Gender discourse in the European Parliament

Feminist critical discourse analysis of gender notions in the European Parliament's discussions on prostitution

Alexandra Nadal Sorando

Supervisor: João Florêncio
Gender Studies, LiU

Master's Programme

Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change (120 ECTS)

Master's thesis (15 ECTS)

ISRN: LIU-TEMA G/GSIC3-A-25/006-SE

LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Prostitution is a very contested issue everywhere. Great advances are being made on its regulation in the European Union through non-binding soft law instruments and on establishing an abolitionist stance inside the European Parliament. Because prostitution touches upon key topics like gender and sexuality, this study seeks to critically assess the value system and gender notions that are at work in the debates on prostitution. The research question that guides the analysis consists in how gender is understood by the members of the European Parliament in their discussions on prostitution, approached with a thematic analysis and a feminist critical discourse analysis of the European Parliament resolution of 2014 on *sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality* and the European Parliament resolution of 2023 on *the regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women's rights*. The study is very much influenced by all the previous scholarship on gender, discourse and prostitution, and the results are also in tune with what has been previously observed in other studies. Still, this thesis provides a detailed and specific study of the gender notions at play in the abovementioned debates. The findings point at a strong connection between women and prostitutes, and prostitution and sexual exploitation, issues with gendering, othering, victimization, and a shallow analysis of structural oppression.

Key words: gender notions, discourse, prostitution, European Parliament, feminist critical discourse analysis, gender studies

Acknowledgements

Before anything else, I want to thank my tutor, João Florêncio, for all of his support, belief and help with this thesis and my ideas on it. I am eternally grateful to have had you as my tutor because I have been fearing this thesis for very long and I was finally able to do whatever I wanted and with your amazing help and guidance all along.

También le quiero dar las gracias a mi madre que siempre cree en mi y en mis ideas aunque a veces no tengamos la misma opinion en ellas. Me has dado mucha fuerza, la cual necesitaba fuertemente, para poder centrarme en escribir una tesis de la que estar orgullosa.

I also want to thank absolutely everyone who has had to put up with me talking about this topic and related issues countless times because for me it was simply never enough.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations

EP	European Parliament
ESWA	European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance
EU	European Union
FCDA	Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis
ICRSE	International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe
INI	Own-initiative report
MEP	Member of the European Parliament

Introduction

"(...) Una sociedad que banaliza la sexualidad y la desliga del amor, aunque diga proteger a la mujer, está fomentando prácticas que realmente la denigran. (...)"

A society that trivializes sexuality and separates it from love, even if it claims to protect women, is promoting practices that actually degrade them.

Margarita de la Pisa Carrión, member of the European Parliament in the debate held on the 13th of September of 2023 in Strasbourg.

This is only one out of many interventions made by members of the European Parliament on women and sexuality. It is part of the debate held on the regulation of prostitution[1] in the European Union in 2023, the transcript of which I came across one day and could not stop reading until the very last point. So many interventions are made on the issues of prostitution in relation to women and their bodies and their worth that I was very eager to bring this into my thesis so I could properly analyze all its content as a gender studies researcher.

The European Parliament (EP) claims to be strongly committed to achieve gender equality, among many other "good" medals, which has led to the reconsideration of the regulation of prostitution. Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been an abolitionist turn on prostitution discourse in the European Parliament (Rubio, 2021). It happened slowly through the building of a tighter connection between human trafficking and prostitution in political discourses (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008), which materialized in the EP resolution of 1997 on *the need to establish an EU-wide campaign for zero tolerance of violence against women* (OJ C 304, 6.10.1997, p.55), which officially declared prostitution as a form of violence against women. Despite this resolution, the regulation of prostitution currently lies under the jurisdiction of each member state in the European Union. Nevertheless, symbolic power and soft law measures have been used by the European Parliament in more recent years to establish a unified

[1] Prostitution is the concept that I am going to be mostly using to refer to the trade between physical-contact sexual activity (i.e. penetrative and non-penetrative sex, manual or oral sex) and money. Sex work is not going to be used as much, since it is often used in scholarship to approach specific aspects of this labor like prostitution, pornography, erotic dancing or massage, phone sex, webcamming, or other.

strategy within the EU in regard to prostitution and gender equality (Sundin, 2023), namely, the EP resolution of 26 February 2014 on *sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality* (2013/2103(INI)), and the EP resolution of 14 September 2023 on *the regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women's rights* (2022/2139(INI)).

This has attracted a lot of international and academic interest because of the long history of diversity in such regulations in the EU, the strong consequences it will mean if any binding measures are taken, and the strong policymaker and democratic agenda-setter role that the EP is at a supranational level (Berthet, 2022). It is nonetheless important to keep in mind that, on the one hand, the EP is not a single individual, but a formation of many different actors with their own ideologies and beliefs, and, on the other hand, the soft law power that the EP has in comparison with national parliaments and its diverse political institutions, or other EU institutions like the European Commission and the European Council (Lombardo and Meier, 2008; Berthet, 2022).

As a researcher, what I find most interesting in this process is to understand how we got to the radical signification of prostitution as gender violence, considering the sexual liberation feminist movements, the rise of sexual liberation overall, and the empowerment of diverse sexual practices in recent times. One clear example of this is the rise in the online sex work industry with the platform of OnlyFans. This could of course also be a motive that led the EP to radicalize towards the other side of the spectrum, which would be the abolition of sex work.

Going back to the abovementioned idea about the morality behind prostitution, this is exactly what interests me the most. The moral values that are at play in the recent debates on prostitution regulation in the European Parliament could be very interesting to analyze, to be aware of what is behind all these "gender equality" measures. Which value system is driving gender equality advancement in the European Union?

From a poststructuralist feminist critique, I am interested in observing the way that gender is (re)produced in those spaces, since I, unfortunately, find it hard to believe that the European Parliament, filled with mid- and senior-level professionals and polarizing views on gender equality, has a deepened understanding and recognition of the role that gender binary has on discourse of such topics. Additionally, the rise of the far-right movement in Europe, the adherence of some feminist movements to the anti-sex work discourse, and the known polarizing effect that gender equality has in the EP are key factors to consider nowadays (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021). This is an important topic to investigate because of how such polarizing discourses shape the public sphere (Balirano and Borba, 2021).

Most of feminist scholarship points out how notions of gender have become an increasingly complex and subtle issue in discourse (Lazar, 2005). Nonetheless, it is still very much alive and, it is necessary to fight against the internalization of gendered norms and practices that is still very much affecting the present and future realities of so many people (Lazar, 2005; Di Sabato and Hughes, 2020).

Therefore, I propose to examine the ways in which the binary gender and its value system have been deployed in recent debates on prostitution regulation in the European Parliament. Although the European Union is claiming to combat gender inequality and violence against women in diverse sectors like prostitution, domestic sphere, workplace, etc., I fear that the understandings of gender at play are not as loose nor irrelevant as we may think.

As abovementioned, there are currently only two resolutions enacted by the EP which focus mainly on prostitution and their verbatim report of proceedings will be the primary sources of the analysis. The aims of this study are, mainly, to provide a critical analysis of the value system on gender that sustain debates on prostitution in the European Parliament, but also to contribute to feminist scholarship on gender roles, the gender binary, and discourse. To achieve the main aim, my research question is:

- How is gender understood by the members of the European Parliament in their discussions on prostitution?

The methods that will be used to answer the research question will be thematic analysis and feminist critical discourse analysis, the process of which I will explain with more detail in the next section. The literature review will go over general information about prostitution policies and discourses and relevant studies in academia that help the analysis and latter discussion of results. Then, I will provide the results of the thematic and discourse analysis, the latter responding to the research question.

Sources and methodology

Materials and methods

This research explores how notions of gender are present in recent European Parliament discussions on the topic of prostitution. The only European Parliament resolutions focusing exclusively on prostitution at the time of writing are the EP resolution of 26 February 2014 on *sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality (*2013/2103(INI)), and the EP resolution of 14 September 2023 on *the regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women's rights* (2022/2139(INI)). Because of my interest in the impact that social discursive practices have on policy discourses (Carta and Wodak, 2015; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021), the research material is comprised of the verbatim report of proceedings and the explanations of votes for each of the two abovementioned resolutions.

The verbatim report of proceedings and the explanations of votes of the first resolution add up to 74 interventions in a total of 17 pages, ranging between 22 and 583 words per intervention. The ones of the second resolution add up to 31 interventions, in a total of 11 pages, ranging between 135 and 672 words per intervention.

Some things to consider about the data are the variety of languages used by the MEPs, which consist of the 24 official languages of the European Union. When analyzing language and discourse, one could argue that systemic and intercultural differences between speakers should be considered (Bartłomiejczyk, 2023), however, in this study this is something that will not be analyzed in detail since the focus is on how gender notions are (re)produced in discourse in such spaces and not why or to which degree each member of the EP is affected by their personal, national and language differences. Moreover, with my fluency in Spanish and English, some interventions were analyzed directly from the source, however, to understand all the other languages that appear, I had to make use of online translating tools like ChatGPT, DeepL, and Google Translate. I may have missed

some nuances that come from understanding the language natively, and that constitutes a limitation of this study.

Regarding the methods, two processes will take place to analyze the data. First, a thematic analysis with some pre-established codes in relation to the research question like “women”/”woman”, “prostitutes”/”sex workers”, “prostitution”/”sex work”, but with the possibility of establishing new ones during the process. Then, a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) will be conducted upon the information extracted by the thematic analysis, which will consist in detecting the main common topics that appear in the MEPs interventions and how these are talked about in light of feminist scholarship.

Discourse is an act of meaning-making which contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of a certain social order (Fairclough, 1992). Analyzing discourse includes not only the meanings that are explicit, but also the less obvious and nuanced meanings that are established through complex ideological assumptions of contemporary societies (Lazar, 2005; Beaton, 2016). It is of great use in illustrating the way that social discursive practices affect policy discourses and, thus, in the definition of political realities (Carta and Wodak, 2015; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021). This is especially relevant in topics such as regulating prostitution, which has been shown to be rooted in discourse (Wagenaar, 2018; Sundin, 2023). The next natural step in discourse analysis is to apply a critical perspective on the way that unequal social arrangements are enacted and sustained through language use, which can be done by drawing specific epistemologies and theories that help us explain complex social phenomena (Lazar, 2017; Carta and Wodak, 2015).

In this thesis, a feminist critical discourse analysis will be conducted. Driven by critical feminist theory, FCDA focuses on how gender notions and relations of power are produced and contested in social practices, relationships, and people’s social and personal identities (Lazar, 2005; Nartey, 2021). It is based in the understanding of gender as an ideological structure and practice, and its mission is observing the complexity of gender and power relations in the discursive practices of legitimation used in the reproduction of othering, ideologies and stereotypes

about certain identities (Lazar, 2017; Nartey, 2021). Specifically applied in politics, feminist critical discourse analysis helps us identify the discursively articulated strategies that make the European Parliament a more unsafe space for advancing gender equality than before and come up with practices than can steer us in the right path towards gender-inclusivity and gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021).

Methodology and theoretical framework

As a feminist researcher, I feel the need to be open about my situatedness like Donna Haraway (1988) suggests as a transparent and responsible way of producing knowledge. I am a cisgender woman from Catalonia, Spain. Since the start of my university studies, I have been interested in the topic of prostitution because of the myriads of layers, issues and realities that it involves. As a critical feminist, I am aware of the detrimental state of our value system as a society; I believe that is the reason for and the basis from which we are building this world full of inequalities and intolerance. Thus, the intention of this thesis to help unmask this value system behind EP decisions on prostitution.

On a methodological level, this thesis follows the principles of poststructuralism. For me, this means understanding subject positions as discursively and socially constructed, fluid and dynamic (Cunningham, 2016). Furthermore, I am inspired by the deconstructive critique that Joan Wallach Scott presents in her work *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis* (1986), pioneered by her generation of gender scholars (Krylova, 2016).

Joan W. Scott's goal consisted of questioning the certainty of established categories and creating openings for transgressions (Krylova, 2016). She advocated for the use of "gender" as an analytical tool to explore the importance we give to sex difference in social relationships and institutions. She argued that gender establishes hierarchies, it does not only affect women, and that it is a fundamental part of all social institutions (Scott, 1986). The role of social institutions and organizations is very important in creating and enforcing gender roles, according to her. Finally, although her intended deconstruction of the binary was meant to step

outside of it, she did not manage to do that, since the heteronormative and the transgressive constitute codependent and dichotomic phenomena in a way (Krylova, 2016). In a similar way, it is possible that I am not able to go beyond the binary since my analysis intends to focus on the binary despite being critical of it.

The conceptual and theoretical foundations relevant to this study correspond to the concepts of sexual difference, gender, gender notions and some adjacent ideas, which I will present here through a poststructuralist lens.

Modern society organizes the world ontologically in terms of dichotomous and separable categories (Lugones, 2010). In the case of human beings, one of these is sexual difference –among others like for example race (Lugones, 2010)–, which has been based on the outer appearance of genitalia limiting it into two categories: female and male, by which we delimit a human's identity. Like many other authors, Saray Ayala and Nadya Vasilyeva (2015) point out how sexual difference is not a purely biological issue, since sex-relevant traits are not packaged in only two clusters. They argue that the individual variability is underestimated because of social practices that mask deviations.

One of the issues of this is hierarchization, the delimitation of two categories, and its spilling into other phenomena. It was thought to be a purely biological issue; however, it has been proven to be a moral and political affair that assigns a series of sex-appropriate norms to each category, and which contributes to oppressive differential treatments (Ayala and Vasilyeva, 2015). Sexism is the most evident consequences of the socio-cultural construction of sexual difference, defined by the Council of Europe as "any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice, or behavior based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex [...]" (2019, p.10).

Binary sexual difference has led to certain norms and expectations that trespass the biological boundary and are purely social, which has brought us to gender. Gender corresponds to a set of socially and culturally constructed meanings which imposes a social dichotomy of labor and human traits assigned to

the perceived sex differences (Scott, 1986; Lazar, 2005). In other words, it is the cultural meanings that we have assigned to the sexed body (Butler, 2002).

Deconstructing gender means being aware of how gender is constantly contested and constructed in discourse and practice to maintain and reproduce gendered inequalities (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017; Berthet, 2022). One simple example of this is the assumption that women are virgins and have a passive sexuality, or the heterosexual relationship between the genders, which leaves no place for "transgressive" identities (Krylova, 2016; Balirano and Borba, 2021). Lesbian and gay studies, queer theory, and transgender and third genders studies have led an academic revolution by deconstructing gender and providing approaches to go beyond the binary matrix (Krylova, 2016).

Gender roles are the specific expectations, stereotyped conducts and norms that the gendered body must follow to function in society. When we talk about the right to life, dignity, personal autonomy, bodily integrity, sexual freedom, and equality, we assume it is a basic human right, however, the patriarchal functioning of society[2] has built barriers for women to access this bare minimum (Roka, 2025). Some examples are the high femicide rates, especially by intimate partners, honor killings, control over reproductive choices, sexual harassment, media sexualization of women, female genital mutilation, and so on. This is clearly not coincidentally happening everywhere in the world, but it comes from the value system we have assigned to sexual difference, gender, and gender roles, which overall reinforces women's oppression (Roka, 2025). The abovementioned examples show the ways in which gender is built in practice across various domains of life, which corresponds to the phenomenon of gendered practices (Roka, 2025).

I also want to address the concept of notions of gender, which corresponds to all these beliefs and value system of sexual difference, gender, and gender roles as fixed and "natural". The tricky part about it is that they have been existing for so long

[2] The patriarchy corresponds to the functioning of society with these cultural norms, sexual dynamics and binary gender notions at its core, which has led us to a world where masculinity is praised and femininity is condemned, and these roles are assigned to our bodies as soon as our bodies finish growing our outer genitalia.

in society and it is so engrained in our way of functioning and understanding the world, that it seems largely consensual and acceptable for men and women alike, which only further obscures the power relation and inequality in it (Lazar, 2005). The next step comes when feminists start pointing this out, and talking about gender equality, which has been criticized as dangerous by far-right movements, because it is. Gender equality is dangerous for the status quo, because it challenges traditional family values based on heteronormative relations, binary gender roles, and the hierarchization of human beings assigned into dichotomous and essentializing categories (Lugones, 2010; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021).

Two other concepts that are very recurrent when talking about prostitution are dignity and agency. On the one hand, dignity corresponds to the quality of being worth of respect, which is understood as something ingrained in the humanness of our beings, and it is very much in relation with the entitlement to human rights (Cunningham, 2016). The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) claims that the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world". Despite this statement, in practice, dignity has been shown to be conditional, unequal and hierarchical (Cunningham, 2016).

On the other hand, agency refers to the capacity to act out of one's free will. This is a very contested topic when talking about gender equality, because many feminists argue that this is not possible for oppressed communities and identities since we do live in a world with ingrained power relations and hierarchies. Anthony Giddens (1979) argues that social structure and human agency are interdependent, and that is why another proposed definition of agency could be "the capacity to act independently, despite social constraints" (Abercrombie et al, 1994).

About prostitution and sex work

In this section, I will be presenting some general information about the most common stances on prostitution and a brief historical overview of its legislation in the European Union. Then, in the literature review, I will go over a range of works that relate to this study, some of which will inspire the discussion of the results.

Stances

Despite there being a myriad of different legislative models on prostitution and specific stances on certain rights and wrongs of the sector, I will be summarizing the most notable takes on prostitution and presenting it as either "for" or "against" it. It is worth noting that all the different stances on prostitution claim to work in the interest of feminism and women's rights (Larsson, 2023).

On the one hand, those who are against "prostitution" defend the criminalization of some of its aspects or all of them (i.e. criminalizing the organization behind the prostitute, the client, or the selling of sex as well) and/or the abolition of prostitution as a whole, with the aim of rescuing victims of sexual exploitation and prostitutes coerced by the patriarchy[3] (Outshoorn et al, 2015; Larsson, 2023). In its historical and social influences we can see radical feminism, emphasizing the origin of women's oppression in their sexual subordination and thus with victimhood; Marxist feminism, arguing that sexuality is that which is one's own, like labor, and that capitalism is the overarching oppressor of women; and far-right movements and religious groups, framing it as morally wrong (Gerassi, 2015; Hofstetter and Rubio, 2023; Larsson, 2023).

This stance often identifies prostitution as a form of violence, a cause or consequence of gender inequality, a violation of women's rights, and a forced or coerced decision consequence of a vulnerable situation (Outshoorn et al, 2015;

[3] This is the stance that is mostly supported in many political sites, namely the European Parliament. Anti-sex second-wave feminism discourse has been evolving and spreading in politics, supported by feminism of cisness, the disillusionment with liberal feminism, and the discursive exoduses from postfeminism (Lewis, 2025).

Larsson, 2023; Sundin, 2023). Thus, it often focuses on the structural aspects of prostitution and not so much on the individual prostitute (Sundin, 2023).

The image of the prostitute is always that of a woman, with no agency, and victim of a patriarchal world (Outshoorn, 2001; Hubbard, 2004; Gatrell, 2010; Sundin, 2023). Most commonly, they are linked to victims of trafficking, and more traditionally, socially dangerous and spreaders of sexually transmitted diseases (Outshoorn, 2011; Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008; Gatrell, 2010; Larsson, 2023).

On the other hand, those who are for "sex work" sometimes defend its legalization with the aim of accepting sex work as any other type of work, protecting the rights of sex workers, and/or providing a more secure situation for the victims of sexual exploitation (Larsson, 2023). In its historical and social influences we can see radical feminism, focusing on female sexual autonomy and diversity in sexual expression and concerned with any sexual moralism that suppresses female sexuality; liberal mainstream feminist thinkers, focusing on free speech and suppressing some intersectional considerations; and many queer organizations, recognizing its multigendered nature and embracing diverse sexual expressions, orientations and characteristics (Larsson, 2023; Ferčíková, 2024; Lanzalotto, 2025).

People in favor of sex work protection make a differentiation between victims of sexual exploitation and sex workers. They defend the prosecution of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, meanwhile reasserting the existence, rights and needs of people who voluntarily take part in sex work (Gatrell, 2010). Sex positive stances acknowledge the choice, agency, consent, personal autonomy and right to sexual self-determination, safety nets, and dignity that sex workers have as human beings (Cunningham, 2016; Larsson, 2023; Sundin, 2023). Sex workers are not victims of trafficking in need of rescue and rehabilitation, but workers who enter a contract and decide –or should be able to decide– by themselves what actions or sexual acts they want to take part in or not (Outshoorn, 2001; Gerassi, 2015; Cunningham, 2016).

Overall, they focus on labor market aspects when addressing sex work and point at the empowerment of women's autonomy as drivers of gender equality (Outshoorn et al, 2015; Sundin, 2023). Some sex work positive actors point at a higher demand for prostitution and wages than other jobs as reasons for the higher number of workers, meanwhile acknowledging other structural factors like immigration policies and economic vulnerabilities which may lead for some people to resort to sex work against their will (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008).

Most sex work organizations have similar general complains for international and local communities, which are the denial of citizenship rights to sex workers, the gendered effects of exploitation as well as criminalization of sex work, and the exclusion of sex workers and their organizations in politics (Gatrell, 2010; Ferčíková, 2024).

Historical overview

As of right now, regulation of sex work is the remit of member states of the European Union through the subsidiarity principle (Berthet, 2022). Nevertheless, the European Parliament has been using non-binding soft law instruments to spread ideas across the EU about prostitution, what constitutes violence against women, the consequences of human trafficking, and so on (Rubio, 2021; Sundin, 2023). To illustrate the evolution of anti-sex work ideology into soft law instruments of the EU, I will be presenting a brief historical overview of the most relevant resolutions and events.

To begin with, between the 1960s and the 1980s, the second-wave feminism developed, in which feminist efforts focused on informal gender inequalities like sexuality, family, and reproductive rights and how these were being affected by sexism.

By the end of the 1980s, sex workers had already been mobilizing to acquire basic rights, however, in second-wave feminist discussions about sexuality, prostitution became a key issue in which the movement struggled to agree on a

stance, which has come to be known as the “Sex Wars” (Hofstetter and Rubio, 2023).

The big disagreement was on the views of sex as a source of oppression or an opportunity for empowerment for women. Some radical feminists defended that heterosexual sex and sex work were reinforcing male structural dominance of women, meanwhile pro-sex radical feminists[4] claimed sexual liberty can be a valuable opportunity for women to express agency and feel empowered (Lanzalotto, 2025).

In 1986, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on *violence against women* (OJ C176/73), which called for measures such as legal recognition, prevention, and assistance to victims, as well as awareness-raising and training of professionals. It did not mention anything about prostitution, but it called the attention on the problem of violence against women.

In 1997, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on *the need to establish an EU-wide campaign for zero tolerance of violence against women* (OJ C 304, 6.10.1997, p.55). This one called for research on the impact of prostitution on violence against women, and it officially linked prostitution with forced prostitution and trafficking. This was the start of the remarks on the issues of prostitution through soft law instruments (Sundin, 2023).

By 1999, the Netherlands fully legalized sex work, and Sweden initiated the criminalization of purchasing sexual services. Having two strong member states establishing such opposite legislation on sex work clearly solidified the polarization of the debate on the regularization of prostitution in the EU (Mattson, 2016; Sundin, 2023).

In 2002, seeing the unsure evolution of prostitution in the EU, a small collective of sex workers formed a working group known as the International Committee for

[4] These thinkers joined forces with liberal feminist thinkers, which allowed a bigger movement of people to accept sex work, but it entailed the shift towards a more liberal strategy by neglecting previous radical and transgressive commitments (Lanzalotto, 2025).

Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) to track and respond to the evolution of abolitionist stances on sex work.

As a consequence of the EP resolution of 1997, the European Parliament and the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities published a report on *the consequences of the sex industry in the European Union* (2003/2107(INI)) in 2004. It was the first one to focus solely on the topic of prostitution and other sexual services. Although it made the distinction between sexual trafficking and sex work –a crucial aspect for sex positive actors–, it stated that the sex industry had an adverse impact on gender equality, stereotyped and emphasized how the sex worker is a vulnerable woman and the client an anonymous man, and also stated that the legalization of sex work did not necessarily reduce exploitation.

On another note, the Council of Europe adopted the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005) with the aim of asserting the respect for human rights and dignity of victims, preventing and combating human trafficking for exploitation –sexual included–, and promoting international cooperation on this issue. It established binding obligations for member states –a later-developed directive (2011/36/EU)–, and the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings as a monitoring organism. This was a great action in the fight against human trafficking, but it also brought more attention to the issue of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, which helped negatively in the fight for sex work acceptance.

Thus, the ICRSE elaborated and presented a Declaration on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (2005) at the European Conference on Sex Work, Human Rights, Labour and Migration that took place in Brussels, Belgium. There, they list and explain the rights that all individuals in Europe have under international human rights law which all national governments should respect and protect, with a focus on sex work. Some of these include the right to life, liberty and security, to privacy and family life, to health, to freedom of movement, to freedom from slavery and forced labor, to public participation, and peaceful assembly and association, among others.

At the end of that same year, the European Parliament and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality released a report on *the situation in combating violence against women and any future action* (2004/2220(INI)). It put emphasis on violence against women as a human rights violation, it connected violence against women to trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation or other purposes, and, most importantly, it linked prostitution with violence, exploitation, and vulnerability, especially –but not only– in the context of trafficking.

In 2009, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on *the Elimination of Violence Against Women* (OJ C285E, 21.20.2010, pp. 53-38), which asserted that violence against women is a structural phenomenon within the EU, urged the European institutions like the Commission and the Council to develop some legislation at the EU level, and referenced human trafficking as intertwined with violence against women. This resolution and the 2005 report started to lean towards and establish an abolitionist stance regarding prostitution (Rubio, 2021).

In 2011, the Council of Europe ratified the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, which is the most extensive legally binding instrument against gender-based violence in the EU, and it entailed very ideological debates in the EP (Berthet, 2022). From that moment on, violence against women and anything related to it became a key issue of European importance, and the ideological connection between human trafficking and prostitution began to consolidate in international politics' discourse (Montoya, 2013).

In 2013, the EU Civil Society Platform against Trafficking was launched, and although several civil society organizations who called for the decriminalization or legalization of sex work wanted to be part of it, they were rejected. La Strada International, the European Sex Workers Rights Alliance (ESWA) –previously known as International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE)–, or even Amnesty International are some of these organizations, which identified human trafficking as a broader migration, labor and social issue the solution of which needed to focus on criminal organizations and traffickers, but still acknowledging

sex work as an occupation that consenting adults can choose to engage in (Ferčíková, 2024; La Strada International, n.d.).

Despite advocacy by civil society organizations to respect the agency and rights of sex workers, in 2014, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on *sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality* (2013/2103(INI)) (OJ C 285, 29.8.2017, pp.78-86), most commonly known as the Honeyball Resolution. This was the first EP resolution mainly aimed at tackling prostitution. It became the most influential publication on prostitution in the EU, and it was key in solidifying the abolitionist agenda in the EP (Sundin, 2023). It condemned prostitution as directly connected with human trafficking, a form of gender violence and inequality, and a violation of human dignity and rights without differentiating between forced or voluntary, and it called for the reduction of demand and the opposition to legalization of prostitution (Larsson, 2023; Sundin, 2023).

During the process of presenting the own-initiative report in the EP, debating it, and voting on it, 560 civil society organizations in favor of the protection of sex work called on the MEPs to vote against its resolution, and 94 academics signed a letter of critique pointing out the methodological flaws and biases that it presented (Bąkowski and Prpic, 2024). Nevertheless, the resolution was adopted.

The next step was taken in 2020, when the European Commission launched an open public consultation in which an emerging instrument on gender-based violence and a new crime of "sexual exploitation" –encompassing all sex work– was proposed (Ferčíková, 2024).

Two years later, the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality started working on a report on the differing EU Member States' regulations on prostitution and their cross-border implications on women's rights as an own-initiative procedure. That same year, the European Coalition on Sex Workers' Rights and Inclusion was formed through the coalition of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the ESWA, and many other civil society organizations, to call out the stigmatization and discrimination that sex worker organizations suffered in public

spaces, and the high levels of discrimination, violence and human rights violations that sex workers face in Europe (ESWA, 2022).

Despite their efforts, the 2022 report made it into the EP and was adopted –with some amendments– as the resolution of 14 September 2023 on *the regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women's rights* (2022/2139(INI)) (OJ C/2024/1767). This is the latest EP resolution on prostitution, and it addresses the different legal frameworks in the EU on prostitution and their effectiveness, the cross-border reality of human trafficking for sexual exploitation pointing at the necessary international cooperation, and a collective effort to reduce demand with the long-term aim of abolishing prostitution in the EU.

In this resolution, the European Commission is called to draw up guidelines to guarantee the fundamental rights of prostitutes. Simultaneously, Member States are called to put in place effective measures to reduce the demand for prostitution –regardless of national legislation on sex work– and efficient policies that eliminate poverty and improve social protection; to tackle online advertisement and contact facilitation; and to ensure that it is punishable as a criminal offence to "solicit, accept or obtain a sexual act from a person in exchange for remuneration, the promise of remuneration, the provision of a benefit in kind or the promise of such a benefit" and to "exploit the prostitution of another person even with the consent of that person" (European Parliament, 2023).

Again, just like with the last resolution, civil society organizations and human rights organizations, now organized as the European Coalition on Sex Workers' Rights and Inclusion, addressed an open letter to the European Parliament urging MEPs to vote against the resolution arguing for the decriminalization of sex work (Bąkowski and Prpic, 2024). But, still, the resolution was adopted.

More recently, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination intended to present a motion for a resolution on *Protecting the human rights and improving the lives of sex workers and victims of sexual exploitation* at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, but the Committee was compelled by the complaints and

opposition to the report and resolution which was referred back to the Committee (Kulczyk, 2024).

Overall, the historical evolution of the reports and resolutions enacted in the EP shows a tendency towards the abolition of prostitution and sex work in the EU as a common issue to deal with as a union. There is still a minimum tolerance towards sex workers, given the fact that this current has not yet made it into binding legislation; nevertheless, the European Parliament has made it clear that prostitution –consensual or forced– is not to be desired in the EU as an agent of gender equality. Despite moral stances on the topic, it is also worth noting how sex work and sex work sympathizing civil society organizations have been avoided and actively excluded from participation in these processes[5] (Hofstetter and Rubio, 2023; Sundin, 2023, Ferčíková, 2024).

Prostitution regulation across the EU

There is a diverse set of regulations on sex work through the EU because of historical and cultural reasons as well as current social contexts and political circumstances, which only proves the complexity of the issue (Oliveira et al, 2023; Bąkowski and Prpic, 2024). Despite nuances in the diverse legislations across the EU, I have tried to organize them in a few categories here to give an overview of the current different types of sex work regulations in the European Union, informed by the "Regulation of prostitution in the European Union. Laws and policies in selected EU Member States" (2024) document published by the European Parliamentary Research Service.

Some states with their own model of prostitution regulation are Belgium, Croatia, and Lithuania. Belgium has a decriminalized approach to prostitution, where buying and selling sex is legal without specific regulation, and third-party involvement is allowed. In Croatia, buying sex is legal, but selling sex is prosecuted and criminalized. Lastly, in Lithuania, both buying and selling sex are illegal.

[5] Some anti-prostitution feminists have tried to discredit sex worker organizations by calling them human traffickers or representatives of criminal organisations (Hofstetter and Rubio, 2023).

Sweden is known to be the first EU Member State, and the first country in the world, to criminalize buying sex but not selling it (Larsson, 2023; Bąkowski and Prpic, 2024). As a matter of fact, their actions set a role model of legislation which was been named ‘the Nordic model’ and recurrently mentioned in the EP discussions that are studied in this thesis. This type of regulation has also been adopted quite recently in France and Ireland (Bąkowski and Prpic, 2024).

Generally speaking, buying and selling sex is legal in Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.

The degrees and types of prostitution regulation vary widely across countries (e.g. whether it is national, regional or municipal measures, if all types of sex work are legal or some are not). Depending on the member state, brothels can be legal, illegal, or only legal if state-licensed, and pimping can also be legal or illegal in these countries.

Overall, there is not one single legal document at the EU level that dictates how prostitution is to be regulated inside the Member States. Nevertheless, through human trafficking resolutions and directives, the sexual exploitation of minors and victims of human trafficking and buying sex of victims of human trafficking knowingly is explicitly banned and punishable through EU directives everywhere (Bąkowski and Prpic, 2024).

Literature review

Gender and discourse

Discourse is a key aspect to analyze to comprehend which ideological assumptions are at work in every context. On the topic of politics, this is very relevant when trying to understand how discursive practices are affected by and reproduce the social order and our political realities and vice versa (Lazar, 2005; Carta and Wodak, 2015; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021). Another fact to consider is how the products of discourse are never fixed and static and change across different contexts and among different actors (Cunningham, 2016). This further highlights discourse as an especially compelling discipline to study in politics.

The European Union and its institutions are the focus of this study, specifically the European Parliament. Many scholars agree on how the European Parliament is aware of the power of discourse and it has been used to define the EU as a harmonized identity among the Member States, a beacon of fundamental rights protection, and more recently, a pioneer institution for advancing gender equality (Berthet, 2022; Sundin, 2023). This is done through the production of some EU values of common sense, and the differentiation between a harmonized EU with a collective identity, versus the rest of the world (Berthet, 2022; Rivas, 2023).

Moreover, being aware of the power of discourse, some scholars have observed the ways in which the EP creates these common values and uses discursive practices. Some of these methods are the lexical repetition of key terms, hegemonic conceptual metaphors, and the awareness of the valuable role as MEPs in producing discourses that shape how we understand the world and frame the EU's international discourses (Beaton, 2016; Carta and Wodak, 2015; Meszner, 2021). Nevertheless, as Valentine Berthet (2022) has observed, the EP has a unique discourse within the diverse EU institutions, through which they identify themselves as a 'good institution' with mechanisms in place that makes them a unanimous democratic actor for the exchange of ideas and the advancement of human rights. This is dangerous because it protects the status quo, meanwhile not leaving space

to question whether these mechanisms are efficient or whether the EP is as unanimous as we think[6].

Several studies, for instance by Valentine Berthet (2022), Emma Larsson (2023), and Julia Sundin (2023), have observed the tensions inside the EP. The political groups in the EP present differences and similarities between and within them, namely on issues of gender equality (Berthet, 2022). After elections, there is an expected change in the composition of the EP due to new MEPs being elected, which can have implications on the discussion of (and the discourse on) certain issues (Sundin, 2023). The variables affecting MEPs opinions and votes are extensive. Some of the main variables observed in the academia are their European party group affiliation, their national party affiliation, their national affiliation, their nation's approach on the issue, their personal attitude towards the issue, the degree of morality involved in the issue, and many more (Larsson, 2023; Oliveira et al, 2023).

In relation to the morality and variability of opinions, discourse studies draw attention to the phenomenon of polarization. Giuseppe Balirano and Rodrigo Borba (2021) maintain that the public sphere is shaped by the existence of dichotomous discourses that become polarized. Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo (2021) point out the same thing, and together with the undermining of inclusiveness and participation of certain communities or opposing narratives, these constitute key challenges to democratic practices in the EP.

More recent studies suggest that right-wing discourses have a key role in polarization, and there are currently a lot of research on these discourses in the EU (see Balirano and Borba, 2021; Ahola, 2014; Coutinho, 2023). On the topic of gender equality, right-wing discourse has been observed to strengthen ideals of the nuclear "traditional" family and the nation, as well as the "natural difference" between the sexes and the gender binary (Balirano and Borba, 2021; Bartłomiejczyk, 2023). Some other studies of discourse in the European Parliament focus on the

[6] A clear example of the lack of unanimity in the European Parliament (and in the EU in general) proves to be the recurrent use of the subsidiarity principle on issues related to "common EU values" (Berthet, 2022). Some examples are LGBTQI+ rights, gender equality, migration flows and asylum, and education curricula.

democratic crisis (see Karv, 2012; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021; Meszner, 2021), the LGBTQI+ community and their rights (see Ottenhof, 2023), racism (see Bartłomiejczyk, 2020), the Muslim migrant community (see Sanchez, 2020), the European identity (see Rivas, 2023), and gender equality among many others (see Montoya, 2013; Berthet, 2022; Bartłomiejczyk, 2023).

Before presenting some research on gender equality in the European Parliament, I would like to draw attention to the importance of analyzing gender. Many academics point out the deconstruction of gender as a useful tool for analysis. Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo (2017) use it to observe how it is continuously contested and constructed in political debates. Also within politics, Valentine Berthet (2022) uses it to examine the processes that maintain and reproduce gendered inequalities through discourse. Most gender discourse researchers agree on the existence of social assumptions and hegemonic power relations that come from the gender binary, which highlights the importance of using gender as a tool for research.

Michelle Lazar (2005, 2014) studies and reveals the effectiveness of hegemonic gender inequalities. She points out that gender asymmetries are materially and symbolically enacted, which means that they can be explicit but also implicit and nuanced in some contexts. The long-standing nature of asymmetric gender norms has made these even more complex and subtle, especially considering how they can be observed in almost every aspect of modern society. Also, Lazar goes a step further and highlights how hegemonic and cognitive these norms are that, firstly, both men and women are accomplices to it; secondly, it seems largely consensual and acceptable to most; and finally, there is a general reluctance to identify the patriarchy and gender issues as existing in one's community or even as personally relevant.

A very interesting study by Magdalena Bartłomiejczyk (2023) focuses on the role of interpreters in the mitigation of sexist discourse in the European Parliament. Meanwhile raising awareness about the difference between hostile and benevolent sexism (see Mastari, Spruyt and Siongers, 2019) and acknowledging a certain

degree of sexism embedded in languages that possess a grammatical gender (see Mills, 2008), Bartłomiejczyk observes the different strategies that EP interpreters use when facing sexist comments by the MEPs. These range from toning it down to avoid spreading harmful ideology to highlighting the MEPs sexist views to call them out. Having conducted similar research on other issues like racism or Euroscepticism (see Bartłomiejczyk, 2020 and 2022), through this study she concludes that sexism is more prone to mitigation by interpreters in the EP, which might be related to the status of sexism as a least mainstream ideology in comparison with other ones like for instance racism.

Some studies on discourse and gender show various forms of othering, ideologies, and stereotypes about diverse identities but especially women (Nartey, 2021). The gendered discourse entails a hierarchical difference of superior/inferior between men and women, within men and within women (McLaughlin, 1991), the universalization and essentialization of the categories of 'man' and 'woman' (Lazar, 2005), and the association of women to danger, unpredictability, weakness, dependency, emotions (Gatrell, 2010; Heathy, 2020). Relevant to mention is the role of lesbian and gay studies and queer theory, and transgender and third genders studies on the advancement of these studies through the questioning of gender and the heterosexual and binary gender matrix, the essentialization of gender, and the broadening of topics that are related to this issue[7] (Krylova, 2016).

Various studies also show the consequences of gender power differentials and discourse. Over three decades, many feminist scholars have been arguing about the way in which women are subject to social and medical control because of this (Young, 2005; Gatrell, 2010). The imposition of gendered roles limits personal autonomy, enforces stereotypical conducts, and harms the pursuit of gender equality (Roka, 2025). And this differential treatment has material and phenomenological consequences which are not only harmful but oppressive for diverse groups of women and men (Lazar, 2005; Ayala and Vasilyeva, 2015).

[7] This influence will not be further explored because the thematic scope of this study does not need a further explanation of this, however, it is very important to highlight the influence of queer studies on gender studies.

Emanuela Lombardo and Petra Meier (2008) present a key study on the evolution on the framing of gender equality in the European Union. They point out how there is a shift in EU gender equality policy of concepts and agendas in the 21st century. The shift in concepts corresponds to the consideration of diverse issues like equal opportunities, positive action and gender mainstreaming into gender equality, which entails the broadening of gender equality to all areas beyond the labor market (Lombardo and Meier, 2008). The shift in agendas corresponds to gender mainstreaming, defined by the Council of Europe as acknowledging "different needs and living conditions and circumstances" of women and men with the aim of solving "-sometimes hidden- gender inequalities" by "integrating a gender equality perspective at all stages" (Council of Europe, n.d.). However, they point out how, although it has meant the incorporation of equal opportunities in EU policies, it fails to make a deeper analysis of gender equality where questioning male standards, norms and behavior should take place (Lombardo and Meier, 2008). A clear example for this is how "family policies" are often framed as an issue in the organization of citizenship, for instance, in how women cannot face a proper balance between work and family life, the common solution to which is putting in question the lack of infrastructure and care facilities, without considering the gender perspective behind the unequal distribution of tasks in the domestic sphere, the gendered relations between women and men, and often other intersectional structural inequalities around it (Lombardo and Meier, 2008).

The fight for gender equality being a key point of EU politics has entailed the framing of violence against women[8] inside its scope and in relation to a human rights issue as well (Montoya, 2013). Despite the good intention behind the focus of gender equality on "violence against women" within the international community, some scholars point out the theoretical shift from a broader encompassing concept of gender –which can include the power relations between them, and go beyond the traditional cisgender binary– to women, as an essentialized homogenous group (Montoya, 2013; Berthet, 2022). This is not a coincidence. In fact, it is very much in

[8] Violence against women is understood as the forms of violence that affect women as a group (Berthet, 2022).

tune with the renewed second-wave feminist discourse that has spread through many political sites, now supported by neoliberal feminism, feminism of cisness –a known example of this being the Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist movement (TERFs), discursive exoduses from postfeminism, and white feminism (Lewis, 2025; Pető, Thissen, and Clavaud, 2025).

Another example of this tendency towards focusing on an all-encompassing understanding of women and leaving behind other gender implications can also be observed in the comfortable adherence to "violence against women" but the still contested debate on the concept of "gendered violence" or "gender-based violence" (Berthet, 2022). It has been observed how the EU uses technocratic and depoliticized terminology to approach many gender equality issues, which could be due to the diverse ideologies and stances on their importance inside the EU institutions. However, this entails a weakening of its force in frameworks and discourses. Valentine Berthet (2022) provides two clear examples of this. On the one hand, the use of "abortion politics" instead of "abortion rights", and on the other hand, the use of bodily "autonomy", "integrity", or even "reproductive rights" instead of "bodily rights", which allows the reframing of the issue according to a particular context or purpose.

As Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo (2021) recurrently argue, this is very common in EU gender equality politics which frequently polarize the EP, and then the proposed measures can get easily sidelined. Other authors also agree on this political limitedness. Related to this, Celeste Montoya (2013) lists the lack of political will or ability to enact new legislation, the lack of state response, the ineffective measures put in place, or how states will engage in or allow oppressive practices, as things to consider when measuring the extent to which meaningful change has actually occurred. Furthermore, many feminist perspectives on the law aim to deconstruct common admiration for enacting new legislation as the divine solution to issues, by raising awareness of context, resistance, and actors in the policy-making process, and its power to regulate, normalize, and produce specific identities (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular 2008, 138). In the end, changing actual

practices and structural inequalities has been proved to be a slow and difficult process (Montoya, 2013).

Another fault for the difficulty for enacting measures to advance gender equality can be seen on institutions. As noted by gender scholars, the topic of gender equality gathers a lot of support and resistance inside a single institution as well as in a societal context (Montoya, 2013). On the one hand, the European Parliament is an institution that is placed within a transnational context like the EU and the United Nations, for instance; a broader ensemble of EU institutions like the European Commission, the EP working groups, the Council of Europe, and many more; and a huge diversity of advocates and actors like MEPs, political groups, NGOs and civil society organizations that also take part in some initiatives (Montoya, 2013). Therefore, the EP is not to be considered as a neutral actor, but a mix of all the actors that play a role in any way in it, as well as the discursive practices that are at play inside it (Berthet, 2022). Valentine Berthet (2022) points out the importance of acknowledging the internal unequal gender practices that are reproduced within each EU institution to be aware of the capacity or ability of these to deliver effective and progressive policies. An example she offers is about sexual harassment in the workplace, which is something that happens in all workplaces and of course the EP is just another more; so when processes are in place trying to deliver policies on that, it is wise not to idealize the EP as a perfect institution free of common unequal and harmful internal dynamics or practices, and understand that, in a way, it is a workplace just like any other.

Some of the observed gendered dynamics in the EP include everyday parliamentary practices as well as within political parties (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). A growing body of literature focusing on discourses describe the EP as a more hostile context for advancing gender equality due to these gendered practices inside the institution in addition to the internal tensions and ideological contradictions within its members (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021; Berthet, 2022). Valentine Berthet (2022) points out how opposition to gender equality has appeared and spread across the EU. Some scholars have uncovered diverse strategies of opposition by anti-gender actors and proved that their presence influences debates

on gender equality (Berthet, 2022). Berthet highlights how the inconsistency within political groups to support gender equality plus the presence of anti-gender actors makes the advancement of gender equality a non-unanimous nor easy process in the EU. This is a great input which helps us deconstruct the image of gender equality as a shared EU value and of the EP as a unified actor for its advancement.

Related to anti-gender actors, the far-right is another relevant topic of studies on opposition to gender equality policy. As Giuseppe Balirano and Rodrigo Borba (2021) point out in their study on the anti-gender discourse of the far-right, these groups and movements across the globe share diverse but identifiable discursive products. This ideology relies in an immutable biology-driven and binary understanding of gender and sexuality based on well-established hierarchical roles for men and women, where transgressive identities like homosexual, transgender and queer people have no place (Balirano and Borba, 2021). It defends gendered notions of masculinity and femininity to maintain traditional heteronormative family dynamics and values. Right-wing discourse shapes the public opinion and policy debates against the advancement of gender equality, the rights of sexual minorities, trans rights, and equal participation rights, as well as those on immigration, social protection and even constitutional reform (Balirano and Borba, 2021; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021). Thus, as all these scholars show, the EP is a place for policy formation towards equality in all senses, but it is also a place of gendered violence and resistance to transgressive identities to the traditional cisgender heterosexual reproductive value system.

Prostitution

Prostitution presents a high level of difficulty of accessing exact numbers and primary sources due to its illegal and secretive statues, but still, it encompasses a big and still growing body of literature. Studies on prostitution have been made within many disciplines, namely sociological, legal, health and feminist research (Gatrell, 2010). The main focuses have been the analysis of diverse legal approaches and their effectiveness, the conditions and identities of sex workers and/or clients, national case studies, social context analysis of views and beliefs on

prostitution, causes and consequences of being involved in the trade, and its relation to human trafficking (Sundin, 2023).

Most of the scholars agree on the fact that prostitution occupies a strong ideological dimension connected to personal moral values (Rubio, 2021). There are different stances on prostitution, which I have explained above (page 7), and one issue in the clash can be found in the discursive practices. Due to the polarization of arguments on this topic and the spread of abolitionist ideas in political institutions, at least in the case of the EU, the abolitionist view can be seen claiming certain arguments which have been solidified as truths and, thus, the sex work positive movement has been falsely placed on the opposing side of such stances (Sundin, 2023). This is very visible in the fight against sexual trafficking, which anti-sex movements approach together with prostitution, and sex work positive movements do not relate it to sex work. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the latter does not care about tackling sexual trafficking, but it can be perceived like this because they do not recurrently address it when talking about sex work, because they see it as two different phenomena. This vision can be easily dismounted by the participation of sex work positive organizations in initiatives to tackle human trafficking for sexual exploitation (see La Strada International, n.d.).

On the topic of the main causes observed leading people to join the sex trade are poverty and scarcity, homelessness, abuse, drug addictions, unfavorable family background, and enjoyment (Qayyum et al., 2013; Gerassi, 2015; Pirmohammadi, 2025). Also, Joan A. Reid (2012), on a more psychological analysis of the causes, observed that harmful informal social control processes during childhood and adolescence can lead to a need for acceptance and love which, combined with the other already-mentioned causes, can easily result in a person's entry into the sex industry, especially in the case of young girls.

A key issue approached in studies on prostitution is the stigmatization of people in the trade. Many scholars agree that they are excluded from political and social life, which clearly has very harmful effects on their living and working conditions and safety (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008; Oliveira et al., 2023).

Many workers recognize the inability of participating normally in social gatherings due to stigma (Qayyum et al., 2013). Some of the effects on the workers' mental health are stress, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, depersonalization, feelings of guilt and low self-esteem; stigmatization puts them in a vulnerable position which facilitates their abuse (Oliveira et al., 2023)

Some scholars raise concerns on the difficulty of maintaining a work-life balance in the sex trade. It is often the case that some women may not be in an ideal workplace and are perhaps being exploited and trying to find a better workplace or change job sectors which can be difficult when having unfavorable familiar situations, like abusive partners, or dependents, like children or elderly (Gatrell, 2010).

Another issue that is often mentioned together with prostitution is human trafficking. Human trafficking for sexual exploitation is a key issue for the EU, and criminalizing stances on prostitution recurrently refer to this crime (Larsson, 2023). Beyond personal stances on the interconnectedness between prostitution and human trafficking, there is a general concern that a considerable number of prostitutes have been trafficked into it (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008). Some scholars point at discriminatory immigration policies and welfare systems to explain the issue (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008). Some scholars also point out that trying to tackle this issue has led to misinformed anti-trafficking and prostitution policies which are putting sex workers in a harmful position, meanwhile already trying to fight exploitation and human trafficking inside the trade themselves (Ferčíková, 2024).

On a legal level, each type of regulation of prostitution emphasizes different aspects of the trade, and that has different impacts on the health, safety, and living and working conditions of sex workers (Oliveira et al., 2023). With the advancement of abolitionist beliefs in the EU, many studies have been and are being done on the criminalization of sex work (Rubio, 2021). The criminalization of prostitution denies any legal protection of their work conditions, and together with the stigma associated with prostitution, the possibilities of physical and/or sexual violence by

clients or the police are way higher (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008; Oliveira et al., 2023). In the face of their 'protection', they are less likely to report abuse or exploitation, and they are likely to have little or mostly negative encounters with the police (Ferčíková, 2024). In most cases, the criminalization of prostitution understands all prostitutes as victims which justifies the governmental actors' excessive control on their bodies and actions (Gatrell, 2010). Due to their disadvantaged legal and social position, their range of options in work-life decisions are limited in comparison with workers in any other occupation (Gatrell, 2010). By denying some basic rights to prostitutes in comparison with other citizens, they are left in a form of 'bare life' where they are simultaneously excluded from the law and subject to its power (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008).

Stewart Cunningham (2016) presents a very interesting study on the concept of 'dignity' in sex work discourse. He observes how legal talks on prostitution depict commercial sex as incompatible with 'human dignity', something intrinsical to being human but which one can quickly observe to be conditional, unequal, and hierarchical. Cunningham complains about how stripping sex work off human dignity only perpetuates the workers' dehumanization, and how they are only able to gain a 'life of dignity' if rescued and rehabilitated out of the trade.

Feminist gender scholars have observed how the evolution in debates on prostitution has entailed a gendering of the concept. Although it is true that more women participate in prostitution than men, and changes and events in the trade usually affect women more harshly than men, it is not helpful to understand all prostitutes as women (Gatrell, 2010). Basic assumptions behind this are the activeness of male sexuality and the passiveness of the female one, just like it happens with agency (Outshoorn, 2001; Cunningham, 2016). From the right-wing movement, prostitution is believed to endanger the foundations of the family and society (Pirmohammadi, 2025). As Joyce Outshoorn (2001) explains, general stances on the legalization of sex work approached it as a gender-neutral event, and it was through feminist stances against prostitution focusing on the gendered effects that it evolved into a general understanding of prostitution as a form of

violence against women, which has impaired the consideration of diverse identities in the trade.

Feminist research has also had a lot to say about the gendered nature of agency, understood as the ability of a person to act independently despite structural and social constraints, and prostitution provides an optimal topic to observe it (Gatrell, 2010). On the one hand, abolitionist stances on prostitution view all prostitutes as victims and limit the agency and autonomy of individual prostitutes by generalizing to more structural aspects (Outshoorn, 2001; Sundin, 2023; Ferčíková, 2024). On the other hand, sex work positive stances view prostitutes as people with their agency who actively decide to enter a contract in the trade[9] (Outshoorn, 2001).

Caroline Gatrell (2010) published a journal article on agency in sex-work and made some remarkable observations on the topic. Firstly, it is clear that in the case of victims of sexual exploitation, they have little to no agency in setting rules and boundaries in relation to their bodies. Secondly, occupational segregation and the gender pay gap are notable motives affecting women's agency when deciding to participate in the trade. Thirdly, women prostitutes' agency faces higher constraints and judgement than with their men fellows, just like in any other occupation. Lastly, even in prostitution legislation, male clients often have more agency and freedom than sex workers do.

With its origin tracing back to the nineteenth century, the victimization of prostitutes and women depicts them as unable to understand their situation and in need to be rescued and rehabilitated (McLaughlin, 1991; Ferčíková, 2024). A relevant observation in this is the common association of women with children and girls victim of sexual exploitation, which arguably infantilizes women, essentializes women's experiences, and stereotypes women and children (Ferčíková, 2024). This can be observed on many debates when repeatedly mentioning "women and girls"

[9] Some authors agree that sex workers are more capable of freely accessing social and health services when their agency is recognised rather than when being seen and treated as powerless victims (Gatrell, 2010).

or “women and children” in general statements on sexual exploitation. On the effects of victimization, some authors state that, on the one hand, the victimization of certain people, collectives and situations can enhance the chances of someone actually entering the trade (Reid, 2012; Gerassi, 2015). On the other hand, the victimization of prostitutes contributes to further marginalization and stigmatization of the collective (Ferčíková, 2024).

On a deeper take, critics argue that the dichotomic essentialization of everyone in the trade, as either victims of sex trafficking or fully agentic and liberated sex workers, creates harmful barriers for the law and social services to be able to help victims of exploitation or to create proper policy on sex work (Gerassi, 2015). When all victims are expected to lack any type of liberty or sense of control and all agentic workers are expected to be fully assertive and in control, many nuanced experiences in the trade or in sexual exploitation environments are lost and no proper solutions can be given to them.

Looking back in time, the censure of ‘whoredom’ and prostitution in public and visible spaces has always been important for states (Hubbard, 2004; Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008). From the eighteenth century onwards, prostitution became a distinctive social problem (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008); the image of the prostitute was that of deviance, disease or sexual deprivation in need of control (Hubbard, Matthews and Scoular, 2008; Gatrell, 2010). From the nineteenth century onwards, the prostitute was no longer an active threat but a fallen woman, a victim (McLaughlin, 1991).

Women have always been confined to the private sphere and to the institution of the family, but still, their bodies were understood as dangerous (McLaughlin, 1991; Gatrell, 2010). The fears of a liberated female sexuality, and prostitution, are seen to threaten family and society values, therefore, this sexual conduct is placed at the opposite side of the ‘normal’ and acceptable understanding of sex, which is as a reproductive means (McLaughlin, 1991; Hubbard, 2004). Sex beyond reproduction was never understood, especially in connection with religion and in the case of women, that is why when it was the case of men, their ‘out of control’

sexuality was removed from any agency and was redirected into a sin, the dangerous women's bodies and prostitution, who are then the guilty temptations (McLaughlin, 1991).

Lisa McLaughlin (1991) presented a study on discourses of prostitution and sexuality, and she makes a key observation of the othering nature of prostitution discourse. The 'othering' effect is built through the establishment of the 'good' and everything else is envisioned in the 'bad' or vice versa. She highlights the oppressing belief that women have no sexual desire or satisfaction and are only interested in sex to build a family or to satisfy their male partner, this is the idea of a 'respectable' woman that functions in the society. That is why the image of the prostitute corresponds to deviance and sexual deprivation, in the case of women, which has only helped deny agency and female sexuality, essentialize prostitution, and to give it this negative connotation to anything that resembles it. In international talks, commercial sex is associated with the lowest end of the social spectrum, and prostitution is stripped of the concept of 'dignity' by collecting all the fears and shames of sex (Hubbard, 2004; Cunningham, 2016).

Study

The study began with a three-read process. A first read to get familiar with the content and to provide translations with online platforms like DeepL, ChatGPT, and Google Translate to those interventions that were any language other than English or Spanish. The second read consisted of reading from beginning to end the translated script to acquire a general overview of the conversation meanwhile detecting the recurring and common themes that were mentioned, which were used to create a table for the thematic analysis, the results of which will be presented below.

Then, after conducting a third read of the materials, and for the feminist critical discourse analysis, the most relevant and notable themes and comments of the first analysis will be discussed and contrasted with previous literature on prostitution and gender discourse. This will provide the answer to this thesis' research question: "How is gender understood by the members of the European Parliament in their discussions on prostitution?"

Thematic Analysis

One of the themes of the analysis was the category of "woman"/ "women". It is noticeable how, in 2014 as well as in 2023, women per se are not explicitly talked about that much. In 2014, some members of the European Parliament make comments in favor of women's agency by stating their right to do what they want with their bodies and complain about the victimization of women as a whole. Nevertheless, in both discussions, women are referred to as victims and in need of protection and education to prevent their capture/ entrance into prostitution.

Another barely mentioned theme is "man"/ "men". In 2014, men are pictured as being most clients, but a MEP mentions that men are also prostitutes. Still, in 2023, men are only referred to as sex buyers and as educated and raised to become perpetrators.

The theme of “sex worker” / “sex workers” have been intertwined with “sex workers’ needs” both in the discussions as well as here in the analysis. In 2014, there is a vague mention of how many do it by their own free will, and some needs of them being the recognition of the social and work rights, adequate duties and protections, their empowerment and healthcare. In 2023, there are two things worth mentioning. On the one hand, the official rapporteur of the report that led to the discussion and resolution in the EP, Maria Noichl, recognizes the existence of a ‘small group’ of women who participate in sex work because of free choice, however, she still argues throughout her other interventions and in the report that prostitution should be abolished in the EU and all prostitutes liberated from this form of violence. I would argue that this is a remarkable take because it recognizes the agency of certain workers and yet it explicitly denies them this freedom. On the other hand, the sex workers’ needs that are mentioned and demanded to be taken care of or considered are more concrete in the second debate where they mention access to justice, social and labor protection, clear legal statuses, right to privacy and digital rights, safeguarding the welfare, self-determination and self-organization, healthcare, housing, respect, and equal treatment in society.

“Sex work” is only explicitly addressed by one MEP in 2014, who defines it as resulting from active individual adults’ decisions. Still, stinging definitions of what work is, or comments about selling sex, sexual relations and women’s dignity are made in both debates. In 2014, one MEP states that work is a source of individual fulfillment, intimacy and dignity are key aspects of sex, and selling sex cannot be a source of individual fulfillment. In 2023, some MEPs mention that sexual relations cannot be a work contract and disregard sex workers’ agency by stating that even with consent it simply cannot be. Also, another MEP makes a very moral comment where she states that sex goes hand-in-hand with love and selling sex belittles the woman, assuming a woman is the seller.

The definition of a theme as “prostitute” / “woman engaging in prostitution” already tells a lot about the range of comments made on it. In 2014, prostitutes are equaled to victims of trafficking and mostly women; other comments go around drug and substance abuse habits, victims of sexual abuse, with difficult

backgrounds, exploited by pimps, and in economic need. In 2023, prostitutes are also mostly women in a vulnerable position and without resources to exit, trapped in exploitation and poverty, without hope or choice; this time, four MEPs mention diverse identities of prostitutes as part of the LGBTQI+ community or with a migrant background. In general, 'women and children' is a very common expression to refer to the people victim of prostitution, and despite mentioning prostitutes with other identities as well, in most of the interventions, MEPs talk about cisgender female prostitutes.

"Prostitution" is a theme with plenty of comments and nuances. Common to both debates are the views on prostitution as in direct connection with human trafficking, a degradation of human dignity, a form of violence against women, treating human beings as commodities, a cause of/ enhancing gender inequality, a cross-border EU issue, a violation of women's rights and a consequence of capitalism. Notable here to mention is how some of these are not addressed when mentioning solutions or the next steps that should be taken by the EU. In 2014, prostitution is also related to health issues, sexual slavery, and a public moral problem. In 2023, it is also claimed as not a choice, harmful to societies and families and a racist, sexist, patriarchal institution.

The main common key priority between 2014 and 2023 is the need for real help to exit prostitution, with an emphasis on offering concrete alternatives to the prostitutes in the latter debate. Other recurrent themes are the reduction of demand, the dismantling of criminal networks of organized crime and trafficking, and prostitutes' protection. In 2014, some interesting points are raised like the use of existing national and European laws that are already in place to stop sexual trafficking, the discouraging of sex tourism, the prosecution of offenders and pimps, and the adequate training of police and judicial personnel to lead with sexual exploitation cases. In 2023, emphasis is given to combating all types of violence against women to protect women's rights, giving access to income, training and jobs for people exiting the trade, and fighting against stigmatization. Overall, a strict focus on women prostitutes and prostitution equaling sexual exploitation and trafficking can be sensed in most of these claims.

There are other aspects that are mentioned by some MEPs in these debates which I found very interesting. In 2014, an MEP highlighted the Nordic model as the best solution to protect women's dignity, another MEP criticized how men already look at women as objects for sex beyond the trade, and another one pointed out at the existence of sex workers also beyond a limited economic background. In 2023, some MEPs mentioned the need for improvement of immigration policies, the need to safeguard women's dignity, the need for a Europe-wide minimum income to avoid poverty and entry into prostitution, and the relation of prostitution with family law.

Complains on the reports presented in the debates are commonly centered around the fact that no distinction is made between agentic sex work and sexual exploitation. Moreover, in the latest debate, Karen Melchior, a MEP from Renew Europe, called out the report for missing the participation of sex work positive voices or civil society organizations, as well as a biased character with the idealization of abolitionist stances and not considering both.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Here I will present the main issues observed in the debates held on the European Parliament that lead to the EP resolution of 26 February 2014 on *sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality* (2013/2103(INI)), and the EP resolution of 14 September 2023 on *the regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women's rights (*2022/2139(INI)). This section presents the ways in which gender is understood by the members of the European Parliament in the abovementioned discussions.

Gendering

One of the most notable observations throughout both debates is how most of the members of the European Parliament mention how many prostitutes are women. This may be a fact, despite it being a difficult sector to get data from, however, beyond this statement, prostitutes are considered women in most of the interventions afterwards. It is not only presenting data, but MEPs focus on this single identity when making general statements about prostitution. A clear example of this

is how almost all MEPs state that prostitution is a form of gender violence and against gender equality, which could be true if the prostitute is always understood as a woman, and the client as a man. This is something also visible in the thematic analysis when talking about men as clients and perpetrators. As Michele Lazar (2005) points out, speaking of 'women' and 'men' in universal essentializing terms is dangerous for the material and phenomenological consequences that debates and frameworks enacted may have on the invisible and diverse realities inside these categories in specific societies.

"Protecting women who are forced into prostitution is an important task for us. To this end I have voted in favour of this report in order to ensure that no abuse is allowed of women who are forced to sell themselves for money."

Marlene Mizzi, from Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, in 2014

This intervention by Marlene Mizzi is a clear example of how prostitution and the prostitute is a women's issue for the European Parliament and its members[10]. They are clearly not considering how debating and voting on prostitution affects many other identities and practices beyond that of the cisgender woman. It makes sense, then, how queer organizations like the European region of International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe) and Transgender Europe make the effort of recognizing sex work as a multigendered phenomenon, since that is clearly not visible in the European Parliament (Ferčíková, 2024).

Following the gendering of the prostitute, the woman prostitute is also not any woman. Without making distinctions or giving importance to the diverse realities and identities of women in prostitution, the image of the prostitute is that of a white cisgender heterosexual woman. No single member of the EP takes a full sentence to bring awareness about racialized women engaging in prostitution, transgender people, non-heterosexual relations, or simply how any non-cisgender and heterosexual sex worker could be victim of hate-crimes in the trade. This has already been observed by Emanuela Lombardo and Petra Meier (2008) in their study on the

[10] Some of the next quotes of this section are also an example of this focus on prostitution and women.

framing of gender equality in the European Union, where they see no reference to race, class, ability, sexual preference, ethnicity and other structural inequalities in these matters.

Without taking away due recognition, some MEPs do mention it. In 2014, only one MEP makes a comment of the possible migrant background of some prostitutes and in 2023, four MEPs also mention the LGBTQI+ community being also in the trade, or refugees and migrants. Like abovementioned with the case of woman and prostitute, these comments do not go beyond a simple observation without any other reflection on how these diverse social experiences may have harsher or simply different effects on their experience in the sex trade.

Dealing with these short-sighted considerations on gender equality issues is one of the main aims of many feminist and gender scholars. Also, with the given importance to gender mainstreaming in the EU, a deeper awareness of social markers in diverse issues should be expected (Lombardo and Meier, 2008). Although they do realize that prostitution may have gendered effects in the case of white cisgender women, they do not go a step beyond and consider other social categories that are also oppressed in society in general and which are also taking part in prostitution.

From the opposing side, the side of the clientele and pimps, men are assigned this role, and it is also not considered how other people may also be part of these and may help the functioning of prostitution. Perhaps other women could be helping in the control and manipulation of prostitutes, just like women are also complicit in the reproducing of gender norms and discourses (Lazar, 2005). By simply assigning the fault to men and not going beyond that statement, the taken-for-granted hegemonic relations of domination and subordination behind the internalization of gender norms can be mistaken for a trend of men feeling superior to women in a specific period (Lazar, 2005). This can obscure the systematic nature of this long-standing oppressive social dynamics through which society has always been revolving against women, racialized people, ethnic minorities, diverse religions, and else.

Othering

Previous studies on sexuality and sex work discourse point at the moral dichotomous understanding of "good" versus "bad" woman or sex. Studies like the one by Lisa McLaughlin (1991) or Stewart Cunningham (2016), in tune with much feminist scholarship, explain that the binary division of certain values to man or woman also happens within these categories, as well as many others of course. As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, I approach gender and gender roles as a set of actions and behaviors that are socially assigned to the binary division of sex, which are reproduced in many diverse aspects of society and constantly being punished if transgressed. Inside the gender of woman there are certain conducts which are socially accepted and some which are not, and what these authors explain is a process known as 'othering' which assigns negative baggage to the transgression of the norm by individuals inside the category. In the case of women, it creates the image of the 'good woman' and the 'bad woman', where the 'good woman' is that who respects and reproduces the acceptable social conducts of womanhood, traditionally established as being delicate, quiet, sensitive, feminine, and romantic, a mother or a girlfriend in relation to men. In terms of sexuality, the 'good woman' is not bothered by sex for passion and enjoyment, but dignified by her virginity, and her passive sexuality, only interested in satisfying her cisgender male partner or building a family (Cunningham, 2016). Contrary to this, a woman who has an active sexual conduct, is single, and disinterested in a romantic relationship or forming a family and bearing children is a 'bad woman' –or a 'whore'[11]– with conducts that supposedly threaten the institution of the family and society's functioning (McLaughlin, 1991; Cunningham, 2016).

Stewart Cunningham (2016) observed how these opposite images are broadcast in the political arena with the concept of 'dignity'. Although dignity is understood to represent inherent inner worth of human beings, he points out that,

[11] Let me remind you how this word has been and still is being used to insult those people who have an active sexual life, usually with different partners, clearly denoting this intolerance towards any sexual conduct beyond reproductive sex. It is also used by sex workers and feminists to retake the power from the Word and use it with an empowering and assertive intention.

in the case of prostitution and women's sexuality in general, it is used to shame and limit women's sexual conducts by dignifying the sexual act with a deeper emotional connection based on love[12], and shaming –and fearing– any other type of sex. Multiple actors and institutions have been using this discourse of sex, and the European Parliament is one of them. Throughout both debates analyzed in this study, the idea of dignity is frequently approached by many members of the European Parliament. Two times to refer to the unchangeable nature of each person's dignity despite what they may choose as their occupation, but many more to state something in the opposite direction:

"Quem considera que uma mulher que vende a sua intimidade e a sua dignidade para a satisfação sexual do homem comprador se sente realizada tem que estar equivocado."
Anyone who thinks that a woman who sells her intimacy and dignity for the sexual gratification of a male buyer feels fulfilled is mistaken.

Inês Cristina Zuber, from the Left (European United Left/ the Nordic Green Left), in 2014's debate

"(...) Si tratta di una vera e propria forma di violenza contro le donne e di una violazione della dignità umana e della parità di genere. (...)"
This is a real form of violence against women and a violation of human dignity and gender equality.

Sergio Paolo Francesco Silvestris, from the European People's Party Group, in 2014's debate

"(...) A prostituição não é uma escolha nem uma inevitabilidade. É violência, exploração e uma forma de escravatura que atenta contra o corpo e a dignidade das mulheres, correspondendo a uma brutal violação dos direitos humanos. (...)"
Prostitution is neither a choice nor an inevitability. It is violence, exploitation, and a form of slavery that attacks the bodies and dignity of women, corresponding to a brutal violation of human rights.

Sandra Pereira, from the Left, in 2023's debate

"(...) We must give the women in prostitution the opportunity to achieve a life with dignity and where their rights are actually respected."

Frances Fitzgerald, from the European People's Party Group, in 2023's debate

As you can see in these quotes from the two debates, dignity appears in relation to the action of actively selling sex. Prostitution appears to be "women (...)

[12] This is a controversial issue with sex linked with homonationalism, which is being actively contested by the queer community because of the acceptance of homosexuality through the motto 'Love is love', which again only accepts homosexuality as long as it reproduces traditional social institutions like the family, marriage, and kids.

selling dignity", "a violation of human dignity", and "an attack on the dignity of women", meanwhile getting out of prostitution is an "opportunity to achieve a life with dignity". Since there are people in the industry who have chosen to be part of it and that it is legal in many European Union member states, it is a disrespect and an attack to sex workers to say that they lose their dignity because of their occupation. Furthermore, continuing with the previous idea of gendering prostitution and the prostitute, talks on dignity on prostitutes are equal to talks on dignity on women, since that is all that this issue is revolving around. Therefore, for many members of the European Parliament, a woman choosing to live their life however they want and use their body for whatever they want in relation to their active and open sexual practices implies a dehumanizing loss of dignity as a human being. This is very much in tune with the issue of traditional gender roles with women who have an active sexual life, the 'bad women', the whores.

Here, I would like to point out how most of these members of the European Parliament are not really including understandings about sex work and agentic sex workers in their speeches, but they are thinking about prostitution as equal to trafficking for sexual exploitation, or just women who choose this occupation because society has 'brain-washed' them into thinking it is as respectable as any other job, when in their eyes it actually is not. Taking this into account, the reflection goes even deeper and one realizes that when they talk about prostitutes, they are mainly talking about women who are victim to sexual exploitation or to 'sexual liberation'. This brings us to the observation that their issue is clearly not that women want money for sexual services, but, for them, the sexual conduct itself is not compatible with human dignity. Again, the dignity problem lies in the idea of a woman having sexual relationships with more than one partner or without the intent of getting pregnant, willingly or forced.

Victimization

Following with the idea of sexual exploitation, the abolitionist trend on prostitution through gender equality policy in the European Parliament has led to equate prostitution with sexual exploitation, the prostitute with a woman, and, thus,

the woman with a victim. This is an association explicitly made by some members of the European Parliament, and here is an example:

> *"(...) A perspetiva abolicionista, em grande parte defendida neste relatório, considera a mulher uma vítima a quem o Estado deve proteger, acompanhar e integrar, (...)"*
> *The abolitionist perspective, largely defended in this report, considers women to be victims whom the state must protect, support, and integrate.*
>
> Inês Cristina Zuber, from the Left, in 2014's debate

Just like in many other studies of sexuality or prostitution discourse, women are perceived as exploited victims in need of protection and rescue (Outshoorn, 2001; Gatrell, 2010; Ferčíková, 2024). Women are powerless victims of society as long as we deny their agency and autonomy[13] (Sundin, 2023; Ferčíková, 2024). On the one hand, women who have been trafficked or forced into prostitution are victims of human trafficking and/or sexual exploitation, but, on the other hand, women who choose this occupation are also victims of a patriarchal system that makes them think that it is empowering.

Denying the dignity of women who decide to have an active sexual life impedes the capability to understand women as agentic, because why would a woman decide to purposely harm her dignity? Perhaps, women (and any other individual) who have chosen this occupation and still decide to stay voluntarily do not see the loss of dignity, because maybe there isn't. Perhaps these sex workers simply chose this occupation and are able to live an average life, without accounting for all the other possible social oppressions particular to each individual. Perhaps these sex workers are only questioning their dignity when facing other people who do not respect their dignity and agency to be sex workers and stigmatize them as victims, criminals, and worth no respect. Perhaps a woman is unable to do what she wants with her body because society keeps claiming that if she has an active sexuality she is 'less of a respectable woman'. Unfortunately, these questions are not being addressed or presented in the European Parliament, and sex work positive

[13] Meanwhile this may seem to be a chance to bring attention to more structural aspects of oppression, we will see later in this section why the European Parliament fails to do that.

organizations and actors are not being included in the decision-making process on prostitution in the EU, the reports, the debates nor the final resolutions.

The same debates that equal prostitution with sexual trafficking and exploitation and deny agency to and victimize women, often relate them with girls or children. This happens frequently:

"(...) We also recognize that women and children do not end up in the prostitution market by their own choice. (...)"

Kristalina Georgieva, Member of the Commission, in 2014's debate

"(...) Bavíme se o velmi citlivém tématu ochrany žen a dětí a já bych si dovolil říct, že nesmíme zapomínat také na snahu zlepšit situaci těchto žen. (...)"
We are discussing the very sensitive issue of protecting women and children, and I would like to say that we must not forget our efforts to improve the situation of these women.

Stanislav Polčák, from the European People's Party Group, in 2023's debate

This can be problematic in the same way that it is problematic to assume all prostitutes are women. By equaling women and girls or children, you create a general category that misses out on very different realities and capacities as well as a lot of nuanced perspectives. In the case of girls and children, it is especially problematic because of the agency and age of consent. Nowadays, it is well known that girls and children, usually under eighteen years of age, but sometimes higher, are not considered to have consent yet because of their age and level of experience and awareness of how society affects individuals' decisions. By that same rule, children engaging in prostitution are victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation of minors which is punishable by many different charges, namely human trafficking, sexual exploitation of a child, sexual assault of a minor, and exploitation of minors. This is not what I am here to question obviously. But the fact that, when the members of the European Parliament talk about women and children all together, they compare the situation of a person who is not yet in the age of consent at all and is, thus, a victim of trafficking and sexual exploitation, with an adult woman who is in the age of consent, and again, maybe a victim of trafficking, but maybe just an agentic sex worker. This is again proof of the issue of equaling a prostitute with a victim of sexual exploitation in these debates.

"At a time when instances of human trafficking are soaring across Europe, and millions of women and girls continue to be sold into a life of sexual exploitation, I fully support the focus of this Report. (...)"

Diane Dodds, from Non-attached members, in 2014's debate

As Irena Ferčíková (2024) points out, the conflation with victims of trafficking and the association of women with girls and children leads to paternalistic and infantilizing policy, which obscures the diversity in women's experiences, infantilizes women and stereotypes women and children. As observed, this is the case of the European Parliament, where women are not considered as agentic through the victimization of women as a whole for their sexual conducts, without distinguishing between sexual exploitation or voluntarily prostitution, or even acknowledging the possibility of women willingly engaging in the trade. In the end, women's agency is not respected in these debates in the name of the 'patriarchy' or the system[14].

Men and the patriarchy

On the other side of the gender binary, men are a category barely approached in these debates. Only four members of the European Parliament make an explicit comment on the role of men in this issue and, although one does mention that men are also prostitutes, most of the interventions on this category are used to establish men as perpetrators, clients and pimps. In line with this image, some members of the EP refer to the patriarchy and gender roles as causes and actors in prostitution. Nevertheless, and as observed in other studies on the topic, no broader analysis or deeper focus appears to be made on this issue (Lombardo and Meier, 2008). Therefore, it can be said that the European Parliament puts more attention to the role of and consequences for women in prostitution, meanwhile avoiding any further reflection on the way that society is built and functioning affects women's participation in the industry. They are more worried about the 'bad woman' and her

[14] This is a particular case about women and sexuality, since this contempt is not applied to approach domestic violence and question the institution of marriage and family and the toll it has for many women, for instance.

dignity and behavior than the socially constructed practices that surround issues of sexuality and gender inequality.

Some members of the European Parliament mention the intertwining of the patriarchy, capitalism, sexism and racism found in prostitution, however, the overall solution for this is to offer exit strategies for women in prostitution. Four members of the European Parliament in 2023 point out the existence of laws against human trafficking for sexual exploitation at the EU level and call for these to be properly and strictly applied to be able to offer help to victims of sexual exploitation. Still, the resolution finds this solution insufficient and aims for the reduction of demand and the 'liberation' of women from prostitution in general. The issue I can observe here is how instead of focusing on applying efficient measures to tackle sexual trafficking in general, the European Parliament is focused on abolishing prostitution and not accepting its existence which leads to a strong discourse on 'saving' women and 'freeing' them; in other words, focusing on controlling women (Hubbard, 2004; Gatrell, 2010).

Limitations of the study

One of the possible limitations of this study is the language barrier. I am only fluent in English and Spanish, and many other languages are present in the analyzed debates, namely French, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, and more. I had to make use of online translating tools which probably do not allow me to perceive the full sculp or affect of the words and meanings of each intervention. Nevertheless, translated interventions still provided a lot of relevant data for both methods in the study.

Another possible limitation of this study consists of its modest scope. I did not aim to generalize about the European Parliament's stances, since as I explained before, it is not realistic to generalize about the EP due to its known internal conflict on many issues. The study also did not intend to generalize about the gender roles that are most present in all resolutions and debates of the EP. However, the results of the feminist critical discourse analysis present the gender notions that were most

visible in those specific debates. Still, many other authors could present their own take and bring up different ideas, but this is my take on gender in these debates.

Conclusion

The European Union is focused on the achievement of gender equality and the fight against violence against women. Gender equality has been established as part of EU values that shape the collective identity of the EU (Lombardo and Meier, 2008; Montoya, 2013; Rubio, 2021; Berthet, 2022). Still, plenty of scholars question the state of these shared values and highlight the importance of observing the internal differences on such topics to understand their actual level of unanimity inside EU institutions (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021; Berthet, 2022). Regarding gender equality, great advances have been made in the topic of prostitution.

Although the regulation of prostitution is the remit of member states, the European Parliament has been using non-binding soft law instruments to define a trajectory towards the abolition of prostitution in the EU (Rubio, 2021; Berthet, 2022; Sundin, 2023). Some of the most relevant frameworks introduced in the EU related to this topic are the EP resolution of 2009 on the *elimination of violence against women,* the 2011 Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, the EP resolution of 2014 on *sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality*, and the EP resolution of 2023 on *the regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women's rights*. The ones that were specifically approached in this study are the verbatim reports of proceedings and explanation of votes of the 2014 and 2023 European Parliament resolutions.

When approaching gender equality and sexuality issues, I think it is very important to pay a lot of attention to how gender notions may affect these topics and that is why the aim of this thesis was to provide a critical analysis of the value system on gender that forms the base of the debates on prostitution in the European Parliament. To do so, the research question I aimed to answer was how gender is understood by the members of the European Parliament in their discussions on prostitution, through a thematic analysis and a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). The methods and analysis were conducted with a poststructuralist methodology that understands subject positions as discursively and socially

constructed, for instance gender, gender roles, dignity, and agency (Cunningham, 2016). Furthermore, the methods were applied and analyzed following Joan W. Scott's (1986) deconstructive critique of gender consisting of questioning the certainty of social categories and the role of social institutions in enforcing them, meanwhile also considering possible transgressions of the norm.

In tune with a lot of scholarship on discourse, it is understood as a key aspect for analysis when trying to understand the ideological assumptions at work in certain debates. Feminist critical discourse analysis is a very useful tool to reveal the hegemonic gender equalities by uncovering explicit and implicit gender asymmetries in discourse with an influence of feminist and gender theory (Lazar, 2005). In studies of prostitution, the main focuses have been the analysis of diverse legal approaches and their effectiveness, the conditions and identities of sex workers and/or clients, national case studies, social context analysis of views and beliefs on prostitution, causes and consequences of being involved in the trade, and its relation to human trafficking, among many other (Sundin, 2023). When analyzing discourse, most scholars agree that debates on prostitution rely on ideological stances and moral values, which proves the relevance of using a critical discourse analysis in this topic (Rubio, 2021).

The thematic analysis shows how the main themes approached in both debates consisted of "prostitute", "woman", "prostitution", and "key priorities". Other relevant categories were "man" / "men", "sex worker" or "sex workers' needs", "sex work", and "complains". The key observations in this process were the connection between prostitute, woman, and victim of trafficking, and prostitution, violence against women, and a violation of women's dignity.

The feminist critical discourse analysis allowed me to dive deeper into each of the previous topics and observations, from which I have extracted four main reflections regarding gendering, othering, victimization, and the role of men and the patriarchy that are in tune with previous literature on prostitution discourse and the EP. Firstly, the European Parliament identifies prostitution as a form of violence against women, which leads to focusing on a white heterosexual cisgender woman

as the image of the prostitute in most interventions. This is done through barely mentioning or giving importance to diverse identities meanwhile continuously generalizing about women and prostitutes, which essentializes women and obscures the diverse realities of many other people inside the trade.

Secondly, othering is done by creating a discursive difference between 'good' and 'bad' sex (or woman), the former related to the family and romantic connections, and the latter connecting to prostitution. The members of the European Parliament relate prostitution with the loss of women's dignity and identify the rehabilitation and integration of women in society through exiting the trade as the only way to regain it. This establishes not only the prostitute as the 'other', but any woman who has sexual relations with multiple partners, no romantic relationship, or no intention of reproduction as well.

Additionally, the spread and establishment of an abolitionist stance on prostitution in the European Parliament has led them to equate prostitution with sexual exploitation. This has meant the solidification of the discourse of women as powerless victims without agency in the hands of the patriarchy that either kidnaps and exploits them, or tricks them into believing that an active sexual life is empowering. Finally, the role of men is barely mentioned, mostly to picture them as the perpetrators or pimps who force women, which, on the one hand, neglects and endangers men working as prostitutes or in the sex trade in general and, on the other hand, does not motivate the European Parliament to question more deeply the effects of patriarchal structural oppression in society.

From what I have been able to observe in all the scholarship that has dealt with this topic and what I have also seen with my own eyes in the study of this thesis, my only reflection left to make is that the evolution of prostitution debates in the European Parliament ends up being intolerant of those women who choose this occupation, forgetting many other identities also engaging in the trade –willingly or forced–, and applying measures that affect more the living and working situation of prostitutes rather than the networks and criminals who may oppress them or the patriarchal and sexist practices and assumptions that put women in that situation

in the first place. In the end, this brings us back to the European Parliament's stronger focus on women's choices and behaviors rather than with tackling the structural oppressive frameworks at work.

With the discourse of "prostitute" equals "victim", "prostitute" equals "woman", "woman" equals "victim", we end up in a position where this debate is not really about protecting sex workers nor protecting women. In that case, the European Parliament should raise awareness and approach the nuanced realities of many prostitutes, the need to develop better measures to offer resources to all of them by enhancing their living and working conditions, or facilitating the escape of victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation. Most importantly, it is time that we start taking serious action to dismantle the patriarchy and the explicit and implicit ways in which gender roles and asymmetries affect the way we live –or are allowed to live– our lives in society.

References

Abercrombie, N., Hill, S., & Turner, B. S. (2006). The Penguin dictionary of sociology. Penguin, London.

Ahola, A. (2014). Divergent Realities: a discourse analysis of the right-wing populist discourse in climate. *Law Review*, *100*(5), 1061-1110.

Ayala, S., & Vasilyeva, N. (2015). Extended sex: An account of sex for a more just society. *Hypatia*, *30*(4), 725-742.

Bąkowski, P., & Prpic, M. (2024). *Regulation of prostitution in the European Union* (EPRS / IDA (2024) 762 354). European Parliamentary Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2024/762354/EPRS_IDA%282024%29762354_EN.pdf

Balirano, G., & Borba, R. (2021). The (Anti) gender discourse of the global far-right. A way of introducing. *ANGLISTICA AION AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL*, *24*(1), 1-7.

Bartłomiejczyk, M. (2020). How much noise can you make through an interpreter? A case study on racist discourse in the European Parliament. *Interpreting*, *22*(2), 238-261.

Bartłomiejczyk, M. (2022). Interpreting nonmainstream ideology (Euroscepticism) in the European Parliament. *Perspectives*, *30*(4), 678-694.

Bartłomiejczyk, M. (2023). Interpreting Sexist Discourse in the European Parliament: A Case Study. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, *23*(3).

Beaton, M. (2016). Interpreted ideologies in institutional discourse: The case of the European Parliament. In S. Harding & O. Carbonell Cortés (Eds.), *Translation and ideology* (pp. 271–296). Routledge.

Berthet, V. (2022). The discursive politics of gendered violence and bodily rights in the European Parliament.

Butler, J. (2002). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.

Carta, C., & Wodak, R. (2015). Discourse analysis, policy analysis, and the borders of EU identity. *Journal of language and politics*, *14*(1), 1-17.

Chappell, L., & Waylen, G. (2013). Gender and the hidden life of institutions. *Public administration*, *91*(3), 599-615.

Council of Europe. (2005, May 16). *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* (CETS No. 197). https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/197

Council of Europe. (2011, May 11). *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)*. Treaty No. 210. https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210

Council of Europe. (2019). Preventing and Combating Sexism. Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1. Available on https://rm.coe.int/cm-rec-2019-1-on-preventing-and-combating-sexism/168094d894

Council of Europe. (n.d.). *Gender mainstreaming at the Council of Europe*. Council of Europe. https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/gender-mainstreaming

Coutinho Cunha, B. (2023). How have far-right parties impacted political discourse in the European Parliament from 2013 to 2015? [Master's Thesis]. Charles University Digital Repository.

Cunningham, S. (2016). Reinforcing or challenging stigma? The risks and benefits of "dignity talk" in sex work discourse. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law / Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique, 29*(1), 45–65. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-015-9424-8

Di Sabato, B., & Hughes, B. (2020). Back to the Future? The Tradwives Movement and the New Forms of Conservative Consensus Building. *Anglistica AION: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *24*(1), 25-40.

European Parliament. (1986, June 11). *European Parliament resolution on violence against women* (OJ C 176, 14.7.1986, P. 73) (Doc. A2-44/86), Official Journal C176.

European Parliament. (1997, September 16). *European Parliament resolution on the need to establish a European Union-wide campaign for zero tolerance of violence against women* (OJ C 304, 6.10.1997, p. 55). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A51997IP0250

European Parliament. (2009, November 26). *Resolution of 26 November 2009 on the elimination of violence against women* (Document 52009IP0098(01)). Official Journal of the European Union, C 285E, 53–58. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52009IP0098(01)

European Parliament. (2014, February 26). *Verbatim report of proceedings of 26 February 2014*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-7-2014-02-26_EN.htm

European Parliament. (2017, August 29). *European Parliament resolution of 26 February 2014 on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality (2013/2103(INI))*. Official Journal of the European Union, C 285, 78–86. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:C:2017:285:TOC

European Parliament. (2023, September 14). *Regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women's rights (2022/2139(INI))*. Legislative Observatory. Retrieved October 23, 2025, from https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/document-summary?id=1757780

European Parliament. (2024, July 11). *Verbatim report of proceedings of 13 September 2023*. *Official Journal of the European Union, C/2024/4388*. Available on https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-09-13-ITM-018_EN.html

European Parliament. Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities. (2004, April 15). *Report on the consequences of the sex industry in the European Union (2003/2107(INI))*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-5-2004-0274_EN.html

European Parliament. Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality. (2005, December 9). *Report on the current situation in combating violence against women and any future action (2004/2220(INI)) (A6-0404/2005)*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-6-0404/2005_EN.html

European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance. (2022, October 13). *Launching our European coalition on sex workers' rights and inclusion*. https://www.eswalliance.org/launching_european_coalition_sex_workers_rights_inclusion

European Union. (2011). *Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA*. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 101, 1–11. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32011L0036

Fairclough, N. (1992). Discourse and text: Linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis. *Discourse & society*, *3*(2), 193-217.

Ferčíková Konečná, I. (2024). Excluded but fighting: where are the voices of sex workers and their allies in EU anti-trafficking policymaking?. *Social Sciences*, *13*(3), 148

Gatrell, C. (2010). Who rules the game? An investigation of sex-work, gender, agency and the body. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, *25*(3), 208-226.

Gerassi L. (2015). A Heated Debate: Theoretical Perspectives of Sexual Exploitation and Sex Work. *Journal of sociology and social welfare*, *42*(4), 79–100.

Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis* (Vol. 241). Univ of California Press.

Haraway, D. J. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies, 14*(3), 575–599. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066

Heathy, B. H. (2020). Gender stereotypes in advertising: A critical discourse analysis. *Language in India*, *20*(1), 45-56.

Hofstetter, J. L., & Rubio Grundell, L. (2023, October 31). *Backlash and backsliding from within: Democracy, feminism, and sex work*. The Loop. https://theloop.ecpr.eu/democracy-feminism-and-sex-work/

Hubbard, P. (2004). Revenge and injustice in the neoliberal city: Uncovering masculinist agendas. *Antipode*, *36*(4), 665-686.

Hubbard, P., Matthews, R., & Scoular, J. (2008). Regulating sex work in the EU: Prostitute women and the new spaces of exclusion. *Gender, Place & Culture, 15*(2), 137–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690701817504

International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe. (2005, October 15–17). *Declaration on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe* [Conference outcome]. Brussels, Belgium. https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/Declaration_booklet_colour%20icrse.pdf

Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2017). Feminist political analysis: Exploring strengths, hegemonies and limitations. *Feminist Theory*, *18*(3), 323-341.

Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2021). Challenges to democratic practices and discourses in the European Parliament: Feminist perspectives on the politics of political groups. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, *28*(3), 579-602.

Karv, H. (2012). *Committed to Democracy?: A Discourse Analysis of the European Parliament* [Master's thesis]. Université Catholique de Louvain.

Krylova, A. (2016). Gender binary and the limits of poststructuralist method. *Gender & History*, *28*(2), 307-323.

Kulczyk, P. (2024, October 4). *PACE: Controversial resolution on prostitution referred back to committee!* European Centre for Law and Justice. https://eclj.org/human-dignity/pace/apce-la-resolution-controversee-sur-la-prostitution-repart-en-commission-?lng=en

La Strada International. (n.d.). *Vision and mission*. Retrieved October 23, 2025, from https://www.lastradainternational.org/vision-and-mission/

Lanzalotto, K. S. (2025). The Paradox of Pleasure: How Sex-Positive Feminism Constrains Female Freedom. CMC Senior Theses. https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/3957

Larsson, E. (2023). What can explain a Member of the European Parliament's aye or nay to an EU abolitionist approach. Voting behavior in the European Parliament on the issue of prostitution.

Lazar, M. M. (2005). Politicizing gender in discourse: Feminist critical discourse analysis as political perspective and praxis. In *Feminist critical discourse analysis: Gender, power and ideology in discourse* (pp. 1-28). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Lazar, M. M. (2014). Feminist critical discourse analysis. *The handbook of language, gender, and sexuality*, 180-199.

Lazar, M. M. (2017). Feminist critical discourse analysis. In *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (pp. 372-387). Routledge.

Lewis, S. (2025, March 28). *Feminists against women*. Political Research Associates. https://politicalresearch.org/2025/03/28/feminists-against-women

Lombardo, E., & Meier, P. (2008). Framing gender equality in the European Union political discourse. *Social Politics*, *15*(1), 101-129.

Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia*, *25*(4), 742-759.

Mastari, L., Spruyt, B., & Siongers, J. (2019). Benevolent and hostile sexism in social spheres: The impact of parents, school and romance on Belgian adolescents' sexist attitudes. *Frontiers in sociology*, *4*, 47.

Mattson, G. (2016). *The cultural politics of European prostitution reform: Governing loose women* [E-book]. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59272-0

McLaughlin, L. (1991). Discourses of prostitution/discourses of sexuality. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *8*(3), 249-272.

Meszner, D. (2021). A Democratic European Union: What does it mean? A discourse analysis of two debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe in the European Parliament.

Mills, S. (2008). Language and sexism. Cambridge University Press.

Montoya, C. (2013). *From global to grassroots: The European Union, transnational advocacy, and combating violence against women*. Oxford University Press.

Nartey, M. (2021). A feminist critical discourse analysis of Ghanaian feminist blogs. *Feminist Media Studies*, *21*(4), 657-672.

Oliveira, A., Lemos, A., Mota, M., & Pinto, R. (2023). Understanding the impact of EU prostitution policies on sex workers: a mixed study systematic review. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *20*(4), 1448-1468.

Ottenhof, S. (2023). *A tale of two ideologies: A political discourse analysis of how LGBTI rights are used to shape the identity of the EU in relation to sexual others in the Ninth European Parliament* [Master's thesis]. University of Twente.

Outshoorn, J. (2001). Debating prostitution in parliament: a feminist analysis. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *8*(4), 472-490.

Outshoorn, J., Dudová, R., Prata, A., & Freidenvall, L. (2015). Women's Movements and Bodily Autonomy: Making the Case for Bodily Citizenship. In *European Women's Movements and Body Politics: The Struggle for Autonomy* (pp. 153-177). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Pető, A., Thissen, L., & Clavaud, A. (2025). *A New Gender Equality Contract for Europe: Feminism and Progressive Politics* (p. 218). Springer Nature.

Pirmohammadi, A. (2025). Causes of the Crime of Prostitution and Ways to Prevent it. *Comparative Criminal Jurisprudence*, *5*(2), 1-13.

Qayyum, S., Iqbal, M. M. A., Akhtar, A., Hayat, A., Janjua, I. M., & Tabassum, S. (2013). Causes and decision of women's involvement into prostitution and its consequences in Punjab, Pakistan. *Academic Research International*, *4*(5), 398.

Reid, J. A. (2012). Exploratory review of route-specific, gendered, and age-graded dynamics of exploitation: Applying life course theory to victimization in sex trafficking in North America. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *17*(3), 257-271.

Rivas Carmona, M. D. M. (2023). Discursive construction of (trans) national vs. party politics in three European Affairs Parliamentary Committees: a critical discourse analysis approach.

Roka, P. (2025). *Patriarchy and Sexual Dynamics: Advancing Women's Liberation*. The Review of Contemporary Scientific and Academic Studies.

Rubio Grundell, L. (2021). The EU's approach to prostitution: Explaining the "why" and "how" of the EP's neo-abolitionist turn. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 28*(4), 425–439. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068211011406

Sanchez Criado, J. (2020). Right to Speak or Freedom to Hate? Critical Discourse Analysis of How Migrants and Refugees are Portrayed by the Nativist Parties at the European Parliament.

Scott, J. W. (1986). Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis. *The American Historical Review*, *91*(5), 1053–1075. https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376

Sundin, J. (2023). You don't have to put on that red light–A frame analysis of the European Parliament's position on prostitution 2014–2021.

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

Wagenaar, H. (2018). Policy as practice: explaining persistent patterns in prostitution policy. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, *57*(3), 379-400.

Young, I. M. (2005). *On female body experience:" Throwing like a girl" and other essays*. Oxford University Press.