



Breaking the Silence: Motivations, Struggles, and Future Hopes of Sex Workers in Türkiye

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Abstract

Sex workers are exposed to different forms of discrimination and inequality in many societies, which negatively affects their bio-psycho-social lives, causing them to be excluded from society and making it difficult for them to access various services. In this study, a phenomenological approach was used within the framework of a qualitative research method to obtain detailed data to determine the experiences of 17 sex workers with different sexual orientations and gender identities living in Türkiye between October 2023 and November 2023. As a result of the analysis, the main themes were determined as experiences related to sex work, current health status, social support systems, experiences with and thoughts about institutions and organizations, and plans for the future. It is thought that it would be beneficial to conduct more studies focusing on the experiences of sex workers with different sexual orientations and gender identities and to present these studies with different research methods. In addition, it is necessary to understand the experiences of sex workers, to identify their changing problems and needs, and to implement policies such as various health, social services and access to justice within this framework.

Keywords Gender identity · Sexual orientation · Sex work · Sex workers · Qualitative research

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Introduction

Sex work emerges as a complex and controversial issue across many societies worldwide. Although the legal and social approaches to sex work vary from country to country -ranging from full criminalization to various models of legalization or decriminalization- sex workers across the globe frequently face a series of interconnected challenges. These include, but are not limited to, criminalization, social stigma, police harassment, arbitrary detention, lack of legal protection, economic precarity, and limited access to comprehensive health and social services (van der Meulen et al., 2013; Platt et al., 2018). The criminalization of sex work, whether direct or indirect, often pushes sex workers into precarious working conditions, forcing them to operate in unsafe environments where they are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

Even in countries where sex work has been decriminalized or partially legalized, institutionalized discrimination and deeply rooted moral judgments continue to impede the realization of sex workers' rights (Laing et al., 2015). Structural stigma and policy gaps often prevent sex workers from accessing justice and social services without fear of judgment or reprisal. This is particularly critical for sex workers who belong to historically marginalized groups, such as trans women, non-binary individuals, and other members of the LGBTI+ community.

Research conducted in diverse contexts such as Europe, Central Asia, South Africa, India, and Canada highlight that LGBTI+ sex workers are at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, including transphobia, homophobia, racism, and classism (ESWA, 2022; Hunt & Hubbard, 2015; Hui, 2017; Ross et al., 2021). These compounded vulnerabilities make it imperative to adopt a rights-based, inclusive, and community-driven approach that not only addresses labor and safety concerns but also affirms the identities and agency of sex workers. Activists and researchers alike have emphasized the importance of recognizing sex work as work, ensuring access to labor protections, decriminalizing consensual adult sex work, and incorporating sex workers' voices in policymaking and advocacy efforts.

In parallel with global trends, sex work in Türkiye also emerges as a complex and highly stigmatized issue. Although different terms and definitions are used for sex work colloquially, in media, and law, today, sex work is broadly defined as the exchange of sexual services between adults with decision-making capacity in exchange for money and without any use of force (based on mutual consent) (Orchard, 2020). Sex work can take the form of a wide range of activities such as "street prostitution, escort services, telephone dating services, pornography stardom, erotic dancing, erotic massage".

In Türkiye, legal regulations and social perspectives surrounding sex work are full of uncertainty and moral judgments (Çokar et al., 2011; Taşçıoğlu, 2021). Terms ranging from "prostitution" to "sex work" reflect the social struggle to reconcile different perspectives on this issue. Legal regulations generally reflect a morality-oriented approach, criminalizing any behavior that is deemed contrary to societal rules and norms, thereby continuing to stigmatize sex workers. More-

over, the absence of a worker-centered perspective in the legal legislation further exacerbates discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes towards sex workers.

Contrary to common beliefs and assumptions in society, sex work transcends traditional gender boundaries and includes individuals with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. In other words, individuals who are sex workers are not only cisgender women. However, the idea that sex work is a profession performed only by trans and cisgender women is also a misconception that does not reflect the diversity of people working in this sector. There are sex workers with various gender identities and sexual orientations. For example, trans (i.e. trans men, trans women, non-binary people etc.) sex workers face numerous difficulties and are exposed to violence and discrimination in the sex work sector and in wider society. Despite efforts to combat discrimination, trans people who engage in sex work often face harassment, administrative sanctions, and violence. The systematic marginalization of trans sex workers points to the existence of broader social and institutional prejudices, and it perpetuates cycles of oppression and exclusion. Additionally, in recent years, an increase has been observed in the cases of discrimination and violence faced by trans sex workers living and working in certain provinces of Türkiye (Odabaşı et al., 2012; Şimşek, 2022).

Studies carried out by various non-governmental organizations and occupational associations on sex workers generally focus on the health status of individuals working in this sector and the extent to which they can access legal and social rights as well as public services. There are also some academic studies conducted on LGBTI+ sex workers in Türkiye. In an ethnographic study, Gök-göz (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with LGBTI+ individuals employed in the sex work sector who were born and still reside in Gaziantep. In this study, the relationship between the conservative cultural climate specific to Gaziantep and the mental world of LGBTI+ individuals were investigated. In another study, Yılmaz (2019) focused on the experiences of trans women who are sex workers and investigated their views on the problems they face. Adopting a phenomenological approach, Yılmaz (2019) researched various themes to reveal the life experiences that trans women have accumulated regarding both sex work and their trans identities, and the way they perceive themselves and their environment as a result of these experiences. However, there is also a need for academic studies that adopt a more comprehensive perspective that delves into the different experiences and perceptions of LGBTI+ sex workers with various gender identities and sexual orientations. This research aims to fill this gap by adopting a broader approach by investigating the intersecting phenomena of gender, sexual orientation, sexuality and social stigma that shape the lives of both cisgender heterosexual and LGBTI+ individuals who engage in sex work in Türkiye. By examining the multifaceted experiences of sex workers with various gender identities and sexual orientations, this study intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding sex work in Türkiye, as well as to shed light on the attitudes of individuals working in this sector towards their profession, their work motivations, and future expectations. Building on earlier research that has primarily focused on specific identity groups or regional contexts, this study contributes to the literature by offering a broader and more inclusive analysis of sex

workers' lived experiences in Türkiye. In doing so, it expands the discussion on sex work by integrating intersectional perspectives on gender, sexual orientation, and social exclusion within a national context. This study seeks to explore the multidimensional aspects of sex workers' lives through a phenomenological lens. Accordingly, the research was guided by the following questions:

RQ1 How are the lived experiences of sex workers shaped?

RQ2 What are their current health conditions, and how do they access health services?

RQ3 How do they describe and experience social support systems?

RQ4 What are their experiences with, and perceptions of, public institutions and civil society organizations?

RQ5 What kinds of plans and expectations do they have for the future?

Method

In this study, a phenomenological approach has been employed within the framework of a qualitative research method to obtain detailed data to determine the experiences of sex workers living in Türkiye. Qualitative research methods are utilized to provide an in-depth understanding in examining psychological and social phenomena (Frankel & Devers, 2000). The phenomenological approach focuses on phenomena that we are aware of, but do not have an in-depth and detailed understanding. The phenomenological research method can be useful in studies that aim to investigate phenomena that are not completely alien to us, but whose full meaning we may not be able to fully comprehend (Tekindal & Uğuz Arsu, 2020). Despite the fact that explanations regarding phenomenology do not necessarily contain new information, they provide important and enlightening data regarding the essence of an issue. Even though it is anticipated that this study will not produce definitive and generalizable results due to the nature of qualitative research, it is thought that it will reveal examples, explanations and experiences that will help to better understand the experiences of sex workers living in Türkiye. Throughout the study, utmost importance was given to conveying the experiences of sex workers first-hand as much as possible.

Participants

Purposive sampling method, which emerged within the qualitative research tradition, was utilized in this study. Criteria for inclusion in the study entailed that participants were to be over the age of 18, define themselves as a sex worker, continue to make a living through sex work, and not have any physical or mental illness that would prevent them from participating in the research. The participants of the study were tried to be reached through non-government organizations that

provide consultancy services to sex workers in Türkiye. These non-government organizations provided initial information to potential volunteers. Researchers then contacted those interested in participating, shared detailed information about the study, and obtained informed consent before conducting in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with 7 sex workers who wanted to be included in the study and then different sex workers were reached through the snowball method. Within the scope of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 sex workers living in Türkiye. The number of 17 participants was chosen because data saturation was reached. We observed that the data started to repeat from the 13th participant onwards. Therefore, this number was sufficient to provide rich and meaningful insights while ensuring methodological rigor.

Participants were between the ages of 24 and 42. Participants' ages, gender identities, sexual orientations, occupations, education levels, relationship status and places of residence are presented in Table 1. Participants were numbered sequentially with the letter "P" in front of their names to ensure anonymity.

Data Collection Tools

In this study, the data, collected through a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers, was evaluated and interpreted. In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are prepared by reviewing the relevant literature. The most characteristic feature of semi-structured interviews is the use of open-ended questions and the ordering of these questions according to a specific interview protocol. Although these questions have an open-ended structure, they are asked within a systematic framework, and the participants are invited to provide detailed and comprehensive answers.

The form used in the study consists of five sections. The first part of the form includes questions regarding the socio-demographic information of the participants. The second part of the form includes questions about the participants' general health status and evaluations. These questions are related to whether the participants had health screenings, whether they had protection or underwent tests for sexually transmitted infections, and whether they engaged in substance use. Some of the questions in this section are as follows: "How would you assess your general health compared to your peers?", "Do you use any protection or undergo tests for sexually transmitted infections? (How often?)".

The third part of the form includes questions that aim to reveal participants' experiences related to sex work. These questions delve into to the length of time during which participants have been involved in sex work; through which platforms sex work is carried out; motivation to do sex work; whether sex work is financially satisfying or not; information about the clients of sex workers; and participants' thoughts on switching to other professions. Some of the questions in this section are as follows: "How long have you been working as a sex worker? (Do you do any other job? - Have you ever taken a break from sex work? If so, why?)", "Where/through which platforms do you engage in sex work? (Do you have a license/permit for sex work?)", "Can you describe your motivation for engaging in sex work?"

Table 1 Information about participants

	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Education	Occupation	Place of Residence	Duration of sex work (Year)	Relationship Status (Year)
P1	27	Man	Gay	Bachelor's degree	Sex worker	Istanbul	3 years	Single
P2	33	Man	Heterosexual	Associate degree	Sex worker	Ankara	12 years	Single
P3	38	Woman	Heterosexual	Highschool	Sex worker	Ankara	20 years	Single
P4	29	Non-binary	Pansexual	Master's degree	Editor/Sex worker	Istanbul	8 years	Single
P5	42	Trans Woman	Heterosexual	Secondary school	Sex worker	Adana	21 years	Single
P6	32	Woman	Lesbian	Master's degree	Translator/Sex worker	Antalya	7 years	Partnered/5.5 years
P7	29	Man	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Graphic designer/Sex worker	Izmir	4 years	Single
P8	33	Woman	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Teacher/Sex worker	Diyarbakir	4 years	Single
P9	30	Trans Man	Pansexual	Highschool	Waiter/Sex worker	Eskisehir	3 years	Single
P10	32	Man	Demisexual/Androsexual	Bachelor's degree	Sex worker	Mersin	13 years	Partnered/3.5 years
P11	29	Trans Woman	Heterosexual	Bachelor's degree	Sex worker	Trabzon Istanbul	7 years	Partnered/1.5 years
P12	41	Woman	Heterosexual	Secondary school	Sex worker	Samsun Istanbul	20 years	Single
P13	30	Man	Gay/Androsexual	Highschool	Sex worker	Antalya Trabzon	7 years	Partnered/1 year
P14	25	Man	Pansexual	Highschool	Visual media/Sex worker	Istanbul	1.5 years	Partnered/2.5 years
P15	24	Woman	Pansexual	Bachelor's degree	Visual media/Sex worker	Istanbul	1.5 years	Partnered/2.5 years
P16	28	Man	Gay	Highschool	Sex worker	Antalya	10 years	Single
P17	38	Trans Man	Pansexual	Bachelor's degree	Teacher/Sex worker	Ankara	6 years	Single

The fourth part of the form consists of questions on participants' experiences with public institutions, non-governmental organizations, and their hopes and expectations for the future. These questions are aimed at discovering whether the participants have information about the places they can apply to when they are subjected to any discrimination, whether they are in contact with non-governmental organizations, and what their plans are for the future. Some of the questions in this section are as follows: "Are you aware of any institutions or organizations that can provide support to you? Do you know of any institutions or organizations where you can receive effective responses if you experience discrimination? What are your experiences and thoughts regarding these?", "Can you share your plans for the future?"

Data Collection Process

The study data were collected through online interviews with the participants. The online interviews were conducted between October 2023 and November 2023 and lasted an average of 65 min. Each online interview was also audio recorded with the permission of the participants. These recordings were transcribed, after which they were disposed of by the researchers. The transcripts of the interviews were created on the basis of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used. These recordings were also destroyed after transcription.

During the data collection process, all participants were asked the same set of open-ended questions, and the interviews were conducted in a structured manner. The researchers conducting the study were trained in accordance with ethical and reliable data collection standards. Participants were selected to reflect diversity in terms of sexual orientation and gender identities, which enhanced the validity of the study. To ensure validity and reliability, the triangulation method was used during data analysis, and findings from different sources were compared. Additionally, the data analysis process was reviewed by an independent expert, and feedback was provided to participants to verify the accuracy of the findings (member checking).

The researchers' previous experiences may affect the analysis process and limit the principle of impartiality in the study. In this context, the researchers have taken various measures to minimize the potential impact of their personal experiences on the study. The researchers are currently receiving therapy support, which plays a crucial role in managing emotional burdens, limiting adverse effects, and enhancing the reliability of the research process. Additionally, the researchers' extensive experience in this field has provided them with the opportunity to develop skills for managing secondary trauma. These skills have been acquired over time and continue to be developed. Throughout the research process, ongoing self-assessments have been conducted to minimize such potential effects, and adherence to scientific ethical principles has been maintained.

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the in-depth interviews were read and analyzed several times at different times by the researchers. MAXQDA 2020 software was used to analyze

the data. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the collected data. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes. Thematic analysis enables data to be organized in the smallest dimension and described in depth (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In the data analysis process, the audio recordings taken during the in-depth interviews were first transcribed, and upon being listened to again by the researchers, they were grouped under concepts that could be summarized in accordance with the purpose of the research. Frequently mentioned expressions in the coding were labeled, then the secondary code was evaluated and combined with similar codes. Finally, main themes and sub-themes were created. A code map was created in line with the codes obtained during the research process; and this map is included in the findings section so that readers can better understand the code distribution. Since one of the researchers has had prior experience with working in the field related to the research area, they had more familiarity, and thus freedom in categorizing and coding the sub-outputs of the study.

Ethics

The data of this study were obtained within the framework of the ethical rules specified in the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, and the interviews were conducted upon receiving the voluntary and informed consent from the participants. They indicated that they fully understood the purpose, process, as well as the potential pitfalls and benefits of this research study. Additionally, participants were informed that they would not receive any payment as a result of participating in this study. The information collected from and about the participants was kept confidential; and they were informed that the study would be published as a research paper, to which they granted their consent. The data collected was not made available to third parties.

Results

It has been observed that sex workers living in Türkiye have various experiences. As a result of the analysis, the main themes were determined as experiences related to sex work, current health status, social support systems, experiences and thoughts about institutions and organizations, and plans for the future (Fig. 1). The theme of experiences related to sex work includes the factors pushing to sex work (domestic violence, economic inadequacies), the motivation to do sex work (being liked, loved, and feeling valued, economic necessity, excitement and enjoying sexuality, activism), the platforms through which sex work is done, different sex work wages and number of clients, violence and discrimination, and confidentiality. The theme related to current health status included codes for physical pain, substance and alcohol use, and health check-ups (vitamin deficiencies, living with HIV). The social support systems theme comprised codes for assigned family, chosen family, and partners. The theme of experiences and thoughts about institutions and organizations included the codes of hypocrisy



Fig. 1 Thematic map/code map

and distrust, dysfunction, violence and discrimination, and the existence of non-governmental organizations. The theme of plans for the future included the codes of healthy life, economic gain, professional goals (obtaining undergraduate or graduate education, working on different platforms, quitting or continuing sex work), a stable relationship, and ensuring social transformation.

Experiences Related to Sex Work

In the analyses, it was observed that the participants had various experiences regarding sex work. The theme of experiences related to sex work includes the factors driving individuals to engage in sex work (domestic violence, economic inadequacies), the motivation to do sex work (being liked, loved, and feeling valued, economic necessity, excitement and enjoying sexuality, activism), the platforms through which sex work is done, different sex work wages and number of clients, violence and discrimination, and confidentiality. All of the participants also stated that they had not thought much about their motivations for sex work until now, that this question was important and meaningful to them and that it helped them discover and express their motivations.

The Factors Driving Individuals to Engage in Sex Work

Many of the participants stated that they were pushed into sex work, and some participants stated that they did sex work willingly. The prominence of domestic violence and economic insecurities emerged as primary factors driving individuals into sex work.

Domestic Violence

Many participants who stated that they were pushed into sex work stated that they were subjected to violence by their families. The violence they described was primarily physical, followed by psychological and emotional violence.

My mother and father used to beat me constantly. One day, while my mother was cooking, she cut my arm with the knife in her hand. My father also broke my foot. When they felt angry, they would take it out on us. After all this violence, nothing went well, neither school nor work. I had to earn money, so I went to the streets and became a sex worker.

Economic Inadequacies

Many participants who stated that they were pushed into sex work stated that the reason for this was their economic vulnerability. This situation has led them to pursue sex work as a secondary occupation.

My primary profession is teaching. But the salary I receive from teaching is not enough for me. Economic conditions are very difficult. Housing, rent, food,

personal care, everything is very expensive. That's why I turned to sex work. I have to do sex work as a second profession.

The Motivation to do Sex Work

The analyzes conducted aimed to understand the motivations behind participants' engagement in sex work based on their experiences. The motivation to engage in sex work is shaped by themes such as being liked, loved, and feeling valued, economic necessity, excitement, enjoying sexuality and activism.

Being Liked, Loved, and Feeling Valuable

Many of the participants expressed their motivation for doing sex work as being liked, loved, and feeling valued. Participants stated that this motivation becomes deeper in the later stages of their involvement in sex work and that their persistence to do sex work is closely related to this motivation.

Before sex work, I didn't like my own body. I have a slightly curvy body, and my self-confidence was damaged because people saw me as overweight and even made fun of me for it. When I started sex work, it was very good that the people who wanted to have sex with me were especially interested in my body and accepted my body as it was. It was so wonderful to feel loved and appreciated.

I have a baby face. This is very popular in our gay community. Especially adult and older gay men seem extremely interested in me. They compliment me when we have sex, they literally love me by touching and kissing me. I really enjoy this.

Economic Necessity

All participants stated their motivation to do sex work as economic necessity. Participants also mentioned that challenging economic circumstances compelled them to turn to sex work in order to survive. Furthermore, economic necessity has been closely related to doing sex work as a secondary occupation.

In order to live, eat, and have a roof over my head, I have to do sex work, even though I sometimes think it is a last resort. Unfortunately, I have nothing else to do. Life circumstances brought me here. The economy in the country is getting worse. I also think that the number of people doing sex work will increase.

Excitement and Enjoying Sexuality

Some of the participants described their motivation for sex work as excitement and enjoying sexuality. It has been observed that this excitement is closely related to meeting new people and exploring different aspects and dimensions of sex.

I have always loved sex and excitement. One of the first reasons why I started sex work was that the people I had sex with loved having sex with me. So, the feedback was pretty good. I thought why not do something I love as a profession and that's how I started my business. Every meeting and every sexual encounter contains a different excitement for me.

Activism

Some of the participants expressed their motivation for sex work as a form of activism. The theme of activism is expressed around providing LGBTQIA+ people who want to have sex for the first time with a safe sex experience.

Even though the LGBTI+ community pays attention to consent, approval, and safe sex issues, I have experienced myself that this does not always happen. In addition to making money, I tried to help those who wanted to have sex with an LGBTI+ person for the first time to experience safe sex as much as I could by teaching them the concepts of consent and approval. Actually, when you look at it, I think it is an important issue of activism in sex work.

The Platforms Through Which Sex Work is Done

Participants stated that they performed sex work through various platforms. Mainly used platforms are X (Twitter), Onlyfans and Hornet. Moreover, some participants who have been doing sex work for many years stated that they have long-standing clients and that these clients come from brothels, streets or avenues.

At first, I started with Hornet. Later, I also opened an account on Twitter. I had to introduce myself. So, I advertised myself and reached more people. Lastly, I opened Onlyfans, it also brings money. I make money from my photos and videos and also find clients from those accounts.

Different Sex Work Wages and Number of Clients

Participants stated that the wages in sex work differ. Participants stated that the wages vary depending on their faces, bodies, the time they spend, their sexual performances and behaviors (BDSM, pissing, etc.) with their clients. It was observed that the wages received by the participants varied between 650 TL and 5000 TL. It has been observed that especially heterosexual women engage in sex work for lower wages. The fact that the participants have "elite clients" also increases the wages they receive. In addition, some participants stated that they received different gifts

(underwear, watches, clothes, etc.) and that these gifts were separate from the wages they received.

The clients I meet are generally elderly and wealthy. They both value me and buy me gifts. Maybe we can call it having a sugar daddy, but it is not something that has continuity.

I receive lower pay compared to the ordinary sex work market. But there is nothing to do. It's a matter of supply and demand, I'm not in much demand. That's why I keep my wages low, I have to make money somehow.

Participants stated that the number of clients in sex work also vary. Participants generally meet with at least one client per day. This number is at most four. While some participants base their activities on a weekly client count, others do so monthly. In addition, some participants stated that they had clients whom they had been seeing for a long time and that these clients wanted to meet on certain days and hours of the week or month.

I have clients that I have been seeing for many years and who want to meet with me. Apart from them, I also take other clients. The number of clients varies. Some days there are many clients, some days there are few clients. There is such a situation in our profession.

Violence and Discrimination

Participants reported that they experienced violence and discrimination in sex work. They stated that they mainly experienced sexual violence, physical violence, and economic violence (non-payment or underpayment of wages). Participants stated that this violence and discrimination was committed especially by their clients, and also stated that they did not report these incidents that they experienced to any institution or organization.

I experienced sexual violence when I was just starting out. I had just started sex work, I didn't know what to do or how to act. Okay, I knew there would be sex, but I didn't think they could do whatever they wanted to me. A client of mine did things to me that I didn't want, and also slapped me. I was shocked, I didn't go anywhere, I felt alone.

There are many people in our profession who do not get paid their wages. In the past, I couldn't raise my voice too much to avoid trouble, but that's not the case anymore. I laid down so much and did what they wanted. They will give me my money in full.

Confidentiality

Participants emphasized that confidentiality is important in sex work. Confidentiality is specifically about protecting the anonymity of the clients they meet. Two participants stated that they were made to sign a confidentiality agreement.

The people I meet are usually old and rich women. They want to spend a long time with me. They take me to a nice, secluded hotel or something, and we spend time there. A few times, some of these women even made them sign confidentiality agreements.

Current Health Status

Participants reported varying health statuses. Some of the participants stated that they remain healthy through exercise and healthy nutrition. On the other hand, many of them described their health status as less than optimal. The theme related to current health status included codes for physical pain, substance and alcohol use, and health check-ups (vitamin deficiencies, living with HIV).

Physical Pain

Some of the participants stated that they experience physical pain. These participants stated that they suffer from some physical pain, especially due to the violence they experienced within their families and from their clients. The common sources of pain they recounted included headaches, arm, leg, and back pain. Some participants also reported that they experienced stomach discomfort.

When my mother kicked me out of the house, I rolled down the stairs and woke up in the hospital. I had fractures in my leg and arm. I still feel pain when I walk a lot. I also have headaches. I think it is closely related to the profession we do. We are constantly under stress.

Substance and Alcohol Use

Some of the participants stated that they used drugs and alcohol extensively. They especially stated that the stress of sex work causes substance and alcohol use. Furthermore, they expressed that they could use drugs and alcohol to accompany their clients, and also added that they used drugs (poppers, etc.) and alcohol during sex to facilitate sex.

Unfortunately, I smoke cigarettes and consume alcohol a lot. Smoking goes very well especially before and after sex. I also smoke in my daily life. Sometimes I also use poppers to make sex more comfortable. I can also use alcohol if the customers want, we can drink with them to relax ourselves.

Health Check-Ups

The majority of the participants reported that they had health check-ups. It has been noted that one of the biggest reasons for these health check-ups is related to the detection of sexually transmitted infections. In this context, it was observed that some of the participants were living with HIV and had vitamin deficiencies.

Vitamin Deficiencies

Some of the participants recounted that they had vitamin deficiencies due to unhealthy diet and stress, and stated that they were mainly deficient in vitamins B12, C and D.

I have been deficient in vitamin B12 and D since childhood. My family didn't care much about us either. Nowadays, unfortunately, it is not possible for me to eat healthy with the money I earn. I do my best, but since I don't have insurance, unfortunately everything related to health is very expensive.

Living with HIV

Several participants stated that they were living with HIV. Only one participant stated that they contracted HIV during sex work. Other participants who stated that they were living with HIV stated that they learned that they were living with HIV before they started sex work.

They wouldn't teach us about protection or anything like that. I learned these things long after I started sex work. The majority of clients did not want to use condoms because they couldn't maintain an erection. So, of course, I was infected with HIV. I am careful now, but I wish I had known and been careful before.

It was before sex work that I learned that I was living with HIV. I am cautious about protection while doing sex work. I also try to be careful not to get any other infections. Because of HIV, I need to be tested at regular intervals. I can say that I am careful about this.

The Social Support Systems

Participants stated that they had various social support systems in their lives. The social support systems theme included codes for assigned family, chosen family, and partners.

Assigned Family

Some of the participants said that their assigned family was one of their social support systems. It has been observed that this is the case for both some LGBT+ and cisgender heterosexual sex worker participants.

My family is an important source of support for me. They know about my sexual orientation and accept me that way. They even met my partner. Sometimes they even spend more time with my partner than me. Considering the situation in our country, I can say that I am lucky.

Chosen Family

Many of the participants said that their chosen family was one of their social support systems. It has been observed that this is especially the case for LGBT+ sex worker participants.

My chosen family is very precious to me. I tell them everything, I share my troubles. We support each other financially and emotionally. While I cannot tell many people around me about my profession, I can tell everything to my chosen family. It is very valuable to know that they exist.

Partners

Some of the participants stated that their partners were an important source of social support for them. They especially expressed that their partners did not exhibit discriminatory and moralistic views towards sex work, and that their partners respected their profession. This was a critical point as it showed that partners had an important place in the participants' lives.

Frankly, I had a hard time before stepping into the relationship. I thought if I told my partner that I was a sex worker, they wouldn't want me. When I talked to them and my partner did not display a discriminatory attitude, our relationship moved to another level. We communicated openly, set boundaries, and trusted each other. That's why my partner is really valuable to me.

Experiences and Thoughts about Institutions and Organizations

All of the participants stated that they had negative experiences with public institutions and organizations and that they had negative thoughts about these institutions and organizations. Apart from this, the majority of the participants expressed that they had positive opinions about non-governmental organizations. The theme of experiences and thoughts about institutions and organizations included the codes of hypocrisy and distrust, dysfunction, violence and discrimination, and the existence of non-governmental organizations.

Hypocrisy and Distrust

All participants stated that they found public institutions and organizations to be hypocritical and untrustworthy. They alluded to instances related to sex work or, for some, their experiences as LGBT+ individuals as reinforcing these perceptions. They recounted that public institutions and organizations do not provide any special services for sex workers, nor do they allow them to benefit from existing services. In addition, the participants stated that many of their clients were people working in important positions in public institutions, and pointed out that this situation was hypocritical.

I have clients in very important places, at the highest levels of bureaucracy. They come to us when it comes to having sex. But they never say anything like let's support sex workers or provide services. If they saw it on the street, they would pretend not to recognize it. They display a hypocritical attitude. The bureaucracy is hypocritical from top to bottom.

Dysfunction

All participants stated that public institutions and organizations are dysfunctional. The state of dysfunction is shaped by the lack of services, especially for sex work.

There are no services for sex work. Even if we want to receive services, public personnel are unaware of sex work. What we experience and our needs are completely unknown. In recent years, public institutions and organizations have become more dysfunctional. For example, they open and close anonymous testing centers. Unfortunately, there is no order or sustainability.

Violence and Discrimination

All participants asserted that public institutions and organizations perpetuate violence and discrimination. Incidents of violence and discrimination experienced specifically in sex work have severely damaged the participants' trust in these institutions and organizations.

We fear for our safety and our lives. We cannot go to the institutions that are supposed to protect us because when we go there, we face discrimination again. We hear insults. Our complaints are not heard, we are threatened not to file a lawsuit. And when we insist, the clients or perpetrators are found right.

The Existence of non-governmental Organizations

The majority of participants stated that they found the existence of non-governmental organizations important. Although the space of non-governmental organizations has been restricted in recent years, they stated that their presence and support is important to them. In addition, participants pointed out the low number of non-governmen-

tal organizations working specifically on sex work in Türkiye and expressed that it would be beneficial to increase this number.

It's a good thing that non-governmental organizations exist. The number of people working specifically in sex work is very small, but they try as much as they can. I received support and consultancy from them several times. They are trying to fill a major deficiency and gap in public institutions.

Plans for the Future

All participants stated that they made various future plans. The theme of plans for the future included the codes of healthy life, economic gain, going abroad, professional goals (obtaining undergraduate or graduate education, working on different platforms, quitting or continuing sex work), a stable relationship, and ensuring social transformation. All of the participants stated that they had not thought much about issues regarding their future plans until now, and that this question was important and meaningful to them.

Healthy Life

All of the participants stated that they wanted to have a healthy life in the future and that they planned a healthy life. Healthy living is shaped around being away from stress and having good physical health. Furthermore, the majority of the participants also shared that in order to continue sex work for many years, they need to maintain a vigorous physical appearance and preserve their existing beauty.

I want to be healthy in the future. Unfortunately, this profession is very exhausting in every aspect. You are constantly stressed, you need to take care of your physical health. You also need to protect your body, you need to take care of your beauty. Both to continue your job and to protect yourself.

Economic Gain

All of the participants stated that they wanted and planned to earn more economic gain in the future. Economic gain is something that participants see as important in living a comfortable life. Participants also stated that they planned to secure themselves by saving money. In addition, economic gain seems to be closely related to investing in the future.

I don't spend the money I earn, I save my money. If I buy myself a house or a car, I can use it in different ways in the coming years. I'm trying to find different ways to gain economic profit, our country has already brought us to this point. My career will end at some point, so I need to invest in the future.

Professional Goals

All participants articulated that they had professional goals and plans for the future. Professional goals are shaped around obtaining undergraduate or graduate education, working on different platforms, quitting or continuing sex work.

Obtaining Undergraduate or Graduate Education

Many of the participants stated that they wanted to obtain undergraduate or graduate education in the future. This situation was especially expressed within the framework of sex work not being done at later ages. Participants also stated that with the support they received from their social circle (chosen family or partner), they realized their own skills and tended to obtain education.

My partner supported me a lot. I can say that I discovered my talent in painting with his observation and support. I am taking a painting course, and I am considering studying for a bachelor's degree in the coming years.

Working on Different Platforms

Many of the participants recounted that they had plans to work on different platforms in the future within the scope of sex work. Working on different platforms is planned within the framework of the use of various social media tools (Onlyfans, Manyvids, JustForFans etc.) or sectors (porn movies etc.).

Frankly, I want to be able to produce films for the porn industry. I think I'm good at finding movie plots. We already shoot videos on different topics with my partner. I want to expand the business a little more.

Quitting or Continuing Sex Work

All participants stated that they had plans to quit or continue sex work. It has been observed that the participants who plan to quit sex work are those who do sex work as a secondary profession while participants who were in a difficult economic situation and did not or could not have another profession planned to continue sex work as long as possible.

Even though I want to leave sex work, I don't think sex work can leave me. I cannot continue my life without sex work. I can't buy my basic needs. That's all I can do. It is very difficult to find another profession. We are experiencing discrimination at its worst, I don't think I can find a different job.

A Stable Relationship

Many of the participants stated that they would like to have a stable relationship in the future. The desire for a stable relationship has been observed to be particularly closely related to having social support.

I really want to have a stable relationship and a partner. I do not want to be alone. Life and this profession have already exhausted me. I want someone who won't judge me by my past and present. I want to spend the rest of my life with someone with whom I have things in common.

Ensuring Social Transformation

All participants stated that they wanted to ensure social transformation in the future. This social transformation has been shaped on the axis of a positive change in perspective on sex work, no discrimination against anyone, a peaceful life, and a decrease in economic difficulties. Many participants also stated that their own presence was important in ensuring this transformation. They stated that their profession and the fact that they are engaged in this profession have an important place in ensuring social transformation.

I very much want a time to come when everyone can live equally in this society. I want a time to come when no one will be marginalized, and no one will be discriminated against. I know it's a request, but most of the planning comes down to asking. I hope that this social transformation that I want will happen in the near future and we will become a prosperous society.

Discussion

This research was conducted to determine the experiences of sex workers living in Türkiye. It has been observed that sex workers living in Türkiye have various experiences. As a result of the analysis, the main themes were determined as experiences related to sex work, current health status, social support systems, experiences and thoughts about institutions and organizations, and plans for the future.

The driving forces for engaging in sex work -domestic violence, economic inadequacies, and the motivation to feel valued, loved, and needed- are not unique to Türkiye. Similar trends are observed worldwide. For instance, Canada has seen that domestic violence and economic hardship are significant motivators for individuals entering sex work (van der Meulen et al., 2013). The motivation for sex work in Türkiye mirrors the findings of Couto et al. (2023) and Jozaghi and Bird (2020), where many individuals are driven by the need to escape economic pressures and abusive environments. Karamouzian et al. (2016) further emphasize that economic challenges are a central factor in sex work across diverse global contexts.

Additionally, in both Türkiye and countries like South Africa, Brazil, and India, negative past experiences contribute to diminished self-esteem and emotional dis-

tress, pushing individuals to seek emotional and physical support (Ernst et al., 2021; Uji, 2015). This pattern aligns with findings from Hui (2017), who discussed how low bargaining power among sex workers in India is often exacerbated by socio-economic pressures. Globally, the diversification of platforms through which sex work occurs -whether street-based or online- has become increasingly evident (Swords et al., 2023). Similarly, in India, brothel-based sex workers adapt to varying working conditions based on platform availability, which directly impacts their economic outcomes and job security (Hui, 2017). Sex workers may have varying numbers of clients and the fee charged may differ depending on the characteristics of these clients (Carael et al., 2006). In South Africa, violence and discrimination are significant challenges faced by sex workers, a sentiment echoed in Türkiye and in South Africa as documented by Campbell et al. (2020) and Hunt and Hubbard (2015). Both Türkiye and South Africa share an issue of pervasive violence and harassment against sex workers, highlighting a shared global challenge.

Health issues related to sex work, including physical pain, substance use, and living with HIV, are not confined to Türkiye. As seen in Canada and South Africa, sex workers frequently face health problems as a result of their profession, including mental health conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and substance addiction (Benoit et al., 2018; Mousavi-Ramezanzade et al., 2020; Taylor-Robinson et al., 2021). This aligns with the findings in Türkiye, where similar health challenges persist among sex workers (Couto et al., 2023; Çoker, 2017).

Moreover, many sex workers in Türkiye live with HIV, a condition that severely affects their quality of life, much like in South Africa (Chen et al., 2022). The impact of HIV is further emphasized by Platt et al. (2018), who explored how sex work laws in different countries affect the health of sex workers. In countries with restrictive or criminalizing laws, such as India and Kenya, sex workers often experience worse health outcomes due to limited access to healthcare (Platt et al., 2018). These patterns are observed similarly in Türkiye, where sex workers encounter barriers to healthcare and support services due to legal and social stigma.

In Türkiye, the concept of chosen family and assigned family as sources of social support is consistent with global trends observed in other countries. In Canada and South Africa, chosen family plays a crucial role in providing both emotional and material support to sex workers (Restar et al., 2022). In Türkiye, social support can be a protective factor that buffers the emotional toll of sex work. De Jesus Moura et al. (2023) found that diversified support systems can lead to a significant improvement in the well-being of sex workers, which is also observed in Brazil and South Africa, where networks of solidarity among sex workers provide essential social and emotional resources.

However, in Europe and Central Asia, there is an added dimension of racialized sex work, where structural racism further compounds the challenges faced by sex workers, particularly those of marginalized ethnic backgrounds (ESWA, 2022). In Türkiye, although racism is less explicitly linked to sex work, the societal stigma and prejudice faced by sex workers -especially those from marginalized communities- adds to the challenge of accessing support systems.

Sex workers in Türkiye encounter numerous obstacles in accessing public services due to prejudice, stigma, and discrimination from public authorities, similar to

what is seen in countries like South Africa and Kenya (Gichuna et al., 2020; Thng et al., 2018). Public authorities in these regions often fail to develop special services or policies for sex workers, thus marginalizing them further. Van der Meulen et al. (2013) noted that even in Canada, where sex work has been partially decriminalized, sex workers still face significant barriers to accessing social and legal support. These barriers include hypocrisy, distrust in institutions, and dysfunction within public systems issues mirrored in Türkiye, where sex workers are largely excluded from health, legal, and social services.

The existence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can partially mitigate these issues, providing advocacy, resources, and legal support for sex workers. Hunt and Hubbard (2015) highlighted the critical role of NGOs in South Africa, providing platforms for sex workers to voice their concerns and seek support. In Türkiye, while some NGOs do exist to advocate for sex workers' rights, their impact remains limited due to the broader social and political environment.

Finally, the theme of plans for the future reveals common aspirations among sex workers in Türkiye and other parts of the world. Sex workers often envision a healthy life, economic gain, and professional goals, such as obtaining an education or transitioning to a different profession. Similar findings were noted by Machingura et al. (2023), who found that in South Africa and Brazil, sex workers frequently aspire to leave the profession and pursue other opportunities. These aspirations are also evident in India, where brothel-based sex workers seek economic mobility and better living conditions (Hui, 2017). In Türkiye, as in other regions, the harsh realities of sex work and the stigma associated with it often make these dreams difficult to achieve. Machingura et al. (2023) suggested that despite these challenges, the desire for a better future persists among sex workers globally, indicating a shared vision of hope and improvement.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This study aimed to understand the experiences of sex workers living in Türkiye. The findings showed that sex workers have various experiences regarding their experiences related to sex work, health status, social support systems and relationships with public institutions. The majority of the participants face difficulties such as poor housing conditions and insufficient economic status. In addition, sex workers are frequently exposed to discrimination and violence while doing their job, but they do not have access to adequate public services to address these issues.

This study revealed that studies on sex workers in Türkiye are limited and that existing studies are insufficient to fully reveal the experiences of sex workers with different sexual orientations and gender identities. This situation makes it difficult to understand the changing problems and needs of sex workers and hinders policy development on these issues. Therefore, it is thought that more studies focusing on the experiences of sex workers and presented with different research methods would be beneficial.

It is believed that implementing various policies to improve the lives of sex workers would be beneficial. First, legal regulations, especially in Türkiye and countries with similar socio-political conditions, need to be reviewed. Current legal frameworks for sex workers in Türkiye are mostly discriminatory and punitive. In this context, laws targeting sex workers should be reorganized to align with human rights principles. Regulations that criminalize sex work have sex workers more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and discrimination. Therefore, it is crucial to abolish or reform laws that consider sex work a crime, in order to recognize and protect the legal rights of sex workers. Health services for sex workers must also be improved. Sex workers often have limited access to healthcare and face the risk of being stigmatized by healthcare providers. To address this, free and anonymous healthcare services should be provided, with particular support in the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Additionally, access to treatment and care services for sex workers living with HIV should be made more accessible. Social services for sex workers need to be expanded and strengthened. Special programs should be developed to help sex workers benefit from social services. These programs should include housing, psychological support, legal counseling, and rehabilitation services. Employment support programs that create alternative livelihoods for individuals who turn to sex work due to domestic violence, economic difficulties, or other compelling reasons should also be made available. Combating discrimination and violence against sex workers is essential. Public awareness campaigns should be organized to prevent discrimination and violence against sex workers. Protective and preventive regulations must be implemented to improve their working conditions and ensure their safety from violence and harassment. In addition, training programs should be introduced in cooperation with civil society organizations to change the attitudes and behaviors of public institution personnel toward sex workers. Support programs for LGBTI+ sex workers need to be increased and enhanced. LGBTI+ sex workers face heightened discrimination and violence due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. In this regard, the development of special support programs for LGBTI+ sex workers are of great importance. These programs should offer both physical and psychological health support and be carried out in cooperation with organizations serving the LGBTI+ community. Education and awareness programs on sex work should be established. To reduce the stigma surrounding sex work, educational and informational programs should be organized both for the general public and for public officials. These programs should raise awareness about the social dimensions of sex work and inform people about the rights of sex workers. Education programs should especially ensure that personnel in the health, justice, and social services sectors adopt a more understanding and supportive approach toward sex workers. International cooperation and the sharing of good practices should be pursued regarding sex work and sex workers. Learning from international best practices can aid in the development of policies for sex workers in Türkiye. By cooperating with countries in Europe and around the world that adopt human rights-based approaches to sex work, policymakers in Türkiye can create more effective and sustainable solutions. Information and experience sharing should be increased

through collaboration with international organizations working in the field of sex work. These policy recommendations should be implemented to address the challenges faced by sex workers and to provide them with a safe, healthy, and human rights-compliant life. Implementing these recommendations can reduce discrimination against sex workers and strengthen their social integration. Furthermore, conducting more research and incorporating the findings into policymaking processes will help produce more effective and lasting solutions.

Limitations

This study is thought to have some limitations. First, although the study employs a qualitative methodology, it may be beneficial to use standardized scales to measure certain variables related to the diverse needs of the participants. Second, the findings cannot be generalized to all sex workers living in Türkiye, as the sample may not represent the entire population. Third, future research could address the needs of different subgroups, taking into account factors such as age, race, culture, language, socio-economic status, and other variables that may influence the experiences of sex workers. Furthermore, a larger and more diverse sample could provide a broader understanding of the issue.

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Declarations

Disclosure This study sent to the journal is the original work of the authors. This work has not been published elsewhere or sent for printing. In addition, we undertake that there is no crime or illegal statement in the article, no illegal materials and methods are used during the research and ethical rules are used.

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