research in New South Wales and Victoria documented how majority-Asian massage parlours offering sexual services were systematically targeted by council inspections, private investigators, law enforcement, and immigration raids in the name of finding trafficking victims. Yet the Asian cis women working in these establishments had, in the majority of cases, consciously opted for this work because its relative invisibility afforded them protection from the more intense sex work stigma of the fully visible commercial sex industry. The raids produced not the identification and protection of trafficking victims but fines, loss of income, and deportation notices or fear thereof for migrant workers [5].

New Zealand's partially decriminalised context, where the 2003 Prostitution Reform Act decriminalised sex work for citizens and permanent residents but explicitly excluded migrants under Section 19, which was framed as an anti-trafficking measure, further illustrates how (victim) stigma power can be operationalised through the differential application of legal protection. SEXHUM's findings confirmed that Section 19 made migrant sex workers significantly more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by preventing them from reporting to police or accessing medical services without risk of deportation [5,24]. The migrant sex worker's deportability functioned as a structural resource for their exploiters [103], a textbook illustration of how border regimes and sex work stigma compound to produce exploitability as a social condition rather than merely an individual misfortune: employers, clients, and intermediaries can rely on migrant workers' fear of immigration enforcement to prevent complaints of violence and exploitation, while stigma surrounding both race/migration and sex work further discourages reporting to authorities.

Sex work stigma has a particularly severe effect on subjects who are already discriminated against in multiple ways by society and state authorities due to poverty, gender, sexuality, and origin. Thus, many cis women are often not only denied the decision to work in prostitution, but they are also denied their will and their right to migrate [98,99]. Structural economic inequalities between different countries, repressive border policies, and a lack of legal and financial options for emigration demonstrably lead in many cases to cis women with a desire to migrate ending up in exploitative forced relationships and to human trafficking flourishing [99]. To claim, however, that all migrant sex workers must be 'saved' from this fate serves to degrade them into objects and to legitimise repressive measures such as raids and deportations against them [39].

The victim stigma also operates internally to sex worker communities in ways that reproduce racialised hierarchies. SWMH documented, across several national contexts, how migrant sex workers were negatively labelled as trafficked or presumed to have pimps by other sex workers, distancing themselves from the most stigmatised category [19]. Racist prejudice against specific nationalities associated with the trafficking moral panic, including Romanian, Nigerian, and Chinese cis women in different European contexts, was reproduced amongst sex workers themselves. The Swedish SWMH data make this particularly explicit. Practitioners and services in Sweden distinguished sharply between national sex workers, read as self-harming with agency but misdirected, and migrant sex workers, read as ultimate victims without agency whose freedom lay in deportation home. One Swedish social worker stated directly that for migrant sex workers, 'they just have to deal with the here and now. They have such a hard situation, if they started reflecting, what would they do? They would just lay down and give up and die' [19].

This denial of reflexive capacity to migrants, the insistence that they cannot be subjects of their own mental health, illustrates how stigma stability operates through policy re-framing: what was once explicit racism is reframed as humanitarian concern, maintaining

colonial hierarchies under progressive rhetoric [39]. The victim stigma in its most naked form is not protection but a colonial erasure of the other's interiority.

The racialisation of violence vulnerability is evident in murder statistics. In the United Kingdom between 1990 and 2016, one hundred and eighty sex workers were murdered, with dramatic increases amongst migrant victims [89]. In France, following the 2016 law, violence escalated with migrant workers disproportionately murdered (Section 4.2; [84]). Lanying's 2024 murder exemplifies this racialised violence: media coverage emphasised her occupation over her humanity [83].

Migrant sex workers, particularly Asian and African cis women, face heightened murder risk not because migration itself creates danger but because racialised victim stigma positions them as simultaneously 'rescuable' (justifying state intervention) and 'ungrievable' (receiving minimal justice when murdered). The sexual humanitarian framework that constructs migrant cis women as trafficking victims paradoxically renders violence against them more likely: raids increase isolation and prevent protective strategies, whilst the victim construction denies them agency to report violence or access justice on their own terms.

The abolitionist attitude towards prostitution, which advocates for state prohibition and associates any sex work with violence and human trafficking, also serves to reinforce the stigma against migrants and sex workers [48]. At the same time, the hierarchical relationships between the richer and poorer countries are not only accepted but also maintained.

The political consequence of this analysis is significant. Across SEXHUM, SWMH, and the VICSW study, research consistently found that the sex workers most affected by racialised victim stigma, including undocumented migrant workers, trans women of colour, and racialised street workers, were systematically excluded from whatever partial protections were available, whether through decriminalisation regimes that excluded migrants, exit programmes that denied the authenticity of their experience, or raids that criminalised their work practices in the name of their rescue. These dynamics show that race and migration status do not simply add another layer of vulnerability but fundamentally transform how sex work stigma operates, producing distinct subject positions that cannot be understood through gender alone.

7. Intersectional Co-Constitution: How Categories Transform Each Other

The preceding analyses examined stigma power through distinct axes: gender and sexuality (Section 4), class (Section 5), and race and migration (Section 6). Each demonstrated how stigma operates through specific mechanisms—cis-heteronormative regulation, class stratification, and racialised victimhood. Yet true intersectionality means analysing not gender plus race plus class but how race changes what gender means, class changes what race means, and migration status changes what gender, race, and class mean [16,17]. Categories do not add; they transform each other. This section demonstrates this co-constitution by examining how race transforms gendered victim stigma across multiple national contexts, revealing how stigma power operates through intersecting systems to produce qualitatively different subject positions.

7.1. How Race Transforms Gendered Victim Stigma

In Sweden, under the Swedish model, white Swedish cis women are constructed as victims of patriarchal exploitation, damaged by sex work itself and suffering mental health problems caused by selling sex. Their whiteness and citizenship produce victimhood coded as psychological damage requiring therapeutic intervention. They are not trafficked but harmed by male demand, needing support to exit into proper womanhood. Migrant workers, including Romanian, Nigerian, and Chinese cis women, are constructed

as trafficking victims controlled by ethnic criminals, denied reflexive capacity and read as ultimate victims whose freedom lies in deportation [5,18,19].

Both white and racialised cis women are constructed as victims under the Swedish model, but race constitutes fundamentally different victimhoods. White Swedish cis women are victims of patriarchy and damaged mental health, requiring therapy and support to 'exit' sex work. Migrant cis women face racialised victim constructions that vary by proximity to Whiteness. Eastern European cis women, occupying conditional Whiteness, are constructed as culturally prone to trafficking—victims of backward patriarchal cultures requiring civilising intervention through deportation [18,97]. This construction mobilises hierarchies of European Whiteness where Western European cis women represent enlightened femininity whilst Eastern Europeans embody cultural deficit. Black African and Asian cis women face more categorical racialisation: constructed as hypersexualised (Nigerian cis women are controlled through 'juju') or passive (Chinese cis women are controlled by ethnic traffickers), positioned outside Whiteness entirely and requiring removal rather than rehabilitation. The interventions are entirely different. White Swedish sex workers receive mental health services encouraging cessation. Migrants face immigration enforcement removing them from the country. This demonstrates that victimhood itself is racialised: what kind of victim one becomes, what interventions follow, and whose agency is recognised all depend on race and citizenship status.

In France, following the 2016 Swedish model law, white French cis women are victims of male exploitation and the prostitution system. They can access exit programmes but must demonstrate a genuine willingness to stop sex work. Chinese cis women are constructed as ideal trafficking victims, passive and controlled by ethnic traffickers, and they are overexposed to policing, migration controls and deportation orders, whilst they are underrepresented in exiting programmes [22]. Nigerian cis women are trafficking victims, but with different racial coding: hypersexualised and controlled through 'juju', an exoticisation of African practice. Again, this does not grant them protection but subjects them to policing and migration controls. In the United States, SEXHUM documented that Latina trans women are subject to anti-trafficking rhetoric justifying enforcement but excluded from victim-centred courts because trans identity does not fit the cis-heteronormative victim template [20]. Racialisation as Latina combined with gender as trans produces ineligibility for victimhood protection.

These patterns reveal that victim stigma under the Swedish model operates on all sex workers, but race determines what type of victim one is allowed to be and what consequences follow. White national (cis) women become damaged individuals requiring therapeutic rehabilitation. White Eastern European (cis) women are constructed as culturally prone to embody patriarchy and become trafficked victims [97]. Asian cis women become passive trafficking victims requiring deportation as rescue. Black cis women become hypersexualised, suspicious victims requiring surveillance. Trans women of colour become categorically excluded from victimhood and face direct criminalisation. The gendered victim stigma is always already racialised; there is no pure gendered victimhood that race then modulates.

These racially differentiated victimhoods also produce racially differentiated violence vulnerabilities. In Norway, client criminalisation decreased violence for white workers but increased it for Black African migrants [87], demonstrating that the same legal framework produces opposite outcomes depending on race. Vuolajärvi's [104] ethnographic research documents how racialised policing intensifies this differential vulnerability. Nigerian cis women faced constant identity checks, were forced out of indoor working environments onto streets through targeted enforcement, and experienced systematic deportations. As Vuolajärvi ([104] p. 159) documents, 'The Nigerians I talked with during my fieldwork had

more negative police contact than other ethnic groups. For the Nigerians, constant identity checks and deportations seemed to be part of everyday life.' Service providers reported that following intensified immigration enforcement in 2015, police 'forced Nigerians out of Norway' whilst other migrant groups continued working [104]. Documented white cis women sex workers can potentially access police protection (though diminished under criminalisation), whilst Nigerian migrant workers cannot, both because of deportation risk and because police treat violence against Nigerian migrant sex workers as a low priority. The Nigerian sex worker's observation—'Most customers do harass us because they can do anything to us. White women are more relaxed because they know police will help them' [87]—articulates precisely how race transforms the relationship between criminalisation, stigma, and violence. It is not that white sex workers face no violence under criminalisation, but that racialised migrant sex workers face compounded exclusion from any protective infrastructure, leaving them maximally vulnerable to perpetrators who understand this differential impunity.

7.2. Theoretical and Political Implications

The comparative analysis demonstrates three core intersectional principles that emerge from the empirical material. First, categories transform, not add [16,17]. Race transforms what gender means, determining what kind of victim one becomes, what interventions follow, and whose agency is recognised. As demonstrated across Sweden, France, and the United States, the same victim framework produces therapeutic intervention for white local/national cis women and deportation for racialised migrants. This is not gender stigma with racial modulation but fundamentally different stigmas constituted through race and migration status.

Second, context specificity matters fundamentally. The same identity intersection produces radically different subject positions in different legal, national, and institutional contexts. One cannot generalise about 'trans women sex workers' or 'Asian migrant sex workers' without specifying the legal framework, migration regime, class position, and institutional context that constitute their positions.

Third, stigma power operates through intersections, not as separate phenomena that then combine. Sex work stigma is always already racialised, classed, and shaped by citizenship. There is no pure sex work stigma that race then adds to, or gender stigma that class then modulates. There are only specific formations of stigma power operating through multiple intersecting systems simultaneously. The victim stigma applied to white Swedish and Nigerian migrant sex workers in Sweden is not the same stigma applied differently; it is a different stigma constituted through race.

Violent vulnerability is produced through intersecting axes rather than being distributed evenly. Trans women of colour face arrest practices that expose them to violence whilst denying protection. Working-class street workers face dismissal when reporting violence. Migrant workers face increased murder risk because racialised victim stigma justifies raids while denying justice. White, national middle-class indoor workers and escorts face the lowest violence rates because class resources enable protective strategies. Violence thus enforces intersecting power relations: those at multiple stigmatised intersections face compounded vulnerability, policing boundaries of acceptable femininity, sexuality, race, migration and class simultaneously.

For political strategy, this analysis demonstrates that challenging sex work stigma requires simultaneously challenging racism, classism, border enforcement, transphobia, and cis-heteronormativity, not as separate issues addressed sequentially but as mutually constituting systems of oppression. Challenging stigma's power requires politics that simultaneously address racism, class exploitation, border enforcement, carceral systems,

transphobia, and cis-heteronormativity as mutually constituting systems of oppression. The Swedish model's victim stigma cannot be challenged without challenging the racialised construction of the trafficking victim. Licensing regimes' protection of some workers cannot be separated from the criminalisation of undocumented migrants. The carceral violence against trans women in the United States cannot be addressed through sex work decriminalisation alone but requires prison abolition and immigration justice. Stigma power's intersectional operations require intersectional resistance.

8. Discussion

This article developed the concept of stigma power to explain why sex work generates unusually persistent and harmful forms of stigmatisation. Integrating Link and Phelan's account of stigma power [12] with Bourdieu's symbolic violence [15] and Foucauldian productive power [14], the analysis shows how stigma operates simultaneously through institutions, embodied practices, and discursive constructions of the sex worker.

The intersectional analysis across 370 participants in three large studies (SWMH, SEXHUM, VICSW) spanning eight national contexts shows how stigma power appears strongly associated with cis male violence against sex workers.

The empirical evidence suggests why criminalisation is associated with increased violence (France, Ireland) [84,85] whilst decriminalisation appears associated with better health outcomes and access to justice (New Zealand, NSW, Australia) [30,62,95,105]; why client criminalisation harms workers more than clients; and why violence rates increase for most marginalised sex workers following implementation of the Swedish model in multiple contexts.

Intersectional analysis illustrates race transforming gendered victimhood (therapeutic intervention for white cis women versus deportation for migrants), class transforming racialisation (trafficking victims versus entrepreneurs from identical racial categories), and migration status transforming gender (workers versus deportable non-subjects versus carceral subjects from identical gender identities) (Section 7). These are not additive effects but constitutive transformations [16,17].

The findings also extend sociological research on stigma by demonstrating that stigma operates not merely as a social attitude or interpersonal process but as a form of structural power. While existing research has mapped the consequences of stigma for marginalised groups, the concept of stigma power emphasises the institutional actors, policy frameworks, and discursive constructions through which stigma is produced and maintained.

As a concept paper, this article proposes new mechanisms requiring empirical testing. The patterns documented across SEXHUM, SWMH, and VICSW are consistent with the framework's propositions, yet the theoretical propositions require longitudinal empirical testing to establish causal relationships rather than associations. Further testing of the framework should also include comparative institutional analysis, quantitative testing of associations and systematic participatory validation, which are beyond this article's scope. The paper also draws on evidence concentrated in Global North contexts and may require adaptation for settings where sex work is normalised within informal economies or where state capacity to institutionalise stigma differs substantially. We see these as productive directions for future research, which could fruitfully pursue empirical testing of the proposed mechanisms, intersectional measurement that captures transformation rather than addition, comparative institutional ethnographies, participatory methods centring sex worker knowledge, and contextual adaptations for diverse global settings.

9. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations: Beyond Liberal Positions

This article asked: How does stigma operate as a structural and intersectional form of power in sex work, and why are decriminalisation and labour-rights reforms necessary but insufficient without complementary anti-stigma interventions? The conceptual framework developed here offers four core answers, summarised below.

The intersectional analysis across 370 participants spanning eight national contexts suggests four core findings. Stigma power appears strongly associated with male violence, creating conditions under which violence becomes routine and unpunished (Section 4.2). It operates intersectionally through constitutive transformation: race, class, and migration status produce qualitatively different subject positions rather than simply stratifying a shared experience (Section 7; [16,17]). Legal frameworks modulate but do not dissolve stigma—even New Zealand's and New South Wales' decriminalisation shows persistent stigma decades later [91,106]—yet criminalisation systematically increases violence whilst decriminalisation improves safety and health [23,24,30,62,63,95,107]. Stigma stability mechanisms explain why legal reform alone is insufficient, requiring complementary anti-stigma interventions (Section 3.2.2; [58]).

9.1. Beyond Liberal Approaches

A liberal position advocating 'mainstreaming' sex work as equivalent to other employment is insufficient because it does not address structural inequalities or sex work stigma itself [3,11]. Managerial determination of client numbers or services would be particularly problematic given the embodied and stigmatised character of this work. As long as many people have limited labour market access due to social positioning and origin, fundamental prerequisites for exploitation exist [2,98].

Progressive prostitution policy would therefore need to initiate improvements in the long term that do not necessarily have to do with the regulation of sex work in the narrower sense. It would need to address gender relations, secure freedom of movement and labour rights for all, and contribute to the reduction in racism, sexism, and trans- and homophobia in society [1,6,10]. Only when all people have the same rights and can also exercise them will a good prostitution policy even be possible.

9.2. Policy Must Acknowledge and Actively Dismantle Stigma

When it comes to new laws, it is essential that stigmatisation and power relations are named and actively addressed. Prostitution laws can definitely contribute to making the lives of sex workers more 'liveable' [108]. Laws to minimise hierarchical structures in sex work would certainly not completely abolish the inequalities between the sexes or sex work stigma, but they could definitely offer an opportunity to empower sex workers and give them tools with which they can better defend themselves against stigma-related exploitation and violence.

The limits of legal reform, absent anti-stigma work, are evident across multiple contexts. Licensing regimes create formal worker categories while leaving stigmatising assumptions intact [29]. So-called 'exit' programmes exclude workers who continue selling sex, using continuation as evidence of inauthentic victimhood [22]. Labour protections on paper mean little when institutional stigma prevents workers from accessing them [19,24].

9.3. Concrete Policy Recommendations: Centring Anti-Stigma Work

Framing sex work stigma through stigma power and the Stigma Stability Framework underscores a double task for politics and policy: contest the actors exercising stigma power and disrupt the stabilising mechanisms regenerating it [33]. The orientation of prostitution

policy proposed here would counteract power relations rather than reproducing them through criminalisation.

Anti-sex work criminalisation produces demonstrable harm to sex workers, as the empirical evidence presented throughout this article establishes. This analysis indicates that policy interventions require explicit political engagement with structural inequalities to improve conditions for diverse sex workers and reduce exploitation. So that those who do this work are not disadvantaged by it and so that those who want to change their profession can do so more easily.

Legal Reform

Legal reform must begin with full decriminalisation of sex work for all parties including migrants, coupled with extension of labour rights and protections with particular attention to preventing exploitative hierarchical structures. Expungement of criminal records related to sex work is essential, as is the abolition of registration systems and mandatory health testing that function as surveillance rather than support. Critically, anti-trafficking clauses that exclude migrants from legal protection must be removed, and territorial restrictions that concentrate stigma and increase vulnerability must be abolished. Sex worker representation in platform governance and transparent payment processor rules informed by sex workers are necessary to address digital contexts.

Anti-Stigma Work as Central (Not Supplementary)

A racism-critical approach alongside decriminalisation is indispensable. At the centre must be socially and state-funded anti-stigma work. This requires strengthening the presence, perspectives, and voices of migrant and racialised sex workers in public and political space through funded platforms, media representation, and participatory policy-making processes. Competent counselling and support must be ensured through racism-critical organisations with peer-led components. Awareness campaigns challenging sex work stigma, victim stigma, and racialised trafficking narratives are essential, alongside targeted educational work for diverse stakeholders about rights, boundaries, and stigma. Support for self-organised social and cultural events such as film festivals, public forums, and community gatherings enables collective resistance. Mandatory anti-stigma training delivered by sex workers in health, migration, and law enforcement institutions addresses institutional habituation. Media guidelines on respectful sex work reporting must be developed and enforced, monitoring to prevent re-stigmatising framings such as media emphasis on 'prostitute' rather than humanity when workers are murdered.

Migrant Rights and Racism-Critical Policy

Migrants must be granted a right to remain and equal labour rights, with migration pathways enabling legal work without tying status to specific employers or sectors [23,98,99]. Confidentiality protections preventing immigration status reporting when workers access services are essential, as are mechanisms protecting migrants from exclusion under otherwise progressive laws. The sexual humanitarian paradigm that justifies raids and deportations as 'rescue' must be actively challenged [39].

Access to Justice

Workers must have meaningful access to justice mechanisms when experiencing violence, theft, or exploitation without fear of criminalisation, deportation, or institutional stigma. This requires removing structural and legal barriers that prevent reporting and addressing institutional practices that dismiss, blame, or further harm workers who seek help.

Institutional Reform

Financial services access without employment discrimination and healthcare access that does not pathologise sex work or assume it is the root cause of mental health difficulties are necessary [36]. Critically, institutions must recognise that disclosure of sex work to healthcare providers often results in worse treatment, requiring institutional change rather than expecting workers to disclose.

Structural Conditions

Addressing structural conditions requires ensuring housing access without employment verification, social protection systems accessible regardless of work type, and mechanisms addressing the fact that as long as many people have limited labour market access due to social positioning and origin, fundamental prerequisites for exploitation exist. Implementation requires sustained funding for peer-led anti-stigma initiatives, enforcement of existing labour protections where decriminalisation exists, removal of migrant exclusions from legal frameworks, and abolition of territorial restrictions that concentrate stigma and increase vulnerability.

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Notes

- ¹ The Swedish model (also termed the Nordic model, Equality model, or neo-abolitionist model) criminalises clients and third parties whilst formally decriminalising sellers, framed as addressing demand and treating sex workers as victims. First implemented in Sweden in 1999, it has been adopted in Norway (2009), Iceland (2009), Canada (2014), Northern Ireland (2015), France (2016), and Ireland (2017). Evidence consistently demonstrates increased violence against workers under this framework [51–53]. For comprehensive analysis of different legal frameworks governing sex work globally, see Östergren [54].
- ² All names of study participants mentioned here are pseudonyms as explained in the original research referenced in this piece.
- ³ SWMH data collection (2016–2017) occurred under Germany’s 2001 Prostitution Act (ProstG, in force January 2002–June 2017), which legalised sex work for persons holding valid work visas, required tax registration (possible under working names), and defined sex workers primarily as independent contractors. On 1 July 2017, the Prostitutes Protection Act (ProstSchutzG) came into force under pressure from neo-abolitionist organisations claiming ProstG promoted trafficking. Despite opposition from sex worker advocates, health professionals, and researchers, ProstSchutzG introduced significantly stricter regulation: compulsory registration in legal names, mandatory health counselling, compulsory business licensing, and mandatory condom use.
- ⁴ We refer here to white migrants from specific countries and backgrounds, such as Eastern European migrant sex workers in Europe, who are strongly stigmatised as particularly prone to patriarchal oppression, victimhood and exploitation in the intersection of migration status and hierarchies of whiteness [100].
- ⁵ For more information on CAER: <https://caer-film.org/> (accessed on 1 April 2026).

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