

Intimacies in Tension: Bodily labour across sex work and domestic work in Southern Europe

Isotta Rossoni and Begoña Aramayona

Abstract

This paper analyses domestic work and sex work as interrelated forms of intimate labour in Southern Europe, with a focus on Spain, Italy, and Malta. Despite their distinct regulatory regimes and social perceptions, both sectors rely on the commodification of bodily presence, care, and emotional engagement, often performed by migrant and racialised women. Inspired by feminist scholarship on intimate labour, the paper explores how intimacy, exploitation, and agency are negotiated differently across these two sectors within the specific socio-political and cultural configurations of Southern Europe. Drawing on the analysis of secondary sources and extensive qualitative fieldwork with sex workers and domestic workers in Spain, Italy, and Malta, the authors interrogate what makes these contexts distinct and how workers strategically navigate precarity, stigma, and legal ambiguity. The paper identifies convergences and divergences in the lived experiences of domestic workers and sex workers, particularly in how they experience boundaries of care, control, and commodification. The research findings highlight the need for greater comparative research, especially in regions like Southern Europe where such scholarship remains fragmented.

Keywords: intimacy, sex work, domestic work, migration, exploitation, Southern Europe

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Introduction

Sex work and domestic employment share deep structural and cultural links in Southern Europe, emerging as two of the most visible and gendered components of the region's informal economies. Marked by weak welfare and familialistic regimes, and affected by increased transnational migratory flows since the 1990s,

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countries like Spain, Italy, and Malta have received thousands of migrants from the Global South, the majority of whom are racialised women offering sexual/erotic and domestic services.¹ Since the 2000s, a restrictive migratory regime has reinforced a segregated labour market, where many non-Western transnational migrants are forced to accept the most precarious and socially devalued jobs while navigating uncertainty and persecution, particularly in situations of irregularity.

Despite their overlapping dimensions, sex work and domestic work differ starkly in their regulatory regimes and how they are portrayed in public discourse. Although both activities implicate some type of commodification of bodily presence, care, and a degree of emotional engagement, sex work is often portrayed as naturally degrading for those performing and consuming it.² Consequently, public policies in Southern Europe have tended to resist recognising sex work as work, favouring ‘end demand’ and ‘exit’ strategies, in a bid to—wishfully—put an end to the sex industry.³ By contrast, domestic employment, although high in demand in Southern European countries,⁴ has often been absent from public discourse and parliamentary agendas. This has reinforced a dated regulatory framework in the region. Although governed via distinct approaches, both domestic employees and sex workers have been prevented from fully accessing labour rights and being

¹ The notion of ‘familialistic regimes’ and ‘weak welfare states’ in Southern Europe refers to welfare systems historically characterised by a more limited institutional development compared to Central and Northern European welfare states, where families—rather than public institutions—continue to absorb significant responsibilities for care, social protection, and everyday survival. See M Ferrera, ‘The “Southern model” of welfare in social Europe’, *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 6, issue 1, 1996, pp. 17–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095892879600600102>; C Martin, ‘Southern Welfare States: Configuration of the Welfare Balance between State and the Family’, in M Baumeister and R Sala (eds.), *Southern Europe? Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece from the 1950s until the Present Day*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt-on-Main, 2015, pp. 77–100.

² T Daniel, J Lamb, and C Campbell, ‘Avoidance and Empowerment: How Do Sex Workers Navigate Stigma?’, *Sexualities*, vol. 28, issue 1–2, 2025, pp. 470–491, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231201736>.

³ J Camilleri and I Rossoni, ‘Charting Sex Work in Malta: First Steps’, *Sociological Research Online*, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804261421049>; L Rubio Grundell, ‘The Rise of Neo-Abolitionism in Europe: Exploring the Role of the Neoliberalism–Vulnerability–Security Nexus in the Prostitution Policies of the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Ireland’, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol. 29, issue 3, 2022, pp. 1034–1056, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab018>; P Degani and L Perini, ‘The Italian Public Policies Frame on Prostitution and the Practical Overlapping with Trafficking: An Inevitable Condition?’, *Peace Human Rights Governance*, vol. 3, issue 1, 2019, pp. 35–68, <https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-phrg-2019-1-2>.

⁴ DOMINA Observatory on Domestic Work in Europe, *Domestic Work in Europe (Report - 2023 Edition)*, retrieved 31 July 2026, <https://www.domesticworkobservatory.com/domestic-work-in-europe-2023>.

socially recognised for their contributions to society and the economy.

The restrictive, criminalising structural drivers and ambiguities surrounding intimate labour make both sectors susceptible to different forms of exploitation and abuse. Yet, the uneven and contrasting treatment between these two sectors helps construct a sanitised representation of domestic work and a demonised portrayal of sex work. While both forms of labour can entail a high degree of intimate and affective engagement, public narratives tend to overemphasise the aspects associated with abuse and exploitation in the case of sex work, all the while underestimating or entirely ignoring those same dynamics in domestic service.⁵

Inspired by feminist scholarship on intimate labour, in this paper we draw on qualitative and ethnographic data gathered through interviews and participant observation with sex workers and domestic workers in Spain, Italy, and Malta. The data allow us to explore similarities and differences in intersections of intimacy and exploitation across these two sectors within the specific socio-political and cultural configurations of Southern Europe. We begin with a theoretical exploration of the concept of intimacy in sex work and domestic work. We then move on to setting the scene of the research, delving deeper into the Southern European landscape of sex work and domestic work and unpacking governance overlaps across the two sectors. After detailing methodological considerations, we present the key findings emerging from the qualitative data, teasing out convergences and divergences in the lived experiences of domestic workers and sex workers. Crucially, our findings point towards a striking, counter-intuitive conclusion to dominant thought: that intimate boundaries are more clearly articulated in sex work and less explicitly codified in the case of domestic work. Finally, we highlight the pressing need for a comparative research agenda, especially in regions like Southern Europe where such scholarship remains fragmented.

Intimacy and Exploitation in Sex Work and Domestic Work

The notion of paid-for or commercialised intimacy has received considerable attention in feminist and sociological scholarship. Amongst others, Hochschild⁶

⁵ B Aramayona, ““Darkening” Informalized Workers: Moral Geographies and the In/Visibilization of Transnational Migrants in Spain”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 49, issue 4, 2025, pp. 892–911, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13328>.

⁶ A R Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983; A R Hochschild, *The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in Market Times*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2012.

as well as Boris and Parreñas⁷ have explored how care work and sex work blur the boundaries between intimacy and waged labour, revealing how affective ties can be commodified through market relations. This literature challenges the assumption that intimacy belongs solely to the private sphere, showing how it becomes a site of economic exchange and social inequality.⁸ Sex work clearly exemplifies this shift. Beyond interactions that could be strictly defined as ‘sexual’, scholars have pointed to a demand for intimate services of various kinds, such as companionship, physical closeness or touch, and empathic listening.⁹ These activities match, to a large extent, those carried out by care workers operating outside the sex industry¹⁰ and reflect a growing appetite for forms of ‘authentic’ human connection, even if at a fee.¹¹

Bernstein¹² brings forth the experiences of middle-class sex workers, arguing that they respond to the demand for connection by engaging in ‘bounded authenticity’ defined as ‘the sale and purchase of authentic emotional and physical connection’¹³ which is limited in time. In other words, they create a time-bound experience of authenticity by producing desire and pleasure that appear genuine. Sex workers’ ability to engage in time-bound authenticity is often viewed as influenced—and therefore also constrained—by their social positioning within the sex work industry, as well as broader systems and structures.¹⁴ At the same time, research

⁷ E Boris and R S Parreñas (eds.), *Intimate Labours: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010.

⁸ *Ibid.*; V A Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007.

⁹ E Bernstein, ‘Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex’, in Boris and Parreñas, pp. 148–165; L Pettinger, ‘Market Moralities in the Field of Commercial Sex’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 6, issue 2, 2013, pp. 184–199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2012.740418>; T Sanders and K Hardy, *Flexible Workers: Labour, Regulation and the Political Economy of the Stripping Industry*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2014; R Colosi, “‘I’m Just with the Guys and We’re Having a Laugh’: Exploring Normative Masculinity in a Lap-Dancing Club Setting, as a Heteronormative Space”, *Sexualities*, vol. 25, issue 3, 2022, pp. 222–241, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720957205>.

¹⁰ S Jäger, ‘Self-Determined Sex Work as Care Work between Experiences of Integrity and Vulnerability’, *De Ethica*, vol. 7, issue 3, 2023, pp. 61–74, <https://doi.org/10.3384/de-ethica.2001-8819.237361>.

¹¹ S Schuchmann, “‘I Tell Them the Story That They Want to Hear That Day’: Emotion Management, Emotional Labour, and Authenticity as a Digital Sex Worker – The Case of OnlyFans”, *Porn Studies*, 2025, pp. 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2025.2501322>.

¹² E Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007.

¹³ Bernstein, ‘Bounded Authenticity’, p. 154.

¹⁴ K I Nayar, ‘Working It: The Professionalization of Amateurism in Digital Adult Entertainment’, *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 17, issue 3, 2017, pp. 473–488, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1303622>; H Sultana, ‘Intimacy, Trust, and Exploitation:

has shown that in other types of sex work, including more precarious ones such as street-based sex work, emotional labour is also present, although expressed and experienced in different ways.¹⁵ These complex and oftentimes contradictory experiences of sex work as affective work challenge common readings of intimacy, including those which associate it primarily with middle-class sex work.¹⁶

Crucially, migration regimes, gendered and racialised labour markets, and laws play a key role in rendering the commodification of intimacy both a necessity and an opportunity for many migrant women beyond the sex work sector.¹⁷ In both domestic work and sex work, *hirability* is shaped by racialised and gendered biases which construct migrant women as sexually promiscuous.¹⁸

The social representation of domestic workers and sex workers differs substantially, shaping broader perceptions of each sector and influencing the ways in which intimacy is negotiated in everyday work. Domestic workers are often incorporated into households as family members, a framing that obscures labour relations while creating expectations of loyalty and emotional availability.¹⁹ In contrast, sex workers are frequently cast as ‘the other’,²⁰ outsiders, or even antagonists to normative family models. Both sectors, however, involve complex, ongoing negotiations of bodily and emotional labour, highlighting how intimacy,

Sex Workers’ Relationship with Their Intimate Partners in a Bangladeshi Brothel’, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 50, issue 4, 2022, pp. 284–291, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajss.2022.04.002>; A P Gutiérrez Garza, ‘The Intimacy of the Gift in the Economy of Sex Work’, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 124, issue 4, 2022, pp. 767–777, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13782>.

¹⁵ M A Carbonero Gamundí and M Gómez Garrido, ‘Being Like Your Girlfriend: Authenticity and the Shifting Borders of Intimacy in Sex Work’, *Sociology*, vol. 52, issue 2, 2018, pp. 384–399, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516688609>; R Alarcón-Medina and M Ayala-Constantino, ‘A Night Shift Ethnography of Sexual Labor: Street Prostitution, Space, and Intimacy in Tijuana’s Zona Norte Red Light District’, *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 50, 2026, pp. 621–645, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-026-09812-3>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ E Zambelli, ‘Intimate Others and Risky Tenants: Disentangling the Economy of Affect Shaping Women’s Migratory Projects in Italy’, *Journal of Political Power*, vol. 12, issue 3, 2019, pp. 425–442, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2019.1669265>.

¹⁸ See B Anderson and J O’Connell Davidson, *Is Trafficking in Human Beings Demand Driven? A multi-country pilot study*, International Organization for Migration, Geneva, 2003, pp. 7–12, for considerations on the sex work sector.

¹⁹ R S Parreñas, ‘Migrant Domestic Workers as “One of the Family”’, in B Anderson and I Shutes (eds.), *Migration and Care Labour: Theory, Policy and Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014, pp. 49–64.

²⁰ S Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994.

care, and affect are constantly managed in everyday work practices.

Importantly, while intimacy is present in both lines of work, the boundary between intimacy and exploitation is often fragile. Intimacy, while central to these forms of labour, may create the illusion of trust or familiarity that can be strategically exploited by clients or employers to overstep boundaries or inflict harm.²¹ These risks are further compounded by the social and legal marginalisation of workers who are frequently migrant, racialised, and engaged in stigmatised forms of labour, limiting their access to protection and justice.²² Consequently, the combination of isolation, precarity, and the commodification of intimacy situates both domestic workers and sex workers in environments where violence is a structural possibility embedded within the organisation of intimate labour.

Context - Sex work and domestic work in Southern Europe

Domestic Work and Sex Work in Southern Europe: The reconfiguration of Southern European care and intimacy markets since the 1990s

As a result of their familialistic welfare regimes and comparatively weak welfare states, countries such as Spain and Italy exhibit some of the highest rates of domestic employment in Europe, accounting for 65% of the total domestic employment demand in Europe.²³ This situation is partly linked to the limited capacity of the state to provide adequate public social and healthcare infrastructures, the persistent difficulties in reconciling work and family life, and the enduring gender inequalities that continue to shape domestic and care responsibilities across Southern Europe.²⁴ Crucially, this ‘externalisation’ of care and domestic activities across the region can only take place because it relies on low-paid labour with limited protections for workers. Indeed, a large proportion of domestic workers are migrant women from the Global South, many of whom are employed through informal arrangements without social security contributions.²⁵

²¹ Hochschild, 1983; Hochschild, 2012.

²² Anderson and O’Connell Davidson; B Ehrenreich and A R Hochschild (eds.), *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2004; T Sanders, *Sex Work: A risky business*, Willan Publishing, Cullompton, 2005.

²³ DOMINA Observatory on Domestic Work in Europe.

²⁴ M Petmesidou, A M Guillén, and E Pavolini, ‘Health Care in Post-Crisis South Europe: Inequalities in Access and Reform Trajectories’, *Social Policy & Administration*, vol. 54, issue 5, 2020, pp. 666–683, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12563>.

²⁵ Oxfam, *Esenciales y sin derechos: o cómo implementar el convenio 189 de la OIT para trabajadoras del hogar*, 2021.

The once locally sourced *señoritas de servicio* or *cameriere*—Spanish or Italian women from rural or socioeconomically marginalised backgrounds who were traditionally employed to ‘serve’ in elite households—have progressively been replaced by migrant women from the Global South since the 1990s.²⁶

This shift represents not only a change in the ethnic or national composition of the workforce but also a broader restructuring and expansion of the sector itself, both in terms of labour supply and demand. The proliferation of migrant women performing household cleaning as well as elder- and childcare in the private homes of middle- and upper-middle-class families across the region is to be understood as part of the transnational reorganisation of social reproduction and the feminisation of migratory flows. This has been facilitated by a legal framework that formally recognises domestic work as a distinct occupational category yet remains weakly regulated in practice, characterised by limited labour protections, scarce public oversight, and, crucially, low wages.²⁷ As such, the domestic and care sector in Southern Europe constitutes a paradigmatic site where global inequalities, gendered labour regimes, and state withdrawal from welfare provision intersect.

Similarly to domestic employment, sex work constitutes another major sector of activity for many women arriving from the Global South.²⁸ It also operates largely outside formal regulations, shaped by a combination of criminal law provisions and public-order regulations. In Spain, for instance, while the selling and purchase of sex are not criminalised, activities such as street solicitation and third-party facilitation are constrained through the *Citizens’ Security Law* (Ley Orgánica 4/2015, ‘Ley Mordaza’) and municipal ordinances on public space. Likewise, in Italy, activities such as facilitation, procurement, and third-party organisation of sex work are heavily penalised, producing a regime of tolerated but structurally informalised work. In Malta, too, activities such as solicitation and sharing flats with other sex workers (generally associated with brothel-keeping) are criminalised.²⁹ Across these contexts, sex work is therefore not regulated as labour but constrained and partially criminalised, generating a zone

²⁶ S Monteros Obelar, ‘El Empleo de Hogar Como Campo de Batalla: Breve Historia de Los Movimientos de Las Luchas En España’, *Afin*, issue 111, 2019, pp. 1–11.

²⁷ C Catarino and L Oso, ‘La inmigración femenina en Madrid y Lisboa: hacia una etnización del servicio doméstico y de las empresas de limpieza’, *Papers (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)*, issue 60, 2000, pp. 183–207.

²⁸ TAMPER, *National Mapping Reports – Spain*, 2010, pp. 278–289; Asociación In Género, *El impacto de la COVID-19 en la vida de las personas que ejercen la prostitución: un estudio en cinco comunidades autónomas de España*, 2021.

²⁹ I Rossoni and J Camilleri, ‘Borders, Barriers, and Violence: Healthcare Challenges in (Migrant) Sex Work’, in V Padovese and I Rossoni (eds.) *Intersections of Sexual Health, Migration and Sexualised Violence*, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham, 2026, pp. 39–54.

of legal ambiguity and liminal legality.³⁰ In practice, this enables the existence of semi-formal private venues where sex work takes place (such as commercial sex clubs or apartments), while simultaneously leaving sex workers without labour protections. Whether criminalised, tolerated, or situated in a legal grey zone, sex work provides flexible income-generating opportunities for individuals excluded from formal labour markets.

Public Discourse, Regulations and the Rescue Industry: Governance cross-overs in domestic and sex work

Public narratives surrounding sex work and domestic work diverge profoundly. While both government and media discourses tend to be marked by widespread condemnation of the allegedly degrading nature of the sale of sexual services, the ethical dimensions involved in the hiring decisions of domestic and care workers remain scarcely questioned.³¹ Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere for the Spanish case,³² and in ways that can also be extended to other countries such as Italy or Malta, over the past twenty years Southern Europe has witnessed a reinforcement of criminalising public governance over migrant labour, resulting in the displacement of migrant workers, particularly women, into ‘darker’ or invisibilised spaces, sheltered from—or stripped of—public oversight.

This is exacerbated by punitive migration regimes leading to increased persecution of migrants—particularly, but not exclusively, in public spaces—due to their frequent condition of administrative irregularity. The difficulty of circulating freely in public spaces, combined with other factors such as the inability to access independent housing, has led many to opt for live-in domestic work. In the case of sex work, increased persecution and criminalisation in public spaces has forced many sex workers to shift to *indoor* settings (e.g. strip clubs and apartments). Many studies show this often leads to increased dependency on third-party operators

³⁰ A Oliveira, *Less Equal than Others: The Laws Affecting Sex Work, and Advocacy in the European Union*, Report for the GUE/NGL Group of the European Parliament, 2020, <http://bloco.org/media/LessEqualThanOthers.pdf>.

³¹ B Aramayona, ‘La invisibilización de la informalidad en la ciudad nocturna: el desplazamiento de trabajadoras sexuales y domésticas hacia espacios privados’, *Forum Sociológico, Série II*, issue 43, 2023, pp. 35–45, <https://doi.org/10.4000/sociologico.11969>; B Aramayona, ‘Las sombras de la noche: Clandestinización de La Informalidad Urbana En Las Geografías Del Placer Del Sur de Europa’, *Punto Sur*, issue 11, 2024, pp. 138–156, <https://doi.org/10.34096/ps.n11.14232>.

³² *Ibid.*

(e.g. club managers), reduced autonomy,³³ and limited protection from police persecution.³⁴

The relationship between sex work and domestic employment in Southern Europe reflects the structural precariousness experienced by migrant women, as sex work often becomes necessary to sustain livelihoods that cannot be secured through low-paid and undervalued forms of formally recognised labour, including domestic work. Migrants often combine sex work with formal jobs, using sex work to meet daily needs, while other jobs help regularise their legal status and mitigate stigma. Publicly funded prostitution-assistance programmes—often criticised by pro-rights organisations as part of the ‘rescue industry’—help sustain and reproduce this revolving door between sex work and other precarious forms of employment (such as domestic work). Much of their interventions, guided by the ‘exit programme’ paradigm, whose ultimate goal is for women to abandon prostitution,³⁵ offers as an alternative access into other low-paid, feminised jobs: training courses to work in supermarkets, elder care, or childcare, further entrenching precarity.

Methods

This paper draws on two separate datasets of qualitative interviews conducted across Spain, Italy, and Malta. The first author conducted research with over 30 migrants with experiences of sex work living in Malta between 2022 and 2024. Recruitment was facilitated via the island’s main sexual health clinic and snowball sampling. A sexual wellness kit was offered in return for participation. The study was approved by Leiden Law School’s ethics committee.

³³ C Arella *et al.*, *Los pasos (in)visibles de la prostitución: Estigma, persecución y vulneración de derechos de las trabajadoras sexuales en Barcelona*, Virus Editorial, Barcelona, 2007; M Barcons Campmajó, ‘Las ordenanzas municipales: entre la regulación y la sanción de la prostitución en España’, *Crítica Penal y Poder*, issue 15, 2018, pp. 90–109; P Sánchez-Perera, *Crítica de la razón puta: Cartografías del estigma de la prostitución*, La Oveja Roja, Madrid, 2023.

³⁴ I Rossoni and M van der Woude, ‘Resisting “Manufactured” Vulnerability: Discretionary Policing and Migrant Sex Workers’ Resistance Strategies in Malta’, *International Journal of Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2026, pp. 85–99, <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcsd.3909>.

³⁵ L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007; P M Martín, ‘¿Abrimos una oenegé? Aproximación a la intervención social en contextos de prostitución en España’, *Itinerarios de Trabajo Social*, vol. 5, 2025, pp. 51–59, <https://doi.org/10.1344/its.i5.47890>; N Mai *et al.*, ‘Migration, sex work and trafficking: The racialized bordering politics of sexual humanitarianism’, in B Holzberg, A Madörin, and M Pfeifer (eds.), *The Sexual Politics of Border Control*, Routledge, London, 2022, pp. 123–144; Degani and Perini.

The second author carried out research with 20 migrants who had worked either as sex workers or care/domestic workers in Spain and Italy between 2021 and 2024. She conducted open-ended, paid interviews in cafés and, in the case of sex workers, sometimes their homes. Interviewees were recruited through word of mouth, including feminist scholars and colleagues. The study was approved by Sheffield University's research ethics committee. In line with feminist ethnography,³⁶ field records also became part of the fieldwork framework, substantively informing and sustaining the overall analytical reflection.

In both studies, participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through informed consent, anonymisation, secure data storage, and clear communication that participation was voluntary and unrelated to access to healthcare (in the case of the first author, in particular) or immigration status. Risks to participants' safety, wellbeing, and employment were minimised by allowing them to skip questions and withdraw at any time. Participants were included if they had prior or current involvement in sex work or domestic work, were over 18, and were not nationals of the country where the fieldwork was conducted. EU and non-EU migrants, as well as a variety of individuals with different migration statuses, gender identities, and sexual orientations, were included in the sample. Sex work experience comprised street work, indoor escorting, erotic dancing/performing, and digital sex work, with all participants working either—sometimes concurrently—as independent operators or for third parties (sex clubs, apartments, or agencies). Domestic work experience included both live-out and live-in work, including a broad range of activities such as cleaning, taking care of old and young people, etc. This allowed for representation of a variety of experiences and for broad exploration of vulnerability and agency across different life paths. The coding process was both deductive and inductive, guided by preliminary themes (e.g. intimacy, exploitation) whilst also leaving room for themes to emerge organically.

Results

Love, Intimacy and Work: Overlaps and tensions

Our findings reveal that domestic workers and sex workers alike 'perform authenticity'. This does not mean that conversations about the 'terms of the contract' of intimate exchange are altogether absent; on the contrary, they are often made explicit at the outset. Nonetheless, in everyday practice, a time-bound kind of 'performance' of authenticity is simultaneously required, a 'pretending to

³⁶ A Araiza Díaz and R González García, 'La Investigación Activista Feminista: Un Diálogo Metodológico Con Los Movimientos Sociales', *Empiria – Revista de Metodología de Ciencias Sociales*, issue 38, 2017, pp. 63–84, <https://doi.org/10.5944/empiria.38.2018.19706>.

want to be there', so to speak (Ninfa, sex worker from Latin America in Spain). Far from being a merely deceptive act, this performance can be understood as a highly skilled and professionally honed form of relational labour.

This delicate balancing act sustains the bodily, affective, and emotional work required in both lines of work, but also produces situations in which the boundaries between desire and obligation, attachment and labour, become blurred. For many of our participants, especially when long-term relationships are in place, it was often difficult to discern whether some of their employers or clients are friends, bosses, or even lovers.

It was not uncommon for participants to report building relationships with clients, sometimes so strong that they 'don't even ask to be paid' (Lisandra, sex worker from Latin America in Spain). As a Latin American migrant, isolated due to the language barrier, her irregular status and involvement in sex work, Jimena provides an example of finding solace in her friendship with a client.

In this line of work, you meet people, people who offer you friendship and want to strengthen those bonds.... I don't have many friends, to be honest.... I have a Maltese friend who helps me a lot and wants me to leave this job. He had never been with an escort before and he told me: 'I was with you, and I felt a very different energy.'

A similar example of these blurred boundaries is illustrated by Jéssica, a Filipino live-in domestic employee residing in Italy, who recounts how the same female employer who made her life miserable with shouting and constant capricious demands is also someone she now misses.

Interviewer: Would you call her a friend or it was just your employer?
Jéssica: Sometimes friend. There are times that we talk as a friend, there are times that... employer. Because when she get sick I take care of her. That's the one that she didn't forget—she can't forget—because when I left her she cried and she thank me for taking care of her. She had the good side also. But, until now, we catch up each other. She cannot forget me.
Interviewer: You get emotional!
Jéssica: Yeah. Though... we had that... though I had a hard time from her, but I still love her as my employer.

The performativity of intimacy in both types of work can also lead some clients or employers to misinterpret or manipulate the terms of the relationship. This can give rise to attempted or actual boundary violation, for example by extending services beyond the originally agreed-upon terms.

For example, I had a client whose apartment—and it wasn't an apartment, it was a mansion.... He must have a lot of money, a lot of money. Luxury cars. I thought, 'This one's going to pay my due', because you see so much luxury and you think, 'He's going to pay... If there's so much luxury, he must have the money to pay... No?'. My payment limit was three hours. 'If you stayed two more hours, it was because you wanted to'. Abhh, imagine how awful that is. – Andrés (sex worker from Latin America in Malta)

As documented elsewhere,³⁷ even when outright abuse does not occur, it is not uncommon for employers or clients to 'overstep' in the attempt to obtain support or intimate connection that goes well beyond the negotiated terms.

Interviewer: If you have to answer [your phone]...
Lucas (sex worker from Latin America in Malta): No, it's a client. [His] brother has died.... He thinks now we are the best friend because we had sex. You know nothing about this shit! I hope he doesn't fall in love, because he suffers.

In our fieldwork, this dynamic appeared in a particularly blurred and emotionally ambiguous form within domestic work—especially in live-in arrangements—where the boundaries between labour, affection, and familial belonging are often rendered deliberately indistinct. In these contexts, the rhetoric of 'being part of the family'³⁸ may foster forms of emotional closeness and mutual dependency that partially obscure the underlying asymmetry of the employment relationship. Yet moments of rupture can suddenly expose the conditional and hierarchical nature of the bond. Carmela, a Latin American domestic employee in Italy, exemplifies this ambiguity. Having worked for several years as a live-in domestic worker for an upper-middle-class family in Rome, she would often join them with her seven-year-old daughter on trips to their holiday home. These shared holidays had contributed to a sense of trust, proximity, and quasi-familial inclusion. However, during one of these trips, an incident involving her daughter profoundly altered Carmela's perception of the relationship and revealed the fragility of the intimacy she believed had been established.

We were at the beach, in the beach area, and when I asked for sunscreen for my daughter, who was little, [employer's name, the mother of the family] replied, 'But you don't get sunburned because you're dark-skinned' as if

³⁷ See e.g. C Milrod and R Weitzer, 'The Intimacy Prism: Emotion Management among the Clients of Escorts', *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 15, issue 5, 2012, pp. 447–467, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x12452148>.

³⁸ Parreñas.

we were dark and the sun couldn't burn us. And of course we did get burned. In fact, my whole back was completely red, right?

Carmela recalls this moment as the tipping point that led her to leave the family. What emerged in that moment was not only a racist remark but also the sudden collapse of the imagined intimacy and familial reciprocity that had structured the relationship until then. A similar example is presented by Jéssica, who reports navigating the emotional weight of preparing to leave her employer. She recounted how she secretly secured a job in Italy while still working for a woman in Singapore (the one she 'loved as her employer'), and how she eventually disclosed this and negotiated her departure from the household.

They called me again that I am the one chosen. So, 'Thank you!' I didn't expect that, that I am the one whom they choose to work for them. So, they started applying my work permit, working visa and everything. It takes only three months. And I didn't talk to my employer that I am applying going to Europe. Surprise! I surprised her. And she scolded me again... I cried so much!

Jéssica's account also illustrates the kinds of affective negotiations that shape domestic employee–employer relationships. These negotiations are ones in which affection becomes both a resource and a constraint, and where loyalty, gratitude, duty, and personal aspiration are woven into a delicate fabric that must be held together without tearing. All stories of our participants, both domestic workers and sex workers, reveal how the emotional bonds cultivated in intimate labour can be both nourishing and quietly suffocating.

Negotiating Boundaries in Contexts of Criminalisation and Migration-related Precarity

Because intimacy is often misinterpreted, and both domestic work and sex work take place against a general backdrop of criminalisation and precarity, migrant workers in both sectors actively resist risk and vulnerability by negotiating boundaries. In the case of sex workers, this negotiation may relate to condom use and client screening via support networks.

Negotiations over condom use were indeed frequent, with some participants ruling out sex without a condom entirely, others charging extra for condomless sex, and others still making choices on a case-by-case basis.

I always use a condom when I give head because I'm not too afraid of giving head without one. Most men don't like it, but if they don't, I always say it's extra. – Jimena

I use condoms for everything, but there's always the client who tells me they don't like condoms. Sometimes I use them, other times ... I don't – Andrés

You have to be very careful... Europeans are very much like, 'who cares, suck it without condoms'. – Policarpa (sex worker from Latin America in Malta)

Across the sample and across countries, there was some evidence of different forms and degrees of collective organisation and mutual support led by sex workers, ranging from small informal networks of solidarity to larger and more structured communities of support, which involved sharing information on dangerous clients or abusive employers. For instance, Angela, a sex worker from Latin America in Malta, spoke of a 'bulky' client, whom she had flagged to other workers as potentially dangerous. Angela's suspicions were confirmed when a transgender worker accepted his request for services and found herself facing serious risks. Angela described how Latin American sex workers living in neighbouring flats in Malta banded together to support her. Although the worker had managed to persuade the client to leave, he unexpectedly returned and tried to forcefully break into her flat.

The door was completely destroyed, it had to be replaced.... In the end the guy left [but then he returned, so] we grabbed some scissors, because he knocked down the door, he was pushing and putting his arm in and when he put his arm in we grabbed him with the scissors, then he started bleeding a lot and left.

Despite this and other examples of community support, most sex workers interviewed—and particularly those with irregular migration status—offered testimonies of self-reliance.³⁹ This coincided with tapping into their personal skills and resources in order to set, re-affirm, or re-negotiate boundaries and protect themselves from risky situations.

I had an experience with a man who, from the moment I walked in, I felt was a bad person. I let him in, and I kept looking at him and thinking 'I don't want to be with this person'. I felt a very, very low energy, and I didn't know how to say anything. I thought 'I'll tell him I'll charge more'. When I bring someone in and I feel like I don't want to be with them anymore, I kind of change the price, and they say, 'Just go!' That's what I do to get rid of them. In the end, I did it, and the guy left really fast.
– Jimena

³⁹ Rossoni and van der Woude.

Irregularity was a key factor impacting workers' confidence in their ability to report client violence to the police and obtain support, as well as their overall feelings of vulnerability.⁴⁰ For example, Andrés recounted an episode where he was physically assaulted by a client who threatened to report him to the police because he was 'illegal'. While he managed to avoid being reported, Andrés felt alone and isolated and was thankful for his physical prowess which allowed him to escape a potentially compromising situation. Aside from the impact of migration laws, particularly in the Maltese case, self-sufficiency among the sex worker community is exacerbated by laws which criminalise sex workers who share dwellings and by the absence of a sex worker collective.⁴¹

In a similar manner, in domestic work, irregular status, in conjunction with live-in arrangements and employer dependency, restrict workers' ability to refuse tasks or set boundaries. However, many still engage in subtle forms of negotiation such as redefining duties, seeking live-out positions, or relying on community networks for support. Research shows that migrant domestic workers frequently experience overwork and sexual harassment but face major obstacles to reporting abuse due to isolation within private households and fear of deportation.⁴²

Jéssica illustrates how affective labour and overwork are deeply entangled in the private arrangements that structure this kind of employment. She recounted how her 'madam' asked her to massage her for hours every day, long into the night, until she felt utterly exhausted but unable to refuse. What began as a gesture of care—expected, yet not formally part of her duties—slowly expanded into an intimate, bodily demand that far exceeded the boundaries of common sense or physical wellbeing. For Jéssica, the lines between professional obligation, emotional loyalty, and bodily availability became blurred, as the intimate proximity characteristic of domestic service created situations where saying 'no' felt almost impossible.

I started by seven. I washed the car in the car washing. After that, I made her coffee. Then, actually, she is not at home the whole day because she has a business. So, I am alone at home doing the household chores. Then, after she comes back, I prepare her food for dinner. After dinner... I believe she finish by nine, eight to nine. After that, I clean the kitchen. After cleaning the kitchen, she wants me to massage her. Like I massage her for

⁴⁰ I Rossoni, 'Crafting vulnerability: Vulnerability (and resistance) among migrants with experiences of sex work in Malta', *European Journal of Criminology*, vol. 23, issue 5, 2026, pp. 813–838, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14773708251400844>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² S Bofill-Poch and R M Porras, 'Indefensión, injusticia y merecimiento en el colectivo de trabajadoras del hogar: análisis de casos judicializados', *Etnográfica – Revista do Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia*, vol. 24, issue 1, 2020, pp. 225–244, <https://doi.org/10.4000/etnografica.8487>.

two hours, three hours... too painful, you know? Until I'm falling asleep also at her back! Oh my God! Sometimes, I do like [movement of massage with minimum care and detail] because I am sleepy. I cannot say, 'Ma'am, enough! I feel asleep.' I cannot say that. Just continue...

In Jéssica's case, a combination of factors—including migratory irregularity, linguistic barriers, social isolation, and dependence on her employer—not only made it difficult to seek institutional support, but also profoundly shaped her capacity to identify whether she was entitled to protection in the first place, or to recognise to what extent the demands imposed by her employer could be considered excessive, illegitimate, or outright abusive. These experiences highlight how intimacy and emotional labour are not fixed but continuously negotiated, staged, and managed every day, reflecting both the structural constraints and the relational strategies embedded in both domestic work and sex work. At the same time, as has been emphasised throughout this section, irregularity is a key factor complicating the possibility of negotiation and even access to support when exploitation or abuse occurs.

Navigating Intimate Spaces

Workers' perceptions of safety intertwine with the ability to appropriate space and exercise control within it. While contemporary urban environments often erode feelings of belonging through mobility, the home—and those spaces one gradually comes to feel 'at home' in—retain symbolic and emotional significance. Yet these spaces are not inherently safe. Unequal power relations with employers or clients and ambiguous intimate encounters can destabilise the sense of protection associated with the domestic sphere. As illustrated in participants' experiences above, the home may become a site where one asserts oneself or, conversely, a locus of vulnerability.

Similarly, the public space, traditionally painted as risky and perilous, can unexpectedly offer spaces for intimacy, which clash with popular understandings of the concept. The possibility of having their own car is essential for many street-based sex workers in securing intimate spaces with clients. Otherwise, they may resort to more secluded locations or improvised set-ups, such as curtains used to enclose a small area. In response to a question on risk in street-based sex work, Antonio, a Southern European sex worker in Malta, spoke of an incident involving a violent client. In doing so, he highlighted the differences between certain public spaces and others, emphasising that paradoxically, although most of his encounters take place at isolated locations, often at night, not all public spaces are the same and some outdoor spots feel safer than indoor arrangements.

While the risk of violence and exploitation impacts many sex workers' decisions over the organisation of intimate spaces, very often feelings of intrusion or violation emerged in connection with less serious incidents, such as sharing a

bed or being exposed to someone's bodily odour.

Interviewer: Do you ever feel unsafe with people coming to your place? Do you think it's safer to have people come to your place than going to their place?

Lucas: No, there is risk. There is a risk, there are a lot of risks.... Here in Malta I had one obese. My God. What the hell was that?! He was like obese frog. He was in my bed, naked, smelling bad. Smelling bad. You don't have idea.

These instances were described in subjective terms by participants, offering a window into individuals' multifaceted understandings of intimacy. Moreover, even in the spatial organisation of the homes where they worked, workers used the arrangement, use, or restriction of space as a way to assert control.

I liked having my own bathroom... some customers had terrible breath! And their feet smelled awful. Many of them appreciated the hygiene... I'd tell them to take their shoes off out here and go to the bathroom, and they'd come back. – Policarpa

For domestic workers entering into their employers' household brings both advantages and disadvantages. Live-in workers often describe it as a necessary step that allows them to save money and avoid exposure to surveillance and harassment in public spaces. At the same time, and differently from independent sex workers, this set-up blurs the boundaries of their availability, leading employers to demand continuous labour, including at night. Having their own room—often the smallest in the house and located next to the children or elders they care for, or in the most remote and unpleasant areas of the home (such as storage rooms)—becomes their only refuge. Several participants reported intrusions into these spaces (e.g. employers entering to 'check' the room out of distrust), which they experienced as violations of their privacy.

This dynamic extends not only to the intimate spaces that live-in domestic employees inhabit or are allowed to inhabit but also to everyday matters such as food and personal hygiene. Amalia, a live-in Southeast Asian domestic worker in her 60s residing in Italy, recounts with astonishment how intensely she had to negotiate her food preferences—particularly her partiality for rice over pasta—with her last employer.

'And you leave me. I have no food. Nowhere to go', I said to her. 'What are you eating? [There is] Many pasta', she said. 'No. I'm eating rice', I said. 'Okay. I'll buy rice'. Then she buy me rice. Only rice! 'How can I eat solo rice?' 'What more?' 'I don't know. Is there a supermarket? I can go and buy for my food...' like that...

As expected, for many of them, transitioning to being live-out domestic workers represents a gain in personal intimacy and space, as well as increased control and autonomy over basic aspects of their lives.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although ‘intimacy’—and the experience of it—is ambivalent in both sectors, clear distinctions between sex work and domestic work emerge from our fieldwork. In contrast with common readings of sex workers which paint them as hapless victims,⁴³ many of our participants spoke of clear, intentional, and assertive boundary-setting and upholding, aligning with other research emphasising the complex ways in which intimacy is performed and negotiated across the sex work sector.⁴⁴ Conversely, our findings in relation to domestic work hint to pervasive nebulousness surrounding boundary-setting, especially under live-in arrangements. Workers are often confused about where intimacy starts and ends, and which services fall within the terms of the employment arrangement and which do not (for example, Jéssica having to massage her employer every night). Codes of what is acceptable or demanding under these intimate arrangements are more blurred, except in cases involving sexualised demands directed at the domestic worker—a situation frequently faced by domestic workers—that clearly violate the normative codes of the sector.

Comparing sex work and domestic work allows us to question and demystify a number of assumptions regarding intimacy in both sectors. For many sex workers, sexual interactions are often routine and emotionally compartmentalised as part of their work. At the same time, intimacy can also emerge unexpectedly in the form of friendship, infatuation, and moments of connection.⁴⁵ Similarly, certain domestic tasks such as cleaning, cooking, or caring for a dependent person can be experienced as forms of love and care, depending on the meaning attached to them, who they are performed for, and with what purpose; but they can also be mechanical and mundane tasks.

Public responses to both sex work and domestic work misunderstand and narrowly define intimacy. In sex work, it is commonly assumed that some sort of intimacy is necessarily present, yet the concept is generally over-simplified to sex—in narrow and generally heteronormative terms—and bodily interaction.

⁴³ K Sparks, ‘Sex Work, the Victim, and the Anti-Trafficking Movement’, in N L Fischer, L Westbrook, and S Seidman (eds.), *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies: Original Essays (4th Edition)*, Routledge, London, 2022.

⁴⁴ Carbonero and Garrido; Alarcón-Medina and Ayala-Constantino.

⁴⁵ H DeLacey and I Rossoni, ‘Beyond “Vanilla” Intimacy: Digital Sex Workers’ Views on Intimacy and Non-Normative Sexual Desires’, *Sexualities*, forthcoming.

Moreover, within neo-abolitionist discourse, this hollowed-out understanding of intimacy, which excludes the experiences of sex workers, is morally condemned and conducive to damning public discourse and treatment. In domestic work, on the other hand, this affective dimension is treated as an implicit requirement of the labour relationship. It is expected that the worker should form some kind of bond with the family, be kind, obedient, and affectionate, especially when caring for dependent people. Just like in sex work, this intimacy is narrowly defined, as it is shaped around the expectations of wealthy employers, without accommodating the voices and lived experiences of domestic workers. However, unlike sex work, the potential ‘profanation’ of intimacy that this commercialisation of care may entail for domestic workers is often left unquestioned.

Our analysis seeks to complicate these binaries by foregrounding that, in both domestic work and sex work, labour relations are deeply shaped by affective dynamics and forms of emotional ambiguity that continuously destabilise the possibility of establishing fixed, stable, and clearly negotiated boundaries of intimacy. There is a considerable heterogeneity of experiences and labour conditions that exist across both sectors. This diversity rarely finds space in public debates, where sex work is often demonised as ‘prostitution’ (regardless of the specific sub-sector and conditions within it), while domestic work often remains socially and politically invisibilised.⁴⁶ Both the sex and domestic sectors witness multiple forms of abuse, as well as pleasure, connection, and learning. Indeed, what we find is that, in both forms of work, migrants’ irregular administrative status is what shapes their capacity to report abuse and violence, change jobs or employers, resist coercion and blackmail, and negotiate boundaries and working conditions. This, in turn, also affects workers’ ability to define and negotiate the limits of the intimacy, emotional involvement, and bodily availability they are willing—or unwilling—to provide within labour relations.

Our research also sheds light on the importance of space in the conceptualisation of intimacy. Public and private spaces, rooms, beds, baths, and kitchens become sites where intimacy is shared, sometimes temporarily co-constructed, or violated. The public sphere, traditionally portrayed as risky and perilous, particularly for women and marginalised workers, may also unexpectedly enable forms of intimacy, care, solidarity, and emotional connection that complicate conventional understandings of where intimacy ‘belongs’. When it is infringed, participants often seek novel spaces to reclaim it.

Despite both sectors being characterised by similarly negotiated and conditional forms of intimacy, they are subject to radically different legal and political treatments across Southern Europe. While sex workers continue to be directly or indirectly criminalised through regulatory frameworks that intensify precarity,

⁴⁶ Aramayona, 2025.

surveillance, and social stigma, domestic work is comparatively institutionalised and actively sustained through regimes of low-paid and weakly protected labour. This contrast is especially significant in countries such as Spain and Italy, which register some of the highest rates of domestic employment in Europe.

In line with arguments advanced by sex worker organisations, we contend that this asymmetry cannot be understood through moral discourses surrounding female sexuality and the historical policing of women's sexual autonomy. It must also be situated within broader political-economic arrangements that rely upon the availability of a feminised and racialised labour force dedicated to sustaining social reproduction and care infrastructures for predominantly white European middle-class households. From this perspective, the differential regulation of sex work and domestic work reveals not simply divergent moral valuations of intimacy, but also the selective legitimisation of forms of feminised labour considered socially necessary to the reproduction of contemporary European welfare and family structures. Moreover, in contexts where discretionality and informality tend to play a more significant role than in other European countries, migrant workers are constantly exposed to ambiguous practices, which often contribute to their marginalisation. Future research should investigate the different forms of discretionality experienced by sex workers in their encounters with the authorities and across public services, the ways they affect various aspects of life, and create both protection challenges and opportunities to sidestep the rules.

Although this article does not specifically focus on unionisation, our broader feminist ethnographic research in Southern Europe also shows that worker-led community organisations—run by sex workers, domestic workers, and migrants—greatly improve workers' awareness of their rights, confidence, and ability to negotiate their working conditions. These groups, which are growing unevenly across Southern Europe, help counter the vulnerabilities built into intimate labour, whereas isolation and limited knowledge of rights expose sex workers and domestic workers to greater insecurity and abuse. Despite national differences, this article highlights a shared need for stronger community organising; for reforms of labour (including sex work) and migration laws and policies to prevent migrant workers' marginalisation; and for a research agenda that analyses domestic and sex work together rather than in silos.

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Isotta Rossoni is the founder and Chief Operations Officer of the NGO Bridges2Health&Rights. She holds a PhD from Leiden University's Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society. Email: i.rossoni@law.leidenuniv.nl

Begoña Aramayona is a postdoctoral researcher at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, working in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology in collaboration with the Gender Studies Centre. She holds a PhD from the Autonomous University of Madrid. Email: b.aramayona@fsof.uned.es