Love for Sale: How Working Conditions Influence the Dramaturgical Presentation of Self for Sex Workers in Amsterdam

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Love for Sale: How working conditions influence the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers in Amsterdam

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Executive Summary

This research analyzes how working conditions affect the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers working in different areas of the sex industry in Amsterdam. Four male brothel sex workers and three female window sex workers were interviewed in person about how they present themselves at work and how that presentation differed from their private lives: Did it enhance or inhibit friendships; result in personal satisfaction; result in work satisfaction; impact their income (or sales)? The sample size is very small but some conclusions can be reached about the differences between working in a window or working in a brothel for sex workers in Amsterdam.

For sex workers, their work is a performance designed for a specific audience, their clientele, and the stage is their working environment (whether brothel or window). Their choice of dress as well as any use of props affects their presentation of self also. Those working in a window environment had far more incentive to change their outward appearance and their usual demeanor to attract customers. Those working in a brothel could dress and conduct themselves in a manner more consistent with their day to day lives outside of their sex work.

Bonds of friendship were greater between those workers who were in business for themselves (those who rented their own windows, for example) as opposed to those who were working for a pimp or in a brothel. This seemed related to the competitiveness of the environment. The more competitive the environment, higher tension between co-workers and fewer friendships with co-workers sustained.
Sex workers sell a product that combines emotional and sexual services specifically tailored to the needs of each client, in some cases as a feigned act of intimacy but truly genuine at other instances. The emotional labour of client interactions is one of the primary dramaturgical stages for a sex worker’s presentation of self.

Overall, the female window sex workers interviewed expressed a much stronger passion for and pride in regards to their work, unlike their male counterparts who determined their success through compensation. But to a greater extent than the women, the male brothel sex workers used sex work as a means of exploring their own sexuality. The female window sex workers faced different issues regarding discrimination and sexual identity than the male brothel sex workers. For the male brothel sex workers, discrimination was related to the choice to expose their identity as a sex worker. For the female window sex workers, no such choice in exposing their identity existed. In conclusion, due to the small sample size, this research is a snapshot of how working conditions affect the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers in Amsterdam.

Abstract

This research investigates how working conditions affect the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers in Amsterdam. Seven participants were interviewed in person; three were female window sex workers and four were male brothel sex workers. The theoretical perspective was inspired by sociologists Erving Goffman and Arlie Hochschild. The findings were discussed through the subcategories on the preparation for work/use of costume and props, feelings on competition and co-workers, feelings on work and success, the emotional labour of client interaction, and feelings on discrimination or other negative aspects of the job. This research concludes that emotional labour of client
interactions is one of the main dramaturgical stages for a sex worker’s presentation of self. Female sex workers often emphasized a passion for the job unlike the male sex workers interviewed who valued compensation for their work. But the male sex workers expressed an attraction to exploring their sexuality through the context of sex work. Many suffered from issues surrounding the maintenance of a dual identity unlike the female sex workers interviewed, who did not have a choice in disclosing their identity as a sex worker because of the public nature of their work. In conclusion, the sample size is incredibly small and cannot be used to make definitive assumptions about the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers as affected by various working conditions but in the future, this topic could be further explored with a larger sample.

**Introduction**

For my first interview, I tried to present myself as the educated young woman that I knew myself to be. Naturally, I got lost on the way to my interview and showed up 30 minutes late at the home of former sex worker and sex work activist, Petra Timmermans. Luckily, Petra still had the time, patience and kindness to indulge me on my little foray into the world of sex work, which I presumed, couldn’t be so foreign from my own. I had previously met Petra as a lecturer on sex workers rights at the SIT office. After a series of questions about Petra’s experiences, (at which time, I’m sure that my lack of knowledge about sex work had already become glaringly apparent,) I naively asked Petra Timmermans something along the lines of how sex workers separate emotions from sex in order to become a sex worker. Had our interview not been academically sanctioned, Petra may have resorted to a harsher response, but she patiently explained to me my error and blatant bias in my perception of sex work. She immediately explained that sex is still
emotional for sex workers despite its commercialization. From this standpoint, the spectrum of emotions, perceptions of, feelings about sex for the sex worker become apparent to me. Generalizations about sex workers and how sex workers feel about sex work cannot begin to accurately survey the vast and comprehensive spectrum of feelings on the subject. Meeting with Petra lead me to the realization that the separation that I was attempting to study did not exist in the format that I was attempting to research it in. Formally acknowledging that I was about to enter a world completely foreign to my own experiences was the first step in truly beginning my research. In true Socratic tradition, I had to admit that I know nothing in order to learn anything. But in order to accomplish anything, I naturally turned to something that I do know—sociology. I draw on the sociological concepts from Erving Goffman and Arlie Hochschild in order to conceptualize and analyze the experiences of the sex workers that I interviewed through the course of my research. As previously mentioned, this research analyzes how working conditions influence the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers with working experience in Amsterdam. Upon my foray in the world of sex work, I truly learned how my own dramaturgical presentation of self could affect my study participants, their perceptions of me, and their inclination to participate in my research. Perhaps my own presentation of the “educated young woman that I knew myself to be” became a bit wiser and a bit less biased through my interactions with the participants in my study. My analysis of the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers in this sample serves as mere jumping-off point for future research, not a sole destination.
Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to educate the reader on a brief overview of the history of the Red-Light District and the legislative environment that has since developed. Understanding the current legislation surrounding sex work allows the reader to better imagine and begin to understand the current state of the working conditions and how they affect the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers. Furthermore, legislation affecting the legal, political, social and economic rights of sex workers in Amsterdam demonstrates the societal opportunities and limitations available to sex workers as defined by the forces of authority at work within the society of the Red-Light District in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

The sexual revolution of the late sixties and early seventies provided the impetus for the modern-day Red Light District in Amsterdam and laid the theoretical foundation for the current notoriously liberal policies on sex work implemented by the Dutch government. Prior to the late sixties and early seventies, sex work was largely ignored. City officials cited an article 205bis of “Public Morality Act” that passed in 1911 and which stated that it was “forbidden to give opportunity to prostitution” as a tool for zoning used against brothels (Boutellier 1991: 201). Essentially this article outlawed “exploitation and profiting from a prostitute’s earning,” but it did not explicitly punish working as a prostitute (Outshoorn 2000: 23). Thus, sex workers never disappeared in Amsterdam but were forced to maintain a certain subtlety to their practices. City officials used the brothel ban to concentrate sex work in designated areas where the practices of sex workers were permitted as long as they were not violent or bothersome and essentially, could be overlooked. But as a result of the sexual revolution, the Red Light District in Amsterdam “grew into a free zone for sex
industries” that could no longer be ignored (Boutellier 1991: 205). Due to its incredible growth, Amsterdam’s sex industry could no longer be quietly controlled and neatly concentrated so that it became a public nuisance. The infamous area was overrun with drunkenness, rowdiness, and violence so much so that it forced city officials to reconsider the matter of sex work, not as public morality, but as public order. At this time, “one could hear the first arguments for a policy-based labor legislation,” that would allow for sex work to be treated as any other national labor or service to be sold that could in return, be taxed, regulated, and controlled (Boutellier 1991:206). Once the mindset towards sex work shifted from prohibiting to permitting, thus began the Dutch regulation of the sex industry.

In the spirit of true Dutch pragmatism, the general ban on brothels and pimping in the Dutch Penal Code was officially lifted, thereby, introducing a series of regulations in administrative and labor law that enables sex work to be treated as labor in October 2000 (Wijers 2008:1). This proactive policy works under the premise that sex work will inevitably occur and as a result, should be regarded as a normal profession because if it is illegal, it will attract other forms of illegality. By inviting acceptable forms of sex work into the public sphere, the government hopes to better protect the sex workers themselves and their clients, separate the sex industry from other criminal activities, and deal more effectively with such illegal activities related to sex work such as exploitation and human trafficking. The amendment only removed part of the old article on prostitution in the Dutch Penal Code so it is better to consider their stance as one of decriminalization, than of legalization (because there is no new national prostitution law.) But officially, the prostitution of an adult male or female person, provided it is done with the consent of that person, is legal and so is the right to legally own a brothel, as well as the organization of the
prostitution of others as long as it takes place on a consensual basis and involves adult persons (over the age of 18). (Wijers 2008: 1).

At the heart of the present laws and policies in the Netherlands is the decriminalization of forms of sex work, in which adult persons are engaged in a voluntary and consensual basis. Any form of coercion, (threat of) violence, deceit or abuse of authority in relation to the prostitution of another person as well as the sexual abuse of minors is strictly prohibited and penalized. The labor approach treats sex work as labor and this application of the labor law to the sex industry extends labor rights to sex workers. (Wijers 2008: 2). In both 2002 and 2006, the Dutch reevaluated the outcomes of the legislative change on sex by focusing on three areas --the municipal policies, illegal and prohibited forms of prostitution (including involuntary prostitution and prostitution by minors) and the social position of prostitutes (Wijers 2008: 3). In summary, the law has led to an increase in regulations and governmental control, and an increased awareness among operators and prostitutes about preventing involuntary prostitution and exploitation (including trafficking in human beings) from the police, social workers, clients, operators of sex businesses, and employees of the tax department. Evidence of this growing awareness can be noted in the increased number of people who report possible cases of coerced prostitution anonymously at the crime reporting tip line. There are scarcely any underage sex workers working in the licensed sector and no evidence to suggest that there is a large percentage of underage sex workers in the unlicensed sector of the industry (Wijers 2008: 5).

Despite the decriminalization of prostitution, the legal position of many sex workers remains poor. According to Marjan Wijers, who is the president of the European
Commission’s expert group on trafficking in human beings, in order to best help sex workers in Amsterdam:

Prostitutes say they need clear information on their status under employment law (especially new entrants) and better representation of their interests. The persistent prejudice about their profession, and the treatment this gives rise to, is still a problem. Operators would above all like more clarity and lack of ambivalence regarding municipal licenses, enforcement and the status of prostitutes under employment law (Wijers 2008: 8)

Another critique of the current approach is that when the ban was lifted on brothels, it did not include lifting the ban for undocumented migrant prostitutes. Legally, non-EU migrants cannot work in the sex sector and sex work is the only kind of work for which a legal prohibition on the issue of working permits exists. Thus, this legislative snafu forces migrant sex workers to work in an illegal and unprotected sector of the sex industry (Wijers 2008: 10). Despite the fact that at the time the ban on brothels was lifted, it was estimated that more than half of the prostitutes working in the Netherlands came from non-EU countries. Nevertheless, the government decided to maintain the prohibition in the Migrant Workers Act on the issuing of working permits for work in the sex industry. This act effectively eliminates the possibility of legal labor migration for the sex industry and maintains the exclusion of migrant prostitutes from legally working in the sex industry. Due to the impossibility of obtaining a legal working permit, migrant prostitutes turn to work in the illegal and unprotected sector. The exclusion of migrant prostitutes from obtaining a legal working permit makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and other forms of violence than if they could legally perform their work (Wijers 2008: 12).
In conclusion, since the decriminalization of various forms of sex work in 2000, the national and local government has predominantly focused upon the implementation of a system to control and regulate the sex industry. Now that such a system has been established, organizations dedicated to the labor rights of sex workers advocate that “the government should also take its responsibility in supporting the empowerment and labor emancipation of sex workers” (Wijers 2008: 12). This means concrete and practical measures to overcome existing barriers that prevent sex workers from standing up for their rights, to protect their privacy in relation to brothel owners, to clarify labor relations in the sex sector, to increase possibilities for sex workers to work independently or in small women-owned brothels, to effectively develop programs for sex workers who want to exit the sex industry and to combat discrimination against sex workers. Through the decriminalization of prostitution, impressive strides have been accomplished for the economic, political, legal, and social rights of sex workers in Amsterdam. On the other hand, as so neatly summarized by Marjan Wijers, “it should be kept in mind that it is not realistic to expect that a situation of discrimination, inequality and exclusion that existed for more than 100 years can be redressed in a mere 8 years” (Wijers 2008: 12).
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework which inspired this research draws upon sociological concepts from the dramaturgical presentation of self by Erving Goffman and the management of emotional labor from Arlie Hochschild. Dramaturgical sociology argues that human actions are dependent upon time, place, and audience. The theatrical metaphor coined by Goffman refers to the method in which an individual presents oneself to another based on cultural values, norms, and expectations. In this context, this research initially seeks to study how differing working conditions affect the presentation of self for sex workers in Amsterdam.

In Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman analyzes all face-to-face interactions as a sort of theatrical performance in which the individual attempts to control or guide the impression that others might make of him or her by changing his or her setting, appearance, and manner. The goal of the presentation of self is acceptance of the audience through manipulation. When the actor succeeds, the audience perceives he or she as he or she desires. Goffman theorizes that in social interaction, like a theatrical performance, there is a front region where the “actors” or individuals perform in front of an audience, highlighting their impression of self or their desired impressions. There is likewise, a back region, which can be considered a private or clandestine place where the actor can be him or herself and shed their role or identity in society. The social actor has the ability to choose his or her stage, props, and costume. The social actor strives for coherence in his or her presentation of self despite the adjustment of settings and does this mainly through interaction with other social actors. For sex workers, their
dramaturgical self is for sale. Thus, economic incentives in addition to other factors affect how one presents oneself depending upon his or her working conditions in the sex industry.

I also want to draw on concepts from Arlie Hochschild to examine the emotional labour involved within the dramaturgical presentation for the sex worker. In Arlie Hochschild’s work, *The Managed Heart*, emotional labor refers to the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. Emotional labour is sold as a wage and therefore, has exchange value. In contrast to emotional labour, emotional work refers to the same acts performed within a private context where they have use value. For sex workers, emotional services include activities such as attentive listening, flirtatious talk, etc. This research intends to determine whether or not some sex workers sell emotional services, in addition to sex services. Some sex workers may or may not feign emotions connected to intimacy and affection in their relations with clients. Hochschild theorizes that “Once an illusion is clearly defined as an illusion, it becomes a lie.” This research seeks to understand how sex workers keep this illusion alive through their management of emotions in their dramaturgical presentation of self following the sociological perspective inspired by Goffman and Hochschild.

**Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, I conducted seven face to face interviews with sex workers currently working in Amsterdam. I conducted these interviews at brothels, bars, and windows in the Red-Light District. Each interview was tape recorded with the written and verbal consent of the participant. Each participant was at least 18 and an EU citizen; thus, each participant worked as a sex worker legally at the time of our interview. Each
interview lasted approximately 30 to 90 minutes. Participants in the study were interviewed using the format available in the appendix. Participants were not compensated for their involvement.

Participants were recruited through an integration of snowball and convenience sampling. Through a contact at Boys Club 21 and the help of my advisor, I was able to make the acquaintance of the male sex workers there and arrange interviews with them at that time or later. I contacted two female participants through the acquaintance of Metje Blaak, an ex-prostitute turned photographer, producer, writer, and spokeswoman for De Rode Draad, an organization that defends the rights of sex workers in Amsterdam and I met one female participant at random working in the Red-Light District. For each interview, I contacted my advisor via my mobile phone when I arrived, informed him where I was, and contacted him again when I finished the interview. This protocol was established in the event of any dangerous or unforeseen circumstances.

After each interview, I stayed in contact with the participants in my study. Initially and primarily, this was to give each participant a typed, compilation of my notes from our interview that compromised his or her story. I compiled my notes into a short write-up ranging from 3 to 10 pages and gave a copy back to my interviewee. These notes are available in the appendix. I informed the interviewee that he or she had the right to correct, add, or delete anything from my notes of our interview at that time or any time afterwards. Apart from the purpose of allowing the participant ‘editorial’ rights over the final interview notes, the write-up was also provided to the interviewee to allow them to reflect upon his or her experiences.
**Ethical issues**

The participants in my study shared with me their experiences as a sex worker as they related to the presentation of self during the course of our interview. Naturally, this reflection upon his or her experiences regarding the presentation of self also led to a discussion of the formation of self for each sex worker, especially in regards to his or her work in the sex industry. For some, this may have brought up some traumatic experiences of abuse, or other unresolved issues, in his or her past. As part of the interview process (either at the time of obtaining consent, or when meeting up to provide the write-up of the interview) I ‘sign-posted’ interviewees to possible sources of telephone advice to explore any of these issues further. I also emphasized the privacy and confidentiality of each participant’s story that was shared with me, because I worked with many co-workers or acquaintances who may have feared this kind of exposure of their personal details. In addition, due to the fact that I worked with a community negatively stigmatized from societal values, it was important to me as a researcher to treat each participant with the upmost respect and not merely as a means to the completion of my research. I remained in contact with each of my participants for varying lengths of time after our initial interview depending upon each participants desire to review their completed script and to allow for a process of natural ‘closure’ which respected them as individuals who had trusted me to hear their experiences and not merely as research subjects. The post-interview write ups are available in the appendix.
Findings and Discussion

My initial research question was: how do working conditions affect the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers in Amsterdam?

This research represents a snapshot -- I hope to elaborate upon common themes as related to the dramaturgical presentation of self as touched upon and expressed by the sex workers who participated in this study. Through the course of interviews, a wealth of qualitative data emerged surrounding other stories of each participant’s work, attitude, past, and life. My sample cannot conveniently be compared in anyway because there are too many variables that differ between each group but essentially, the male participants work in a brothel and the female participants work in the windows. All of my participants differ greatly in age, race, nationality, socioeconomic level, sexual orientation, education, variety of sex work experience, attitude toward sexuality, and outlook on life.

I outline my discussion with the following subcategories: preparation for work/ use of props and costumes, competition and co-workers, the emotional labour of client interactions, feelings on sex work and success, and feelings on discrimination and other negative aspects of sex work.

Preparation for work/ Use of props and costumes

Proposition: According to Goffman, the individual is a social actor who has the ability to choose his stage, props, and costume which he will use before a specific audience.

Finding: For the men, typical attire at the brothel was jeans and a blouse, t-shirt, or tank top. The male sex workers all dressed normally for work as if they were going to a bar, club, or party. Robin admitted that when getting ready for Boys Club 21, he might “take longer with checking the mirror, doing your hair…. just a little bit more together with
makeup, when I’m tired.” Robin has another job by day as a waiter. He notes how he prepared differently for each job, because at Boys Club 21, he explains, “it’s more about seduction. Of course, when I work at a restaurant, I serve people but I’m not trying to sleep with them. That’s the difference.”

While the men wore typically normal attire to work with the aim of seduction, the women aim for a “shock and awe” approach. At the beginning of my research, I met with Licia Brussa, former sex worker and sex work activist, and she noted that, the Red-Light District is like a candy shop and referring specifically to window sex workers, “A smart sex worker will learn to be different than the other candy.” Both Lisa and Svetlena typically wear bikinis and a pair of stilettos to work. Josje is a bit older and wears a corset and long black skirt. Lisa explained, in her matching underwear set and knee high stiletto boots, “Sometimes I don’t like to show anything, but it’s just that if you don’t show off anything, they’re not going to come knock, ya know. It looks boring, and they have that at home.” Lisa tries to be “different than home, a little more kinky and exotic.” The women working in the windows do not wear what they normally would wear to go out. Their intended impression for their audience is to look sexy, unique, and unavailable anywhere else. The Red-Light District becomes a candy shop with women competing for the client’s affections. To a far greater degree than brothel workers, window workers aim to find their niche, typically through their style of dress.

Svetlena showed me her variety of hats that she wears to work, but also her favorite: “I love hats! I’m crazy about it.” She mentioned that she has also gained notoriety in her area as “the girl with the hat always reading a book” due in part to her tradition but also according to her review on a website that reviews the women in the Red Light District.
So Svetlena mentions that sometimes tourists, “come, they don’t look for me, they look just for the girl with the hat! I stay with the hat, not because of the clients but because I like it.” Svetlena envelopes her own sense of fashion and personality to attract clients through “shock and awe” approach but also maintains her uniqueness. Her neighbor, Josje, also attracts clients in a unique way through the use of props.

No other participant that I spoke with used props as creatively and uniquely as Josje. She has a large wall of sex toys when one enters her window. She began incorporating sex toys in her work about 4 years ago after a good experience with a client. Now, she exclusively caters to fetishes involving S&M or any other toy fantasy. Josje laughed off my question as to how she prepared for work and found the idea of her doing any rituals to prepare hysterical. She explained, “I think I am just myself. I am not totally different but I do need all these things around me to do what I do.” Josje hates being late to work because it takes about 45 minutes for her to unpack and display all of her sex toy collection. She cites that showing up to work late and having a client waiting is frustrating because “it is difficult to do something without my toys. Of course, then I have to look in all my bags for the toys and then I am not relaxed, yeah? It needs to be like, everything needs to be unpacked and I have to be ready.” Another final component of the standard work preparation is the routine of getting ready.

Most of the women spend about an hour getting ready for work by setting up their room. Svetlena noted her detailed morning routine for work begins when she wakes up at 7:30 am, commutes to the city, picks up her key, unpacks her room, and enjoys a black cup of coffee around the corner before beginning work at noon. Josje arrives at work early to unpack her bags and Lisa also takes time to herself to get her room ready before rushing
into work. Because the men do not work in personal private spaces, they never mentioned this aspect of their preparation for work. Both window sex workers and brothel sex workers, male and female, dress and act differently in their preparations for work.

**Conclusion:** For sex workers, their work is a performance designed for a specific audience, their clientele and the stage is their working environment (whether brothel or window). Their choice of dress as well as any use of props affects their presentation of self also.

*Feelings on Competition and Co-workers*

**Proposition:** For both brothel sex workers and window sex workers, competition includes his or her co-workers. Competitiveness in a work environment where the presentation of self affects one’s profit margin also affects the depth of the relationship between co-workers. All of my male participants fall under the category of “co-workers.” Of my three female participants, two can be considered co-workers. For the female window sex workers, neighbors were considered co-workers because of consistent interaction at work.

**Findings:** At Boys Club 21, it was common practice for new boys to go downstairs and answer the door when a potential client arrives. When I asked Robin about how he felt about his co-workers, he remarked that “There are sometimes periods with new boys, that they are talking with a client and sometimes push themselves too much.” Robin mentioned that if he ever feels like a client is interested in another boy, he will ask, ‘Would you like me to introduce you to him?’ If I don’t make the money, I want someone else to make the money.” Introducing a new personality within the male brothel can potentially cause some frustrations among co-workers, but not necessarily competition. It should also be noted,
that of the four male co-workers, Robin was the only participant who mentioned that he would help a fellow co-worker make money from a prospective client in the event that he could not himself. In my interview with Patrick, he explained that there is never too much jealousy, because at the end of the day, everyone makes money. The brothel atmosphere allowed the male participants to share certain common experiences and prevented a high competitive tension. Robin commented that “It’s nice sometimes to share it [the job] with someone because sometimes, like you have certain experiences.” The atmosphere at the Boys Club 21 cultivates a relaxed environment where the boys can socialize and have some fun together at work. Sean mentioned that waiting was one of the worst aspects of the job. Many of the boys working at Boys Club 21 fondly reminisce about when they used to have the internet there and they could get online to check their email, to watch porn, or check their social networking sites, like Facebook or Myspace when they were waiting for clients.) Patrick explains that his co-workers are nice, but they wouldn’t really socialize too much outside of the workplace. But the ability to socialize in the workplace, alleviated overt competitive tensions and allowed for the men to bond over common experiences. Robin stated that he rarely went out with his co-workers after work, not as a result of any particular problems with his co-workers, but because Robin is simply very hard-working and has little time to socialize with anyone outside of work. But among the co-workers, no strong relationship stood out and the co-workers were essentially strangers to one another. Their relationships seemed relatively weak and of little importance to each participant.

Competition certainly still existed, but it manifested itself in different ways. In regards to competition, Patrick explained that since he was the only blonde, this quality
made Patrick a unique catch at the brothel because clients who preferred blondes naturally sought him out. Physical differences and styles between the boys actually strengthened the reputation of Boys Club 21. Diversity of sex workers appeals to a wider range of clients; thus, this becomes a larger source of income for the establishment itself.

Lisa was the first female sex worker with whom I spoke. She works a window opposite Boys Club 21. Lisa explained that she did not spend a considerable amount of time with her co-workers because other girls could be “very jealous and there is a lot of drama. Backstabbing. It’s really competitive.” She explained that certain groups of girls, often bonded by common nationality, culture, language, or pimp, can be the most competitive and that “most of those girls who nag on each other they mostly have someone that takes the money from them. They work hard and it stands for nothing, ya know. So they get jealous of each other and start fighting with one another. It’s not nice when you see other girls have a hard time because a boy controls them.” In contrast to my experience with Lisa, I met Josje and Svetlena, co-workers and good friends, through an acquaintance of Metje Blaak.

Josje and Svetlena know the rarity of their relationship, especially among female window sex workers. Like Lisa, Josje and Svetlena stand out in their area as a result of their freedom. Josje explains that she likes her neighbors but she suspects that some “have a pimp so I’m not gonna speak to them. That is my thing, I just ignore it a little bit.” Svetlena explained the competitive atmosphere as “You know the girls, they play like, okay, I’m your best friend but if they can put a knife in your back, they will do it with pleasure. Especially in this job, it is very hard to have a real friend.” She complained that if she has more clients than another girl, it’s likely that girl will begin rumors about how she’s not using a condom
or she is so dirty in a jealous effort to deter future customers from her window. Svetlena evokes a mixture of cold respect and understanding for her colleagues but remains adamant about the impossibility of a deep connection between the women. She noted though, that hanging out with her co-workers outside of the workplace can be “easier in a way because many women are ashamed to say they’re a prostitute so when you’re with the same people, you can be yourself because you don’t have to be embarrassed for nothing, because you are all the same.” This added stigma of prostitution affects many of the female window sex workers relationships between each other as well as their bonds with other women, even those outside of the sex industry. But for Josje and Svetlena, Josje described their relationship as “totally open. We talk about everything. We laugh a lot.” She even recalls dressing up as a nurse and inviting her neighbor also dressed up to enhance clients fantasy’s and helping one another out in this way. Svetlena also mentioned that “For me, I have no pimp so I have much fun. Josje also, because we go out together and we enjoy so much. But the rest of them, they are a little bit in this way, more cold.” Josje and Svetlena could hardly contain their laughter about experiences with one another and glowed with a genuine love for one another during our separate interviews. In addition, neither Josje or Svetlena feels ashamed to work as a prostitute, thus, their ability to connect with one another on that level is unique in itself because many female window sex workers do not love this job.

**Conclusion:** Despite the probability that deep bonds between female window sex workers will not occur, the rarity still exists. Once this barrier has been overcome, the possibilities for a strong, open, and deep relationship are endless. Initially, the freedom to work allows for the freedom to choose which co-workers to gravitate towards and bond
with. Thus, the bonds of female window sex workers are affected by their independence (or dependence on a pimp) and their acceptance of sex work for themselves. For the male sex workers the brothel was an environment that allowed sex workers to bond over common experiences, interact with co-workers as well as clients, and celebrate their physical differences in order to achieve financial success for the establishment. These factors alleviated high and overt competitive tensions and allowed for a pleasant working environment but did not foster deep bonds between co-workers.

**The Emotional Labour of Client Interactions**

**Proposition:** The common perception of sex work is that it is primarily the selling of a sexual service. This research explored to what extent sex work sells emotional services in addition to sexual and whether or not these intimacies were feigned.

**Findings:** Lisa explains, that “I think some of the clients you get a relationship to.” Many of my participants reported similar feelings towards clients. Robin explains that at Boys Club 21, “It’s not really like total strangers because here you talk to the people and so you try to connect in a certain way. So that makes it easier.” Josje also explained, that “I like them all [my clients] because I only take clients that I have a good connection with and it feels right. Josje uses her autonomy to protect herself and relies a lot upon intuition for her sense of safety and security at work, and stated that it is uncommon practice for sex workers to work with someone who seems unsafe or dangerous.

Robin neatly summarizes the feelings of vulnerability between human beings associated with nakedness, even for sex workers as in his experience, “When you go upstairs, you are also very vulnerable. Because like, in normal daylight, you are in uniform or whatever kind of clothing.” But in addition to a feeling of safety, enjoying the company of
the client allows the sex worker to enjoy work as well. Svetlena notes that “I try to keep the conversation because it is very hard when the person came inside and you also have people who don’t speak at all. And then in the time, these ten minutes are very hard. But mostly, the people that I always find to have sex with them, it always goes so fast and so nice. So for me, it’s not a problem at all.” Thus, having a good relationship with clients makes work for the sex worker more fun. Svetlena admits that she often has so much fun at work that it doesn’t feel like work because she makes money from her hobby.

Josje explained that she likes a lot of the people she meets but “for me, this is my job. It’s not like, in private time, I go out with my clients or get drinks with them. No, I just want to keep it separated. So it’s only here. Sometimes people fall in love with you.” For customers who fall in love, Svetlena proactively explains to them, “I have to say, okay darling, we have nice time but this is my job. Of course, they know it but they don’t like to accept it. So in the moment they understand clear because okay, she look at me like a job, then they just go away. They don’t like these things. They don’t like to feel like they’re my job. They like to feel like, when they come here, they’re something special. More special than everybody. So for me, in this way, it’s quite difficult.” The quotes from these two women clearly illustrate Hochschild’s concept that “once an illusion is clearly defined as an illusion, it becomes a lie.”

Both of these women also shared how these intimate experiences are also commodities, and when this becomes too apparent, sex workers loose many customers. Lisa mentioned, that on some occasions, she will “fake [orgasms]. But sometimes I get irritated because they can’t fuck you so I get angry. And sometimes you get so horny that you want to fuck too but this guy can’t right. This is not funny. He even paid for it.” Thus, to
an extent, the authenticity of relations with a client provides the sex worker with more pleasure and fulfillment in his or her typical workday. Sex workers may have to fake orgasms or pretend to care about a client’s problems, but for the most part, sex workers choose their clients for a reason.

Sean cites listening to clients as one of the worst aspects of his job. He explains that some days, it feels like he asks everyone “the same questions and you know, more or less, how they’re going to answer”. Robin notes how difficult, client interactions can be, especially “if you’re really not attracted [to clients]. I try not to be harsh, like ‘Oh, you have a really nice body,’ when really, you know.” The female participants had greater freedom to accept or reject clients than the male participants. Working in a brothel somewhat limits the autonomy of the male sex workers but none ever truly felt forced or coerced into accepting clients. The spectrum of freedom to choose clients for female window sex workers was greater but the risks could also be higher.

But, almost all of the male and female sex workers mentioned feeling like a sex therapist. Svetlena elaborates upon the services she provides because for her, “It’s not like, uh, okay, only sex. You know, for me, it’s not like that. I love it. I cannot do that. Alright, they come and pay me and sex and then they go away. We have much more than this. And they love it...And I think they love it because they have a lot of attention and when they come, it’s all about them. In the room, it’s all about them, you know.”

Josje said “I am not going to do anything on a bad day. I’m not going to do anything if I don’t feel good. I have to feel good, you know. Because I have to smile and be nice and be properly to every person. You cannot say ‘oh I’m having a bad day’ because they don’t care.
They just want to have a nice time. And they are paying for it, so of course, they get a nice time.”

The attention for every client, thus an aspect of the emotional services sold by sex workers, increases the feelings of intimacy in every transaction. Other window sex workers may charge clients in a “pay as you play” manner by asking for more money with every act but Josje finds this option disgusting as she explains, “I don’t think that’s a nice way to be intimate with somebody. For every 10 minutes to ask for money. That’s just stupid. That’s not relaxed. So I don’t do that. It’s one price and it’s for a certain amount of time and then you can do whatever the person likes to do or what I like to do. ”

**Conclusion:** Sex workers sell a product that combines emotional and sexual services specifically tailored to the needs of each client, in some cases as a feigned act of intimacy but truly genuine at other instances. The emotional labour of client interactions is one of the primary dramaturgical stages for a sex worker’s presentation of self. Each sex worker must attract clients that will return for the emotional services that he or she provides. A customer’s intense affections can often be detrimental to a sex worker’s work and significantly affect the dramaturgical self for sale. Sex work becomes more enjoyable for sex workers through genuine interactions with the client but includes more emotional labour for the sex worker in addition to the selling of sexual services.

**Feelings about Work and Success**

**Proposition:** How an individual defines success for his or her work affects his or her dramaturgical presentation of self. Sex workers defined their success at work in different ways.
Findings: “Do you like your job? Or the money you get from your job?” Sean asked me during our interview and he emphasized how much he loved getting paid and making money throughout our conversation. Patrick explained that he’s travelled internationally in luxury—as a sex worker—“I’ve been to America, Australia, Israel, all over the world -- Nice clothes, shopping, restaurants, hotels.” Patrick and Robin both cited economic incentives as the reason as to why they begin working in the sex industry. All of the other sex workers that I spoke with cited money as a secondary benefit to sex work, but not as the driving reason for their initial involvement in the business. Each of the boys makes approximately 65€ per client from Boys Club 21. (Some of my male participants also receive a supplemental income from performing other escort services as well).

When talking to the female sex workers, each explained how much she paid for the rent for her window for one day. It costs about 100€ for the window from 12pm until 7pm and about 150€ for the window from 9pm or so until 4 or 6 am. Lisa, who typically works at night, explained, “you basically fuck two people for free every day. It’s very annoying sometimes.” Each explained that any day could be different and each client wants different things which will cost each client accordingly. Lisa says that she “fucks 5-20 people per day,” 20 being that maximum you could have in a day. “You have to think about your body also. You can’t push it because then you will get pain. Because it’s always a different shape of the dicks, you know, some small, some big, some massive. Like what the fuck is that? Will that fit in a condom?” None of my male participants ever spoke of their body as a limit to their income cap for a day at work. In my interview with Josje, she briefly mentioned how much she made and her accumulated assets (two houses, a bar, and a car) that complement her comfortable lifestyle but overall, Josje expressed a genuine love for her work as her
main motivator for work, unlike my male participants. Lisa explained that she loved her job as well because she enjoys pushing her sexuality to extremes. Svetlena also continually mentioned how she loves her job because she makes money from her hobby, sex. Svetlena excels at sex work because of her autonomy and her passion.

**Conclusion:** In each of my interviews with male sex workers, they emphasized how much money they earned. Overall, the female window sex workers interviewed expressed a much stronger passion for and pride in regards to their work, which allowed for the female definition of success in sex work to include freedom for pleasure, unlike their male counterparts who determined their success through concrete economic calculations.

**Feelings on Discrimination and other Negative Aspects of Sex Work**

**Proposition:** Each sex worker interviewed experiences different aspects of sex work negatively depending upon a number of variables. The most common negative experiences related to the presentation of self include discrimination, age and body image issues, as well as the exhausting maintenance of a dual identity.

**Findings:** The oldest participant, Josje, confidently told me her age of 41 at the start of our interview. In my interview with Patrick, he ignored the question of his age and cited age as being one of the reasons that he left Boys Club 21. Patrick constantly talks about how much more money the younger boys make and how it was easier to make more money when he was younger. In addition to age, physical beauty was another factor for each sex worker. All of the male participants emphasized physical fitness, and mentioned frequent gym workouts with personal trainers a few times per week. Sean and Robin both mentioned too much smoking and drinking as one of the worst aspects of their job. Robin had plastic surgery (liposuction, cheek bones, and veneers) done in Colombia to enhance
his physical appearance for sex work in the past and hopes to have more done in the future. In comparison, no female participant mentioned any sort of physical exertion or concern to stay fit. Lena and Lisa both wear string bikinis to work and exhibit an air of confidence about their bodies. Josje is a bit older and dresses more conservatively but she never cited any body image issues. Josje had gastric bypass surgery and needs to maintain a healthy diet as a result but she remains confident in her appearance.

Each of the participants interviewed experienced discrimination in different ways. Robin does not feel discriminated against “because I’m not really out [as a sex worker.] It prevents me from coming out because I think a lot of people feel negative about the job that I do. Sometimes I hear a negative thing about sex work and think I’m glad they’re not talking about me. I feel like it’s the same as being gay, if you’re not out and you hear something negative, it prevents you from outing yourself.” Patrick and Sean also answered similarly in regards to my question about discrimination. On the other hand, Lukas is the “person who was not afraid of anything” and self-proclaimed exhibitionist.

For some of the male brothel sex workers, like Patrick, they felt as though they were leading a double life or as if he were an actor. When Patrick would tell his parents that he was currently on the beach in Israel, they would naturally ask, “How? Why? Where did you get the money?” His family may have been suspicious about how he was earning his money but the possibility of Patrick being a sex worker was never openly discussed. Patrick neglected telling his parents about his sex work mainly because he was bisexual and did not want to reveal this to his parents. Sex work provided Patrick with the opportunity to explore aspects of his sexuality discreetly, without the pressure of heteronormative societal standards. Robin agreed, that hiding his job as a sex worker from his family,
parents, colleagues at work, and some friends, feels “a little bit like a double life.” Sean did not feel frustrated with a dual identity; he just doesn’t feel the need to tell everyone in his life about what he’s doing.

In comparison, Lisa, Svetlena, and Josje agreed that it was better for them to tell everyone in their life about their work in the windows than to let someone find out about it themselves. Lisa explained that she often felt discriminated against, “As a woman, from other women. But I think that’s more, because they are in a way, a little bit jealous, because the other girl is doing it, and they’re good. And they can’t, but in a way, they want to try it.” Josje noted that even outside of work, she feels discriminated against because “These days we pay taxes and must do all these types of things to be straight for the government. But if you go to the bank, and you say, okay, this is how much money I make, here’s my papers in order with my book keeper and then they say, ‘this is not a real job. You cannot loan money or anything.” Svetlena also mentions how “sometimes when I speak with people, it’s hard. Because when you don’t tell people you’re a prostitute, they accept you totally normal way. But in the moment they are, ‘so, what do you do for work?’ then I say,’ I make the men happy’. And first time, it takes them a little bit to think about and I say, ‘ah yeah, I’m prostitute’. Okay, so you just feel, they totally change. They just step off. Most of the people, they really don’t like to walk with them and they ‘oh you walk with prostitute’. And they don’t like us, but everybody come by us.” She also mentioned that in other situations, “Some people get so embarrassed when I tell them I’m prostitute, they start to think, ‘Oh but why you doing this, why you waste your time, you so beautiful’. I say, ‘Excuse me? Darling, what is wrong with that?’ I don’t like the people to feel for me in this way, ‘ah, poor girls.’ Most people feel sorry for us but why? Not all girls have pimps. There are some girls
like me who enjoy this job and we love this job. Like Josje and whoever. You don’t have to be sorry. Sometimes I think, ‘oh poor people, you judge me in this way’.

**Conclusion:** The female window sex workers faced different issues regarding discrimination and sexual identity than the male brothel sex workers. All participants revealed varying degrees of comfort with age and body image. The average age female sex workers in my sample expected to work until they were at least 50 or 60, much older than the age male sex workers expected to work until. But for most of the male brothel sex workers, discrimination related to the choice of whether or not to reveal their identity as a sex worker. For the female window sex workers, no such choice in exposing their identity existed. For the male sex workers, the context of sex work allows him the ability to explore his own sexuality. The female window sex workers that I spoke with did not feel frustrated with dual identity complex because in most cases, they told everyone in their life about their work themselves.
Conclusions

In conclusion, my research explored how working conditions affected the dramaturgical presentation of self for sex workers in Amsterdam. No definitive conclusion can be drawn from my small sample but in the future, this research could be continued on a larger scale by interacting with more sex workers in other areas of the sex industry.

As a researcher, I am not bold enough tell you that this research significantly changed the world in any way but I am humble enough to tell you about how it changed me. I learned a lot about my own presentation of self through this process. My inspiring interactions with the participants taught me many important lessons about how to treat others, how to overcome struggle, and how to respect oneself. I learned how to ask questions correctly and respectfully in our interviews as well as how to listen carefully to what was said and intuit cautiously from what was not. It was my most sincere intention initially that I treat the participants in my study as ends in themselves, not simply as a means to the end of my research. I have stayed true to my intention as best as humanely possible and I encourage other researchers to utilize this stance when working with not only stigmatized groups but also any human subjects for the purposes of research.
The Interviews

Introduction
Again, I would like to acknowledge that this research would not have been possible without the help of all of the generous individuals that volunteered their time to speak with me. I encourage the reader to read the interviews at his or her own pleasure; the post-interview write ups are not essential to understanding my analysis but I include them as a tool to better understand some of the themes that I touch upon and the sex industry in Amsterdam. Most of these interview transcriptions include the responses to my questions verbatim (depending on the recording conditions) in order to provide a more comprehensive impression of the individual. The grammatical errors, broken English and vulgar language recorded in these post-interview write ups attempt to stay true to the individual’s personality and reveal the eloquent truth of his or her experience.

Format
At the beginning of each interview*, the participant was given a sheet of paper that listed the following questions in this order:

- How do the working conditions of sex workers in Amsterdam influence their dramaturgical presentation of self?
- Tell me a little bit about yourself and what your job is like.
- How do you feel about your job?
- What is a typical day like?
- How do you feel about your co-workers?
- How do you feel about your clients?
- How do you get ready or prepare for work?
- How much do you make per hour? Per day? Per month?
- How do you act at work that might be different from other situations in your life?
- Are there any dangers or risks to your job?
- Do you ever feel discriminated against?
- What is your attitude towards sex work?
- How do you feel about the negative attitudes that other people might have about sex work?

*The first interview that I conducted included more questions that were deleted or combined with others to create this more concise, finalized format. The first interview guide followed this line of questioning but did not involve these questions verbatim.

Interview #1
I met Sean while he was working at Boys Club 21 and this is where our interview took place.

“Do you like your job? Or the money you get from your job?” Sean insightfully asks me during our interview. Sean comes from Latvia. He is 32. He has been working in the sex industry for approximately 6 weeks. He used to work other jobs (not in the sex industry)
but they never paid enough for the long hours. At his new job, Sean works almost every day from 3pm until 1 am. He is not paid to simply come to the club. The boys receive commission (approximately 65€) for every hour a client pays for a private room with them upstairs (approximately 155€).

Sean acquires clients through interacting with them at a bar-like setting. Clients always buy drinks for the boys. He explains that one must feel a connection quickly between clients, so that one does not waste too much time with a prospective client who does not pay. One must be careful not to linger around a client who is only buying you drinks and not paying to take you upstairs. But when asked about his skills at work, Sean assures me, “I always have good technique. And it doesn’t matter where I work.”

Sean wears his normal attire to work. He doesn’t see himself as a different person at work. He has not told his family and all of his friends about his new job, but that is because he doesn’t think it is that important. He does not feel guilty or embarrassed about being a sex worker. The worst part of his job is all of the drinking and smoking. No one forces Sean to drink or smoke on the job, but it is expected in a normal fraternization with clients. Sean is not very close with his co-workers because his co-workers are essentially his competition. The boys are friendly with each other, but do not necessarily fraternize outside of work or hold deep conversations with one another.

Listening to clients can also be one of the worst aspects of the job for Sean. He explains that some days, it feels like he asks everyone “the same questions and you know, more or less, how they’re going to answer”. Sean likes intelligent clients more so than good-looking or well dressed clients. He has never had a bad experience with a client. Once, Sean received a $600 tip from a client who was an American tourist after he had been upstairs with him for an hour. Sean always practices safe sex at work.

In the future, Sean might like to save some money and start his own business.

**Interview #2**

I met Patrick at Boys Club 21 and but at the time of our interview, he was no longer working there. We met at a local bar to discuss his experiences as sex worker.

Patrick has travelled the world as a male escort. He started working when he was 18 because he needed to make money. He responded to an advertisement in the newspaper. Patrick explains that the money was good when he was younger -- “I’ve been to America, Australia, Israel, all over the world -- Nice clothes, shopping, restaurants, hotels.” Patrick believes he made more money when he was younger and his age has affected his decision to leave Boys Club 21.

Patrick never told his family or close friends about his job as a sex worker. He says that “nobody knows” about this aspect of his life. Patrick said that at times, he felt as though he were leading a double life or as if he were an actor. When Patrick would tell his parents that he was currently on the beach in Israel, they would naturally ask, “How? Why? Where did you get the money?” His family may have been suspicious about how he was earning his money but the possibility of Patrick being a sex worker was never openly discussed. He did not want to tell his parents about it because he was bisexual. He did not think they would have a problem with that but he also did not want to tell them. He prefers to work as a male escort outside of a brothel, such as Boys Club 21.
Patrick describes how he was a good judge of character due to his experiences as a sex worker: “And sometimes with my father, he makes buildings, you know. I’d give him a hand with clients and would be like ‘Hey dad, he likes me’. ‘No he’s married has kids.’ But still, it’s the way he talks to me. You know, I know how it works.” Patrick could read people in a way that others might be oblivious to as a result of his work as a sex worker. He can tell what people want.

Patrick explains that his co-workers are nice, but they wouldn’t really socialize too much outside of the workplace. When asked whether or not the atmosphere ever got competitive, Patrick explained that for him, he was the only blonde. This quality made Patrick a unique catch at the brothel because clients who preferred blondes naturally sought out Patrick. Patrick believes that younger boys make the most money but suggests that there is never too much jealousy, because at the end of the day, everyone makes money.

When asked about his ideal client, Patrick says he prefers clean clients. He received 64 € per hour for every client at Boys Club 21. Patrick just wears his normal attire to work. Patrick has some younger clients. He has never had any bad experiences with a client. He always discuss what each person wants and does not want prior to their sexual encounter together. In the event that a client would refuse to pay, Patrick takes something valuable as collateral. For example, Patrick once took a television set and on another occasion, Patrick took the client’s leather jacket because he did not want to pay.

Patrick says he never feels discriminated against because no one knows he is a sex worker. He believes that sex work is a good field of work -- “I don’t hurt people, it’s easy money.” Patrick says that sometimes clients did truly get to know him. Other times, clients who were married might ask him not to acknowledge them if they saw each other outside of work. Other clients who were married might hire Patrick to have sex with their wives so experiences with each client could vary greatly. Patrick claims that one of his clients worked in the White House.

In regards to his sexuality, Patrick explains the he would not want a relationship with a man. His clients are male and female but in his personal life, Patrick would only want to be with women. He says that he often enjoys the attention from men more than sex with men.

In the future, Patrick wants to attend chef school in order to become a chef and work at a five star restaurant.

**Interview #3**

I met Robin at Boys Club 21 and this is where our interview took place.

“I'm from Freisland. I’ve lived here now for 10 years. In the first place I came here because I met a boy. We had a relationship and I was very good to him. I came here when I was 18 and I was with him for 4 years. Like, uh we had a good relationship but with a lot of violence and some things. He was a couple years older than I was. I was married to him when I was 21 and then a few months later, I got a divorce. But it was big drama. And after that, I got another relationship, but he was stealing my money so from abusive to that. So then I was totally broke. And that actually made me decide to get into the work because otherwise, I would have been paying him money for the next five years and it was like, I didn’t want that to happen. And I was like, this is my escape or what I can do to at least go
on with my life. It helped [get control back over my life] because I was like at first, I’ll just try it and then I found out I was really popular and I was really good at what I was doing back then. At first, it was a little bit hard because the people that you are with are not your first choice, of course. But now if I go out to a bar or something after work, I am really picky. “

After all of his experiences, Robin admits, that he has become a really good judge of character. When dealing with clients, Robin explains that, “some people come here because they have really high-paying jobs and so they are intelligent and they pick up on things. So you kind of learn and everyone has sort of a nice picture or something that you can just relate to. It’s not really like total strangers because here you talk to the people and so you try to connect in a certain way. So that makes it easier.”

He explains that in addition to working at Boys Clubs 21, Robin also works at a restaurant. “Most of the times I work during the day and then I have my nighttime job. Then I go home, shower, eat something, come here, work, come home again. Do the same thing again [the next day.]” I asked Robin how getting ready to go to Boys Club 21 might differ from getting ready for his other job. He agreed, that it was different and explained why: “I think you take longer with checking the mirror, doing your hair, just a little bit more together with makeup, when I’m tired.” I asked Robin how working at Boys Club 21 might be different from his other job at a restaurant and he explains, “I think here, it’s more about seduction. Of course, when I work at a restaurant, I serve people but I’m not trying to sleep with them. That’s the difference.”

When asked about how he feels about his job as a sex worker, Robin explained: “It’s a little bit conflicting because on one hand, I feel good about it, but on the other hand, I also don’t advertise it. Like, my family and my parents don’t know it. Some of my friends but my colleagues at work, they don’t know it. It’s a little bit like a double life. It’s nice sometimes to share it [the job] with someone because sometimes, like you have certain experiences and like sometimes, the people you meet aren’t at a state in their life where they are happy. They just got out of a relationship or they are married with children and they are not happy about their lifestyle. All of a sudden you are like ...how do you say that? A social worker? No, a therapist.”

“When you go upstairs, you are also very vulnerable. Because like, in normal daylight, you are in uniform or whatever kind of clothing... But yeah, I think it’s also, for me, now it’s easier but in the beginning it was a bit like, um I don’t know, it would be a little bit strange in the beginning for a couple of years but now it’s easier”.

Robin explains that it was difficult in the beginning it was difficult, especially “if you’re really not attracted [to clients]. I try not to be harsh, like ‘Oh, you have a really nice body,’ when really, you know.” Robin explains that when interacting with a client, he doesn’t really use a pick-up line but will try to casually suggest, “why don’t we go upstairs? I try to throw it in, in conversation. But, pick-up lines, I don’t really know. I try to use my eyes a lot.”

“Yesterday, I was with a client. He’s married and has children. He gave me a really nice tip -- 350€ for one hour but he’s like in love with me lately and I don’t know why. Like, its people keep telling me, it’s nice, but sometimes I feel, its how do you say? Choking? I don’t know. Suffocating, yeah.”

I asked Robin if he would ever consider dating a client, “No, because I think, if you would do that and you would get into a fight...I think that’s not a good way to start a
relationship. I mean, *Pretty Woman*, isn’t that what we all want? But, I think it's like if you
are with a very strong personality, you’ll never really develop... I think it would be a little
bit unequal, if you can understand that.”

When asked how Robin felt about his clients, he responded: “In general? Okay. I
mean, they are really old and I draw the line at about 60. I mean, if they are really older,
they are probably also easier to please.”

When asked about his ideal client, Robin responded: “Someone that I’m attracted to.
Um, that books me for a few hours, leaves a nice tip. And someone I can converse, talk to,
and I just feel like if you cannot talk to someone when you are doing work, then it’s a long
hour.”

In reference to how Robin feels about his co-workers, he explains: “There are
sometimes periods with new boys, that they are talking with a client and sometimes push
themselves too much. I mean, if I come to a client and I feel like he likes another boy, I will
ask, ‘Would you like me to introduce you to him?’ If I don’t make the money, I want
someone else to make the money.”

I asked Robin if he ever hangs out with his co-workers outside of work and he
responded: “Yeah, sometimes we go out but I don’t really go out that much.” Robin lets me
know that the boys don’t ever get too competitive and to an extent, help each other out. But
Robin reminds me, “not everyone is like that.” He makes about 65€ per hour from Boys
Club 21, but with tips, about 150€ per hour. It depends on the day how many clients that he
has but it isn’t often that Robin comes into work without seeing a client.

The worst part of the job is “waiting. And I also stopped smoking and then when I
came here, everyone is smoking so like I tried to not smoke. I tried not to smoke at home
but, yeah, it’s just here.”

The best part of the job: “the people you meet. But the friendships you make here,
sometimes you think you are really good friends and then they move somewhere else and
you don’t hear from them for over 6 months and then you hear from them when they need
a place to stay. I don’t like that.”

Robin describes the danger or risks associated with his jobs as a sex worker: “If the
condom breaks, that is a risk but of course, mentally, you have to be very strong. “ I asked
Robin if he ever feels discriminated against, and he responded, “No, because I’m not really
out [as a sex worker.] It prevents me from coming out because I think a lot of people feel
negative about the job that I do. Sometimes I hear a negative thing about sex work and
think I’m glad they’re not talking about me. I feel like it’s the same as being gay, if you’re not
out and you hear something negative, it prevents you from outing yourself.”

When asked about his attitude towards sex work, Robin responded, “If a man buys a
woman a drink and she goes to bed with him just because he bought her a drink, what’s the
difference?”

In the future, Robin might seem himself working as a sex worker, but not necessarily
at Boys Club 21. He would also like to write a book.

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**Interview #4**

I met with Lisa on Spuistraat after approaching her one evening at her window.

“I like sex. I think it’s evil, dirty and nice. It’s also beautiful in many ways, ya know?”
Lisa explained. “It depends on the person who you are with. The person who does the sex
with you, can either do it bad or nice, you know.” I asked Lisa if she ever has clients who are
good at sex, and she answered, “Yeah, some are really good at sex. I’m thinking what kind of
porn movie they’ve been watching and trying to react to that way because it’s like oh, you
only see this in movies. But that’s not even really good either.”

Lisa explained that prior to working as a window sex worker, “Well basically before,
I did normal stuff... Here I just wanted to try it just to see how it is...I just figured I was
going to try it myself. I didn’t ask anyone. I didn’t ask any girls or anything. I knew what the
prices was when I started asking around. I also had a lot of guys who ask me, if I didn’t want
to go out with them, if I say ‘no way’, ‘if I pay you, will you go out with me’ and would pay
me, and I obviously do it just for the exciting and see what happens, ya know. Cause
sometimes it were very good. Some men are just really lonely and they want the company,
obviously. You have a lot of strange people.”

In addition to working in live sex shows or as an escort at hotels, Lisa prefers to
work from her rented window. “I like better to be in the window because you have more
safety. If you need someone around you, you can get anyone. The police are not evil to you
here. In the United States, they’d probably throw you in jail and call you a crack head, and
say what the fuck are you doing, ya know? Something like that. It’s really different from
place to place. Where I really come from is Norway. It is totally different for the girls who
work there. They work on the street or in apartments. And there is mostly men who
controls them. And they don’t have anything that they can do. They are locked inside. Many
girls disappear in that, I think, and nobody knows about it because they don’t know where
the girls come from.”

“I think some of the clients you get a relationship to. Almost. My regulars. They come
often, even if they are married or maybe they are single. Some of them you have to tell
them not to expect too much. They have to take it easy.” Lisa explained how she reacts to
clients who tell her they are in love with her, “It’s a bit funny but you have to keep it serious
because you’re not sure how they’re going to react, you know. So you have to try to deal
with it in a nice way. Some of them, the handlers, I don’t think they really realize what they
are falling in love with. Because a girl who already does this work is probably not going to
be very good in a relationship if she doesn’t find a man that she really trusts and can really
accept what she is doing.”

“I hang out with my same-old friends and they know what I’m doing. They think it’s
a little bit strange. Cool, a little bit, yeah. I have lots of friends walk past some times, smoke
joints with me, come with drinks for me, and food. My friends are really supportive. At first
they were like, yeah, you like that work because you are so extreme sometimes. When it
comes to sex, everyone can hear you.’ And then they are like, ‘no I think it’s good for you,
this work, because you have a lot of fun with it.’ But I also know there’s a lot of girls that
don’t have fun with it, and there is a lot of men who are really rude, evil, think they own
you, and that’s not nice, you know. Men have a little twisted idea sometimes, especially
when they are starting in a negative tone, and I’m like, just forget it. There’s no point. Most
of the time you are going to start fighting with them and they are gonna scream and yell at
you. It’s not worth it, ya know? “

Lisa explains a typical day as “I mostly work evenings, from 7 til 5 or 6 in the
morning. Sometimes if I’m bored or I didn’t have clients I go home. I’ll go home, get drunk,
hang out with my friends or something. I try to do other stuff, I’m not only this, ya know.
Sometimes when I rent the room, I go out, have a couple of beers, and come back. If I look
out and say, na, let's go out and drink instead. Then I go out and I turn to the men outside, I'll have to meet you tomorrow and I go and pack up the room and the stuff here to give it back so that the other girl can have the room the next day. Sometimes I have a party in the room also. One time before Christmas, we were four girls upstairs in a party and drinking and making fools of themselves. It's like old memories, you know. Because they have a friend that does this and they think it's nice, it's not bad. Because all parents say it's so bad but in the way that everyone does something bad behind closed doors and don't tell anyone but basically the whole neighborhood knows it. So they don't want to talk out about it. Anyway, the people are whispering. why not just do it? And then they are standing there, shocked. It's in your face."

I asked Lisa if she ever hangs out with the other girls who work in the windows next to her and she answers, "Not too much. Because a lot of girls are very jealous and there is a lot of drama. Backstabbing. It's really competitive. Most girls are, or it's a certain group of girls that are Hungarian, Polish, or Russian. Those girls know each other, ya know? They like to pick on each other all the time. I don't like to stand too close to them. I stand here. It's like one German, a Bulgarian one, and a Spanish woman. I am the only Norwegian. So you know, it's okay because we're not going to bother each other, we have fun with each other also. Like, you get a little bit grownup and you realize there's just not any point in picking on each other. It's just not nice. But most of those girls who nag on each other they mostly have someone that takes the money from them. They work hard and it stands for nothing, ya know. So they get jealous of each other and start fighting with one another. It's not nice when you see other girls have a hard time because a boy controls them. " Lisa believes that "I think if I started this when I was younger, it wouldn’t go so good for me because I come from such abusive family, maybe for a lot of things. But now I have more control of myself and I know if someone tried to hurt me, I don’t accept it so easy anymore. I’m not, how you say, naive anymore. I say, just try, you just wait and you’re going to meet yourself in the door one day. Most of the people, when I say you’re going to meet yourself in the door, they get scared. Because they know it’s true. They hurt someone else, it always comes back to yourself one day.”

To get ready for work, Lisa says she does, “What you normally you do when you come for work – you put your makeup on. I don’t do too much. I just relax. I don’t sit and plan what’s gonna come and go because you never know who's coming. It could be someone who wants to lick your shoes, ya know? It’s a little bit funny. It’s a strange day. Some people come and they actually want SM because they can see you’re a little bit angry. They like that. Some days I try to be cute. Some people say I look too serious. But I try to be a little bit more funny and add some humor to stuff. Most of the guys say, ‘yeah, you look relaxed and not like you’re going to freak out.’ But then, when I can do many weird stuff in the room and they’re like laughing, ‘why the fuck did I go with you’? Then they realize, ‘she’s a really nice girl.’”

“I have a lot of tourists. American couples. And I also have some Italian women because their family is so Christian, against gay things, and they don’t know that they are lesbians so they come to the Red Light. It’s actually quite funny. There are a lot of them, actually. Sometimes also many girls pass by and they get so shocked, they don’t know what to do.”

“Women are more fun. Men always think they know what they want. But women like to test it out, more curious, ya know. Men try to do it in their own way. Sometimes I
fake [orgasms]. But sometimes I get irritated because they can’t fuck you so I get angry. And sometimes you get so horny that you want to fuck too but this guy can’t right. This is not funny. He even paid for it."

How much Lisa makes, depends upon each day. A typical client may only take 20 minutes. Lisa explains that she rents the window for 150€ so “you basically fuck two people for free every day. It’s very annoying sometimes. Sometimes it would be better if you worked from home, but you don’t want all these people at your house. They know where you live. You don’t want that. You want your own space sometimes.” Lisa says that she “fucks 5-20 people per day,” 20 being that maximum you could have in a day. “You have to think about your body also. You can’t push it because then you will get pain. Because it’s always a different shape of the dicks, you know, some small, some big, some massive. Like what the fuck is that? Will that fit in a condom? “

“The worst part of the job is that the men don’t have respect for women. They start calling them stuff and try to hit them. The only men I have had who’ve been like that have been from Morocco. I know some of the Moroccans are nice, but if they are drunk I tell them no. Go away; come back when you’re sober.”

The best part of the job is “that there are a lot of nice people on the job. It’s also like being a sex therapist sometimes. You have a lot of people that don’t just want to have sex. They want to talk about it. They don’t know about their technique or they don’t know how to get their girlfriend to have sex with them again because the girlfriend had a child or something. I try [to give advice]. It’s very difficult though. Men and women are different, they want different things. Maybe they want more attention with the children or the men. It’s very difficult because sometimes it’s not just about giving things. It’s about the loving thing. And money’s not so good to show love to women. Only when they think they want love.”

For work, Lisa might wear a bikini or matching underwear set with knee high stiletto boots, or even a t-shirt. “Sometimes I don’t like to show anything, but it’s just that if you don’t show off anything, they’re not going to come knock, ya know. It looks boring, and they have that at home.” Lisa tries to be “something that looks more different than home, “A little more kinky and exotic.”

“I don’t feel like I have to hide myself from when I’m doing because I’m not ashamed of it. They [my family and friends] all know what I’m doing, even if they like it or not. They get to hear it from me, for myself, not from others. I’m a grownup. I chose this path.”

The dangers to Lisa’s job are that “Men could be very rude and try to take off the condoms. That’s a very bad risk if you don’t keep your eyes on them. That’s the reason why we have mirrors in the rooms. So you can watch them from behind. Because some people can try to take off the condom and fuck it up and that’s not good. You never know what they have. It’s not so much risk though. You could get someone who looks nice but then tries to stab you, but hey, that doesn’t happen often. Some robberies are normal. But you have security in the rooms.”

I asked Lisa if she ever felt discriminated against and she answered, “Sometimes. As a woman, from other women. But I think that’s more, because they are in a way, a little bit jealous, because the other girl is doing it, and they’re good. And they can’t, but in a way, they want to try it. The other day, I had a girl who was rude to me and then she asked me for a cigarette. I was like, ‘You really want a cigarette from a bitch? You sure about that?’ And she realizes, oh, maybe I shouldn’t have said those things I said earlier and then go and
ask for a cigarette.’ That’s a little bit stupid. And then the bitch is so nice to give her a cigarette too. Just to make her feel bad, ya know. Like who’s the bitch now?”

When I asked Lisa about sex work, she naturally responded, “I like it. I was so high on myself because guys keep telling you how gorgeous you are, how sexy you are. Before when you hear that you are embarrassed, but now you are like,’ oh yeah, I am a little bit sexy.’ When you have someone who tries to tell you that you are a little bit ugly, then I am like, I don’t believe you because I have a hundred other people who tells me different. We also have women that pass by sometimes and say ‘you girls look so beautiful’. And that is really nice when a woman comes and says that to you because you don’t expect it. Because some women look so angry when they look at you. It’s very nice. It gives girl a little bit more comfort in a bad situation sometimes.”

In the future, Lisa might want to write a book or even make a movie about her experiences. Lisa would like to write a book about sex work and send it to Norway to help improve conditions for the girls working there.

**Interview #5**

I met Lukas through his work as a stripper, exotic dancer, and bar tender at Boys Club 21. Lukas does not work for Boys Club 21 as a sex worker as the other men there do. We met at a local establishment to discuss his experiences in the sex industry.

“People are into different things. There are all kinds of different people, you know? Like SM or something. And I strip. People who want to hide themselves because they have no power or are a little bit ashamed. People who are ashamed, they are like people who are of no relation to me. Because they like people, who are also like them, only just they are different. They just try to find these people who are like them, or why they are like that, that’s why they want to have connections to such people. Because I have enough experience with such people. It was very strange, always touching them and everything. Because I was the person who was not ashamed of anything. You know?”

“People are, what I know, from the years of experience that I worked [as a sex worker], I’ve met a lot of gay boys in my life, in Prague, Hamburg, Paris, Belgium, Rusland. And some of them are strong, some of them are not strong. But they, these people who are not strong, have to be passive. People who are strong, once they are undressed in the room, because half the people that are strong, they are pussies in the bed, sometimes. They just play big gangsters. I know, I know. I’ve met so many of them. Experience is very nice.”

“I do not work at Boys Club. I do not work at Boys Club like the boys in the rooms. I only work there as bar tender and stripper. Not with the opas [grandfathers, or old men]. My job, in real life, I like dance, for money. I am a private dancer for money. I like to dance, yeah. If people pay me good money, and pay taxes for me, and give me good contacts, I dance. I am very happy to dance. That’s why I make my own company for entertainment with dancers, shows.”

“I started it a year ago. We started with tour of Europe and two parties. And it was big. Preparations were very heavy. I have to build a website, I have to do graphic design. I am alone, at my company. I have a book keeper and we employ other people who work for my company. It’s a new company so I don’t have to pay for the next two years. We are getting incorporated. I get advice, I discuss everything with my book keeper.”
“I worked as a dancer for years with other different companies. We have choreography. I see different kinds of dancers and we teach each other dance. Big time or small, I grew up dancing. It’s a lot with your body. It’s a challenge. I love it.”

“A typical day is like appointment, appointment, appointment. People are talking about business, license, photos, presentation, organization... New faces, new bodies, looking, finding good prices, asking for some shows, more exotic or something. Finding people who we can work together in the future, you know?” Lukas emphasized how much networking he does for the new business and all of the “talking. Always a lot of talking.”

“I am the management. I am the boss of my company. I am the head of the business. My entertainment at the moment, I am very busy with one very big company, but also everywhere, around the world. And these companies want something from me that nobody else has. Video profiles, worldwide... A lot of pictures and agents and formal wear. We are going to do a big entertainment video to send worldwide.”

Lukas expects hundreds of people at the next event he is planning. “The company who is working with us, they get to say how much so that they also make a profit. We make about 150€ for one hour. One hour working on stage, 250€, for price. There is no tax on it and they have to pay commission to our company. We are well-known. Special artists for work or rent. In New York City or Las Vegas, if someone wants to find us, they can find us on our website.” Lukas hopes to find more work in Amsterdam, Canary Islands, Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Hamburg, and Berlin. He speaks five languages – two perfectly, Dutch and German, but also Polish, Slovak, & Czech.

Lukas explained his attitude towards sex work: “It’s one of the oldest jobs and the best jobs for people to make good money. When you work in the sex business, you can be very rich when you are very good. I have a lot of boyfriends or contacts [in the sex industry.] They are not in it anymore. They are now very rich. They have their own apartments, sports cars. They have everything. It depends on how clever how rich they are.” To be successful at sex work, one must be “Beautiful, correct, professional, and open-minded. Like, someone tells you his fantasy. You need to make the night with the client exciting. When the client is happy, they call back and of course, he will pay a lot of money... You know, they come back and you can make a lot more money in a short time if you are a good boy. If you have 30 female customers and 30 male customers in one month, then you have 60 customers. You can easily make about 10,000€ in this business. For example, I worked with 20-25 women a month. I was visiting women in their houses and they paid me for service. I was working in Hamburg. It was a very good service. I have a price 150€ per hour. And sometimes they pay me €250, depends on service. If I would kiss her that costs extra.” For 150€, Lukas explains that he would “fuck her, she sucks my dick, I fuck her. Pussy everywhere. I make her ready, very formal.”

Lukas does not feel the need to hide his work from others:“I tell everybody, everything. I don’t care. It’s my life. When I give it to people, I can fuck how much I want and I can have sex with who I want, only because I am a person like that. I was doing this before when I was younger and now I’m older, I’m not one of those boys who wants to go and fuck everybody. I have only one partner, always. I find somebody and I make him king. And when I like it, I stay, for 10 years. Longest relationship is now, 5 years.”

Lukas comments that, “At the moment, I don’t know who I am because I have too much work. I work everywhere, in the shop, on design, everything. It won’t stop. Even now, when we finish, I have an appointment at 6’o’clock and then at 8’o’clock I will be at the
house of a woman, to speak about her entertainment because she has a company that makes clothes. Expensive. Her models are working at my show. I am very busy at the moment with dance, dance, dance. Everywhere.”

I asked Lukas more about how he presents himself to his clients. He responded, “When I’m lazy, and I have to perform, I am acting. Everybody is different... Sometimes I feel like shit, sometimes I feel good. I am not going to do the show forever, my whole life. It’s only now, because at the moment, nobody from my friends want to work there, like this, because they want to sell sex for money. Every month, sex for money, it’s good, yeah?

I asked Lukas about any dangers to his job: “I like to fuck too much. Everybody knows everything. I don’t care. As long as I have an open mind. As long as I am safe. In sex, I never put something strange, I never go to extremes, I never go to the dirty ways of sex with strangers because it is very scary, with sicknesses. People who do this are sick. [People] Who fuck without condoms. For a little money? Not in my life.”

In the future, Lukas would like to build, own, and operate a dance club “that Amsterdam has nothing like and has never seen before. With very good dancers, strippers, cages and sex club. No women there, only men.” Lukas does not like dealing with female dancers and he says, “I do not like contact with women.”

I asked Lukas what else he thought I should know for my research, and he explained that, “Everyone who has sex, has different ideas. For the men on the little girls, when normal sexual life doesn’t make you happy anymore or he is so hungry and fucking horny, that he can’t handle it, and he jumps on a woman like a wild animal and he abuse her. That is the thing that you need to know in your life that he is not, he doesn’t want to do it. But he is not strong. Too much testosterone. And he will do something sick. And he is raping many and many another too to make him happy. It is a sickness. Everybody is sick in a way. Somebody put a dildo in his ass or a stick in his dick, everybody has a different sexuality sickness. Somebody likes hairy girls, or shaved girls, young or old women, young boys, it’s all about sexuality. It’s a very big world. I found out really from years, so many. You are very young but you find out now. There are very different neighborhoods where people are all different. I hope you can understand what I’m talking about. Not only there, but also in the rooms with the girls. And if you know how it’s going to go. The girls that I knew were very nice. Like models. Now they are fat. Now they are passing time with things of their own. Hand cuffs or masochist sex. People are changing, looking, trying to make money. Not everybody, there are some people only working in leather. Or rich people, they get horny and want leather. Or latex. Or rubber.”

Lukas explained that he knows what people want because “I am a sexual being myself and I see sexuality from hetero, bisexual, transvestite, homo, everything.” Lukas learned how to please clients from porn and from having a lot of sex: “I love sex and I want to show that I am the person to do the sex right. I know, that’s how I am. For the women, I love. For the man, sex is not like with the woman. For men, I have to be boy. But with women, I get to be the man.”

[It should be noted that when signing my consent form with the heading “sex work in Amsterdam,” Lukas edited both copies of our consent forms to read “strip work” instead.]
Interview #6

I met Josje through the acquaintance of Metje Blaak. At the start of our interview in her window, I was distracted by all of the passersby peering in at us. Josje just told me that I'd have to get used to it because all of this attention was part of the job.

“My name is Josje and I am 41 years old. I start this job when I was maybe 19 or 20. And I do this job with a girlfriend for maybe 2 years time together. We rented a window together and also working in clubs for a few months at first. Of course, you hear about [windows] how you can do your own thing and make your own money, and that was very interesting because if you work in a club, you half to share half of the money and you need to take all of the clients because you cannot say no, most of the time, 'I do not want this client.' You just have to take the client. Here, I think I refuse about 70% of the men that want to come inside. But I can do it, because I do all these things and I have different things than most girls so yeah, now I’m in a position that I can do that. But if you have to make like 30€, let’s say, for a blow job or a fuck, you have to make 400€ just to pay for all your cuts and have all your money. So you can imagine, you cannot say, ‘I do not want you inside.’ You just take them all.

“You pay 100€ for rent for one day until 7pm. So you have to bring your key at 6:45. I have to stop at 6 because I have to pack all my things and leave the room a little bit nice. You can start at about 10 am but I start around 11 or 12 and for me, that’s okay. So you have about 6 hours to work and at night, the girls pay more money. It’s not the same amount. Of course, it depends on how much money you make that you pay taxes on but yeah, you get whatever you want. Some girls say, yeah, I only make my rent and a little bit for myself. Then you don’t pay so much tax. But that of course, is not the way to do. I have two houses and a car and of course, I need to make a certain amount to pay for all of those things [referring to wall of sex toys in her room].”

“It starts at 50€ and that is all for normal sex. You know, fuck, suck position or oil massage. Or you come in and you have to know what you want to do. For example, if someone wants something with anal or S&M, it’s 50€, then I can fuck him with my strap-on or use one of my other toys. But then that’s it. They don’t have sex with me and if they want something else then it’s 100€ for half an hour. But I don’t really watch the clock because you never know. Sometimes it goes quickly and other times a little bit longer. It’s not a problem. 100€ is a lot of money. I hear a lot of other girls have a timer and they ring a bell. That is the worst thing ever, I think. For 100€, everything is possible. So if they say they want to do something, or have sex with me or, everything is fine. A lot of girls ask for more money for everything you want to do inside. So for instance, you pay 50€ or 70€, let’s say you want to use the gas mask or you want a little anal, then they say ‘now you have to pay 20€ more. And oh yeah, if you want to do this or that then you have to pay this or that more.’ I don’t think that’s a nice way to be intimate with somebody. For every 10 minutes to ask for money. That’s just stupid. That’s not relaxed. So I don’t do that. It’s one price and it’s for a certain amount of time and then you can do whatever the person likes to do or what I like to do.”

“I also have, of course, a lot of people who come inside and want to be my slave. They say ‘you can do everything you like with me.’ That is the most difficult because then I say, well, okay but then it is going to be my fantasy. But then my fantasy can be very different from the client of course, and most people they say ‘oh you can do anything you
like to do with me,’ and then I say ‘okay, I’m going to fuck you in the ass or something’ ‘oh no, nothing anal!’ then I say, ‘okay, then tell me what you want!’ So that’s a little difficult. Of course, as people visit you more often, then you know a little bit what they want. Regulars are nice. Because every time you can go a little bit further or do different things. You already know what they are interested in.”

“I like them all [my clients] because I only take clients that I have a good connection with and it feels right. If someone’s at my door, then I want to have a little conversation with him. Some people say ‘oh yeah, I come in’ and I say, ‘oh no, you have to wait because I want to speak a bit with you.’ Because not everybody is nice. Some people are just being rude or expect me to do things that I don’t want to do.” I asked Josje who she typically rejects and she explained, “Most of the time it is the people that wear their sunglasses and they keep them up while they are speaking to me, they are -- what is the word in English? You know, if you are talking with someone, you take them off. Some men don’t and they keep them up and want to speak with me, then I say ‘take it off.’ And they are 50% already, for me, somebody I’m gonna reject. So if you make one more mistake after that one, then no more for you!”

“I always sit in the back here on the bench. I wear a long skirt and a leather corset. So I am fully dressed but it is, of course, a little bit sexy. It’s not naked, you don’t see anything. And some people ask me, ‘stand up, turn around, how much is it?’ and that is definitely a ‘no’ for me.” I asked Josje if she ever had a problem with drunk tourists and she explained that “In the day time, it’s okay. There are not so many drunk people. The problem is not so much being drunk as long as you behave. You can be drunk, I don’t care, as long as you’re okay. Of course, some people visit me and they drink a few beers to get more relaxed or because there is nice weather outside now. And if I’m busy and they have to wait, then you go to a bar and drink a few beers and then they come here with me and say ‘oh, I drink a little bit too much.’ But they are just nice and I know them so it’s not a problem. But now if people are really, really, drunk, I’m not going to take them. Why should you? I think that most of the girls that take the drunken people just to rip them [steal money from them]. That happens of course, when people are very drunk. I am never going to steal from you, but for somebody, it happens. There is a certain type of girl that takes in the very drunk people. Just to rip them off. A lot of girls have a pimp and they have to make the most of the money so they literally pull them in, because they so drunk, they easy to rip, so yeah.”

“I don’t really see a lot of the other girls who work here [on this street.] I see a few of the girls that work in my house here, and well, I have a lot of nice neighbor girls, it’s okay. And if it’s like, she is from Bulgaria, the other girl is Dutch, and then two more Dutch girls, and another from Romania, but I think they have a pimp so I’m not gunna speak to them. That is my thing, I just ignore it a little bit.” I asked Josje about the girls she does speak with and she described their relationship as “totally open. We talk about everything. If you open this door, there is a hallway and you can all open your doors. I can show you. You see? You can open your doors and talk with each other. We also go to each other and talk with each other. We laugh a lot. If I have a client, then maybe I do this nurse thing, you know? Dressed up like a nurse and giving him an exam and then I’m thinking ‘oh, I need an assistant,’ you know, ‘oh you like that?’ ‘Is that possible?’ Of course that’s possible. I take the girl from room 5, maybe you’ll see her later. And she also dresses up like a nurse and when we do this together, it is very nice. And sometimes it is very difficult to stay serious. But with her, most of the time, it goes fine. One time it didn’t because I brought like these things [surgical
masks] to put on, like this, and I gave her one and said ‘okay, everything needs to be very sterilized here so put it on.’ And I put it on, and I look at her, and we both start to laugh at one another. And I’m just looking at her and thinking, okay, this is gonna be fine but like, I can’t stop laughing, you know? So I say, ‘ah, well, you need to sterilize everything, you don’t need to take care of the patient, I do it myself.’ Then I just go in the hallway and laugh until I’m fine again. It was very funny. Sometimes you just look at each other and think I’m in the wrong movie. But I really love my job. It’s so nice. People who come in here are somewhat surprised, they always say ‘oh, you’re so relaxed and I can just be myself. You can say whatever you like and you don’t think it’s anything strange.’"

“I like a lot of people [I meet], but for me, this is my job. It’s not like, in private time, I go out with my clients or get drinks with them. No, I just want to keep it separated. So it’s only here. Sometimes people fall in love with you... I also have a lot of people who are mentally disabled. They can function real good in the world, they can visit me on their own, but they have no girlfriend and they live in a very – what is the word? – superficial world. They come here, visit us, and then they fall in love and they really think you are a little bit their girlfriends. So I have people I text with everyday, not ten times, but maybe they text me ten times and I send back one time. They are really nice and maybe they have nothing further. Maybe they have some kind of job with the government, gardening things a lot of times or something like that and no friends, a little bit lonely. So for me, it’s okay to send some them messages. Why not? They are nice and they visit me every week so why not?”

“I love my job! This is the best! If there is ever one day when I think, this is it, I don’t like this anymore, I’m gonna do something else then I will. It’s not like I’m stuck here or anything. I can cook very well so open my own restaurant. I have so many things that interest me. Something with animals, maybe an animal daycare center or something. For now, at the moment, I’m gonna stay here. As long as I like it. I don’t know. The things I do, I think you can do till maybe you’re 60 or more. But I don’t know if I’ll still like it then. You never know. Because when I start this job, I only did it like 2 years and then I was working in a bar. I told you I started with my girlfriend? We worked for 2 years behind the window, save a lot of money, and then we buy this bar in this place that we lived before. And we still have it, for now, maybe 15 or 17 years? More than 15. We should throw a party for that. Well, she got married and had children so I did the bar, most of the time. And now the children are big and now she does it. Because I get a little bit fed-up with it 7 days a week. Every night until 5 o’clock! At the end of it, I still love the bar but I don’t want to work the nighttime. I don’t do the day anymore. She now does it totally because I did it for 15 years. I used to work there for 5-6 days and then take a day free, and work here. Because I really loved it.”

“I didn’t do this a few years ago. I just did it like the other girls. And for me, I made a little bit of money. As you say, ‘I can live from it.’ And this guy came to my door one day with a strap-on dildo and ask me if I can fuck him with it. I say, ‘no, no, no. I’m not going to do that. I don’t know how to do it’. And he said, ‘please, can you try it?’ I said, ‘okay, I’m gonna try it. But if I don’t like it, then we just stop.’ And he said okay. But I love it! And I think, this is really fun. This was real good. I didn’t know that! Oh my goodness! This is great! And he stayed one week, he was on holiday. And everyday he’d bring something else, like hand cuffs or like a little whip or something to put on your balls or something. And I thought, everyday is getting a bit better for me! Nicer! He said I could keep some of the things. And then I buy some things. When I put them on the wall, I get different customers
and then they bring you things. Some things you make yourself. Well, it's like this. I still want more things. Sometimes you throw something away or think, like this one I don't use so much and you buy something new, which you think is better. So yeah, it's like a never-ending story. It is wonderful. Yeah, great. I didn't know I'd love it so much, but yeah, for me it's good. Now it's 3 or 4 years I think.”

I commented that Josje's sex toy collection displayed through her window was unlike any other window that I'd seen. She said, “Yeah, there are some other girls with a few toys but it's not only the toys. There are also girls making more signs that say what they want.” At this point, Josje was interrupted by a regular customer that she knows. Josje jokingly said that when she has nothing to do here, no one comes, but since she has started our interview, she has seen several clients walking about. She assures me that it is okay for our interview to continue and concludes that she thinks it is more popular today because of the holiday. “Yesterday they do something with their families, and today, they do something for themselves,” she remarks.

“I think I am just myself. I am not totally different but I do need all these things around me to do what I do. Because sometimes I am a little bit late, and then I walk here and then there’s a client waiting for me and he wants something special and it is difficult to do something without my toys. Of course, then I have to look in all my bags for the toys and then I am not relaxed, yeah? It needs to be like, everything needs to be unpacked and I have to be ready. Then time just goes by itself. It is different all the time. I don’t have one standard thing that I do or ten standard things. They just come in and it’s going to be different every time. If everything is unpacked, I'm ready and if somebody that doesn't need toys or anything with me, then that is okay. Nothing special, like rituals or anything. I am just being myself and everything and whatever my imagination comes into my mind and then it's gonna come. It’s different every time.”

I asked Josje what happens if she’s having a bad day and she explains, “Yeah, everybody has those days. Like ugh, I don’t want to go to my job today. It happens a few times a year. And if you have a boss, you say you're sick. And I just say I’m not gonna come. I call the office and say, ‘see you tomorrow!’ Yeah, but of course, you have to pay the rent. But if you’re really not feeling fine, and sometimes there is nothing to do with the job, you just don’t feel like going here and then you stay home. Because what difference does it, I’m not going to do anything if I don’t feel good. I have to feel good, you know. Because I have to smile and be nice and be properly to every person. You cannot say ‘oh I’m having a bad day’ because they don’t care. They just want to have a nice time. And they are paying for it, so of course, they get a nice time.”

I asked Josje about any dangers or risks to her job and she responded, “I think there are but I’ve never experienced anything like this. Yeah, so I think it’s stupid to say that there are not, because there are of course but I don’t know what the figures, if it happens more accidents with prostitutes or with other people, normal people walking in the streets or breaking into somebody’s house. I don’t know. I actually think it’s less. Especially with the clients and girls related. I am not speaking about the pimps, of course. That is a different story. But for the clients and the girl taking the client in. I don’t know but I think it’s so many girls working here. You have the alarm, the social things, they film here and everything. I think in this area, it’s not so much dangerous. I think if you work in the streets or you work somewhere in a house, I think it’s not real for sex workers. I think it’s more
dangerous there. I think really, when you use drugs and work the streets and go with a client in the car, like that. I think that's really dangerous."

"Maybe not the safest way but it depends on the clients that you take in. There are some girls that, like I said to you before, take in the rude people, or the drunk people or all the people that I don't want to have inside. And of course, then you have every day problems with your clients. Because you take in the wrong clients. And maybe you do it on purpose. Some girls take clients in that maybe look a little bit stupid or maybe they don’t speak up for themselves so they are just gonna make 50€ and in 5 minutes, say ‘well, your time is finished.’ And then the clients say, ‘what are you talking about? I was just inside.’ ‘You need to put on your clothes and get dressed or pay more money.’ And of course, this is not okay, but they say, ‘what do you want? Do you want me to call the police or get my pimp or what?’ This is just rude girls. They are not okay but they also work here. And if they have a client, most of them, they think, ‘oh okay, I just made a mistake. I will just take my things and go.’ But there is also somebody that is going to think, I’m not going to do that. I just want my money back or I am going to do something. Then of course, they push the alarm and it is a problem. But it is always the same girls who do that. So in the end, I'm not gonna look anymore. If it happens 3 or 4 times a day in one week long, then I’m totally finished because I know that the girl is not okay.”

"I never used my alarm. So this is enough. I have had somebody who want to put on more light. And just pushes my button but that’s something else! Because then they hit it and that is very funny you see.” Josje points out the multiple panic buttons in different positions around her room. “And I didn’t know how to put it off because I’d never used it! So there is a light in the hall and everybody knows the alarm is with me. Because I never used it and everybody barged in here to say ‘oh what is going on?’ and I say ‘nothing, I don’t know how to shut it off!’ This was just a stupid thing but yeah, I don’t think it’s real dangerous. That’s why I said, you just need to make a conversation with somebody, look good. Everybody has some instinct in themselves, listen to them. If there is some reason, you don’t know why but you don’t feel good, don’t take the person in. Your first reaction is usually the best."

Josje explains if she ever felt discriminated against: "Yeah, I think so because this job is really, um, what is the word in English? It is important because a lot of people visit the girls for so many different reasons. And then if you speak to people, they say, ‘yeah, well it is necessary that the girls are there. It is okay, maybe, for other girls could get raped or more.’ That is not true, I think, but okay, everybody thinks their own thing. Then the next day, they come here and they start laughing, like 'look at this or look at this!' and I’m thinking, what is wrong with you? This is not okay. That is sometimes difficult.”

“These days we pay taxes and must do all these types of things to be straight for the government. But if you go to the bank, and you say, okay, this is how much money I make, here’s my papers in order with my book keeper and then they say, ‘this is not a real job. You cannot loan money or anything. That is not okay, yeah? So that is the thing that I feel discriminated against.”

“Now, most of the people here that shout at people or do the things, yeah, well they shout at everybody. What’s the difference, so I’m not worried about it. Sometimes I think, did you look in the mirror? Na, you can better make a joke out of it. So no, I don’t feel discriminated here but sometimes they don’t respect you. That is something else.”
I asked Josje what the worst part of her job was and she responded, “For my job? There is nothing, I like everything. And I chose to sit here, myself, in front of the window. So actually I cannot complain. Besides, I only don’t like the tourists [motions to a tour group in front of her window]. I hate it. Sometimes you have like this group with a guide and I don’t know them. They never visit me or ask me if it’s okay to stand there and tell something about what I do. I don’t know. They tell different stories and they lie. They don’t pay me for it. So sometimes I say, ‘hello, are you going to speak with me one day? But also, maybe to give me some money, because they pay you and you are just standing there for free and I don’t make any money if you stand here with twenty to thirty people.’ And that also happens every day so that’s why I just don’t like it. It happens every day and I think, it could be different, you know. They could also speak with me or speak with the other girls and ask, ‘do you want to be part of this?’ You know? Or something together. They think I just beat the shit out of everyone who comes inside my room. That’s not true. They just tell so many crazy stories that I think, what is this man saying about me? This is not okay. I just dislike that as a part of my job but I can also chose to work somewhere else. Maybe in a club or private place. It’s one of the things I dislike from working behind the window.

Josje explains her feelings about sex work saying that, “I think it’s a necessary thing. I do this job for five days and then I have one morning every week that I work for a foundation that works with mentally and physically disabled people. So I go there. I have clients with people who are only in a wheelchair and they can’t move themselves below the head or something like that. And they cannot have sex but they might just want to take a shower with somebody who’s naked also, you know. And they can laugh with them and have fun and see somebody else just -- They have nothing. Every day you have some sister or brother who puts you in the shower and gets you dressed and other things. They don’t have any intimacy. So I go there and I have two or three clients a week so that’s also the sex work. But if you are at like a birthday party for somebody and they ask you what you do, and then you say, ‘oh yeah, well I’m a sex therapist. I work with mentally and physically disabled people.’ Then everybody say, ‘oh that’s very interesting.’ But if I say, ‘I am a sex worker and I work behind the windows in Amsterdam,’ then everybody gasps but it’s the same job. It’s the same. I do the same. It gives me the same good feeling but it’s just how you give it a name, what you do.”

When I asked Josje about how she feels about the negative attitudes that other might have about sex work, she responded, “I did something for tv. for AT5 a few times and there’s going to be a documentary later and I already did one. The people in the street were so very nice to me. I would expect a lot of the people in the street to be rude, maybe, I don’t know. I guess I didn’t know so that was the most frightening part, of how is everybody going to react. Everyone was so real nice, even up until today. People come up and say, ‘I saw you on tv, real nice!’ and ‘I love the way you do it differently and that you are so -- you love your job. Real nice!’ I had this one lady and she was on a bike with the kids in the front and I was walking with my dog in the street and she was ringing her bell and I’m thinking, what’s this, you know? And she’s like, ‘Yeah I see you on tv! Very good! Loved it!’ So that was real nice so it’s not like negative things. What I did for the tv, I only get like positive things and no negative things and that was it. But I was also surprised because I thought it was a little bit scary to do that, but no, it was totally a different then what I thought was gonna happen. Everybody was just nice and they liked it.”
To conclude our interview, Josje shared with me what she believes is the best part of her job: “The best part for me is to do all these crazy things and to have a nice time and still make your money. And that I’m free. I’m free to do whatever I like and I think that I know it is like that but I don’t think about it so much. But I think if you work for a boss or something, you have to do what they ask you to and sometimes for a little money. And I can do whatever I like or just say, ‘I’m not gonna do that. Bye, bye!’ and just do everyday what I like. Yeah, so I’m thinking, I’m very lucky. I still make money, I have no worries. So yeah the best part is just be free. I’m free to do whatever I like and that’s the best part I think.”

Interview #7

I met with Lena through the acquaintance of Josje and we discussed her experiences as a sex worker at her window prior to beginning her work for the day.

“If I say something wrong, can you change it?”

“I am coming from Bulgaria, do I have to say my name or something? [At this point, I assured Svetlena that I would remember her name.] “I am coming from Bulgaria and I am here for three years for this job. And I love it.” She worked as a sex worker in Bulgaria for about a year before coming to Amsterdam to do this work. “In Bulgaria, the girls there are mostly in the street or in hotels. When I was there, I was working in hotels but when you are in Bulgaria you have to work for someone else. You cannot work for yourself. Here, I work for myself. It’s perfect. But in Bulgaria, it’s just, no way, no way. You have to go to work and at the end of the day, somebody takes your money. So there it is not possible to work for yourself. Because Bulgaria has different parts and the pimps all have different territory. So, okay, you want to work in my territory? Okay, it’s good but you will pay me, otherwise there is no way to work. So there you have to work for someone else always. They are not gonna let you work alone.”

“I came and when I started to work in the window, it was quite shocking for me in the beginning. Because when I came, I also came with pimp from Bulgaria. And, um, I have to work because I don’t have any choice at that moment. And yeah, they just put me in the window, and I was so, just, ‘what the fuck is going on?’ I was so ashamed because all I do was sit naked and so many people and holy shit, it was terrible.”

“Of course, I wanted to work for myself but many of the things get in the way. Most of the girls that come here and for me, we’re poor girls, people with problems in the family. For me I’m also the case. I’ve always been problem child to my family. And on my way to come here, it was just to get away from Bulgaria. You don’t stay there. And coming here, of course, I don’t like it to work for someone else, but at that moment, I don’t have any choice. I have to do that. Later, I start to speak with the people, slowly and I was quiet for a few months, work for my pimp and that was because it was kind of, 24/7 you have to work. Day and night time. You don’t have a relax. You only have a two or three hours to sleep if you can and for the rest of the time, you have to be all on work so it was quite hard. And in this way, of course, I don’t like it. No normal person would like that job.”

“They [the pimps] don’t take care of nothing. But normally, the deal with them is, because we live a few girls in an apartment so the things is then, some of them, they coming and staying by us because the pimps, in this way, they can control us. They don’t let you talk or live alone or separate you from the girls. They keep the girls in the same society
because it’s more easier to control the girls. So we live with them totally. And then when we get away from pimp but of course, I’m the one of the lucky ones.”

“And the first one, we live with him. And afterwards, I run from him with another girl but we went to another one, also Bulgarian. With the other one, we had our own apartment but our apartment was next to him so he was almost every day there and every night. So it was the same. So they is always around to control you, otherwise, the girl is going to do whatever they want. This is their power. Otherwise, if they cannot control you then the girls say, okay, fuck off, I can work for myself. But in this way, they control you in a psychic way, you know? It’s not like they beat you. Okay, there are people that beat the girls, of course, but most of the pimps, they just wash your brain. You are so washed, so you have to go to work.”

“In this way, [the pimps say] ‘Oh yeah, you can go to work but if you feel tired, you don’t have to go to work. But if you come and say, ‘okay, yeah, tonight I cannot go to work.’ ‘No you have to go. You cannot stay at home, blah blah blah.’ So they always work you. And any way, you cannot say you don’t go to work, doesn’t matter how you feel, unless you are going to die, okay, but for the rest, you have to work for them. But most of the girls, I think they thought they work also for pimps because some of them say, ‘Oh no, he’s my boyfriend.’ Oh woman, are you crazy? It is not possible for him to be your boyfriend, take your money. But most of the girls in this way, are very easy-going people. They are people that don’t have that much attention from someone else to love them and all this stuff. So if they meet a nice guy and he starts talking to them in a very nice way and gives them enough attention, they already fall in love with him so in this way, when you fall in love with someone, then you cannot love someone in this way. ‘Okay we can go to Amsterdam and do something and then we save money and then in the end we gonna marry and blah blah blah.’ And so for the girls, it’s like okay, I can do that for you. So then after that, when we save money and we’re gonna have life together and in the end, what’s happening is they’re stuck in the window. He took all her money and then he has a house in his own country, and he probably has an expensive car. And then the girls don’t stop in the window because they have to work. And in this way, if you want and you get in this circle, it is very difficult to get away. Very difficult. But I am one of the lucky ones.”

I asked Lena how she was able to get away from her pimp and she explained, “The other thing is I think in mostly in this way. Most of the pimps will say something like, oh yeah, I know your family and so I can do something bad to your family and make bad things for you. So the girls are, in this way, they are okay, everybody loves his family so nobody is going to let something happen as much as he can protect them. So the thing is, the girls don’t have a choice. They are so afraid that he will do something to their families, but the thing with me is my pimp, tell me the same. ‘Yeah, if you try to run away from me I am gonna send some Moroccans shoot you in the window’ and blah blah blah all these bull shit stories. But I’m thinking, okay what the fuck, he cannot do nothing to me, because he needs me. I make his living, in this way. As long as I make money, he will not kick me out. Never what he think. But the girls don’t think in this way. And the thing’s I run from him in this way because I think, okay I don’t have nothing to loose. What the fuck more worse can this happen. I don’t have any contact with my family and normally, if he’s a smart guy, he never gonna do something to my family because nobody want to have extra problems. They are a little bit smart for this. So in the end, when I came on work, I start to speak with the clients. I know where I can go and ask for help and blah blah blah, all these things. So in the end, I
have a whole plan and of course, I also have a little bit of help from people. So when I was sure then if I get away from him, I have place where to stay, safe place, and I can relax, you know? And then organize my things, then I just run. I have my papers so that’s why I waited. I have to work for him for two months just to get my papers because I don’t know where to go or what to do. So I get my papers, then I say, okay, fuck off now. And I don’t tell him, I don’t need you. Then I just take off one evening after work and at that time, my boyfriend, he came. ‘Okay, you come by my house and you know, then in the morning I bring you.’ Okay, perfect. But he knows my story, this guy.”

At this point, Svetlena excused herself “With my what the fuck language blah blah blah. No it’s my speaking, I don’t care. And when I go to the police I speak in this way also and they were a little bit shocked. They don’t like me, the police, because I go to make my papers. I go through my pimp’s stuff. And I have a very big fight with them also. But this can be very good material for you because they [the police] told me, ‘do you know some girls that need help?’ Okay, because of course, everybody works for pimp. ‘Yeah, you can tell us, because we have trust and can do something.’ It doesn’t matter because the police do nothing for girls. Nothing. It is very sad. Because for first time, when I run, I have a safe place to stay and be protected. Okay, they say, ‘let’s make paper.’ Of course, then they make paper and then they say, ‘okay now go home and we wait to call you’. Nobody is going to speak in this way, are you crazy? The girls who care and want to speak, you have to give them protection. In the moment that they are by police station, you have to have house for them. They can never come back to the pimp. Because I tell women, you gonna bring me to the dentist, okay you go home and we call you. What do you expect, that girls are gonna speak in this way? Nobody will speak because for them it will be big trouble if pimp understand because they’ve been to the police. The police is mother fuckers. But for me, it was good because I have a big mouth in this way. “

I asked Lena how she feels about her job and she responded, “Honestly, very, very fine. Better than ever. Actually, when I work for pimp, I feel very shit. Anyway, I don’t care for work, I didn’t care if I came in the window, I don’t do nothing about it. If somebody came, okay, I don’t care because I don’t have that zeal to work and to make money because I know at the end of the day or at the end of the evening, somebody will take my money. And I say okay, why should I do my best to make money? Like, the person who take it, they don’t care at all. But they take your money and separate it from that. You have to pay your bills for what you have, you have to pay your taxes but that is not the case, because they do not tell you that you have to pay taxes. And you have to pay your insurance in case the girl has insurance because when I work for him, I don’t have those kinds of things. No health care. When I work for him I have nothing. They don’t give a shit, they don’t care. For them, it’s just, ‘okay, she’s my moneymaker. Perfect, as much as I can make money from her, just great. If something happens and I cannot anymore make money from her or whatever, for me it’s done’. They don’t care at all for the girls. They don’t care at all. I didn’t have any five, ten cents in my pocket when I work for pimp. Five cents is quite good because in this way, they control you. For in this way, when I work in the window, I feel like a dog. Just terrible. I feel like I’m nothing, honestly. Like, I don’t know for what I exist in this world. All this shit. But since when that changed since when I work for myself, the big difference because I love my job. And if I can do that till 50, I will do that. I love it because I have freedom and a lot of friends also in this way and I do whatever I want but I love my job. At the moment I’m just proud of that of what I’m doing. I love it, to do this job.”
“Okay sometimes I can be quite irritated but everybody has this mood. But for the rest, I love my job and I do my job with pleasure. I love it. I am never ashamed of that, what I’m doing. Before, when I work for pimp, I get shit and when I try to tell people what and it’s like let me guess, you’re from Bulgaria. You’re 25. Your language is not that good so what the fuck are you doing here? Sure, I’m not that good. You cannot work in the shop. So you see I think it is the best for me when the people know what I’m doing or they see me with my pimp or something. For me, it was very embarrassed. But know, I just don’t care because everybody who knows me knows what I’m doing. And I’m very proud of that, so I don’t care. I love it.”

“My day, well, every day is different. Mostly, I’m coming and I make my things then we started. And I love my job because every time is coming different people. Okay so already I have regular clients. But also some kind of people who come by you 2 or 3 years almost every week, it’s quite fun because you know, it’s not anymore like you’re working. Okay, they come and they pay you, of course, for your time, but we have so much fun, it’s not normal. We have so much fun. I don’t feel like I’m working. I love to do that. Yeah, so mostly, my days are very happy. Very happy. I love it! I love to come and work. And last time when I had two weeks free, oh my god, I get crazy. I just couldn’t handle it. Two weeks and I start to miss my job. So many persons and other people. It’s kind of like you have relation with them. Kind of relation and some of them, when they more longer come, then their families ‘oh hello darling, how are you? How is your kids today? Or what did you do last week? It’s just this kind of relations, I just love it. It’s not like, uh, okay, only sex. You know, for me, it’s not like that. I love it. I cannot do that. Alright they come and pay me and sex and then they go away. We have much more than this. And they love it. They love it. With the girls, when somebody come and pay us for our attention for twenty minutes, for normally he cannot get that by the wife or mostly by the girlfriend, if you know what I mean. And I think they love it because they have a lot of attention and when they come, it’s all about them. In the room, it’s all about them, you know? So I quite love my days. Every day is fun. And I love it. I cannot stay without my job, never. People might think, oh she’s a whore. She likes to fuck [laughs] But no, it’s because most of the girls, they don’t like this job. And this job is quite difficult to do if you don’t like it. It’s very difficult because when you look at it in this way, every time is different people. You don’t know the person. Normally, in normal life when you start having sex with someone else, you have to know a little bit about the person. Except if you’re broke… Most of the girls, we know in sexual way, we know a little bit like persons, you know. So it’s quite difficult to have sex with this person you’ve never seen in your life and you can just pay and go in and have sex. But it depends on which way you look at the person. I love sex. I love it. I love that part of my job also. From my hobby, I make my money, honestly. Yeah but for me, even if I see person for the first time I’m getting easy-going with the people and you can always find for something to speak. And this I try to keep the conversation because it is very hard when the person came inside and you also have people who don’t speak at all. And then in the time, these ten minutes are very hard. But mostly, the people that I always find to have sex with them, it always goes so fast and so nice. So for me, it’s not a problem at all.”

“I love them. Okay, I treat everybody in a good way and I give more to most of them when they pay me 50€. Much more, sometimes I give extra time when I am with them. Some of them, very nice. And that is because, when you get more close to the person they start to look on you in totally different way. They don’t think anymore like this your job,
you know, they already think because they fall in love with you if you’re too nice to them. And then it starts to be quite difficult because for some of them, if I’m busy, they are already jealous because I’m busy. I say, darling, this my job and you can come but if I have appointment and then comes someone else that I know also, of course, I’m gonna let him come outside. I’m gonna take him and for the other one, if he has appointment, he already think you take someone else and blah blah blah. And I say, this, my job and you have to accept it. But for most of the people, if you’re too nice, then it is quite difficult to see the difference. Because I mean, what’s the difference? So in this way, sometimes its very difficult. Josje always says, Lena, you give them too nice a time, you’re too nice with them so they get totally in the wrong way. But you have to try to keep the border between this is my job and after that, this is my life. And most of the people, clients, try to get into your life because they think that the only way to you. They don’t think you have a private life. They think, okay, she’s a prostitute, I can call her whenever I want, whatever time works for me. But it’s not like that. My time is from 10 in the morning till the afternoon and after that is my private life. So sometimes it can be quite difficult because in this way you can loose customers also. Because they get disappointed and they fall in love with you. And you say, darling, listen, I’m here to make my money. They feel like, in this way, that you use them so for me, sometimes its quite difficult to be with the people inside as only clients. Because they look at me in a totally different way. They have like Christmas or my birthday or whatever I get so much calls and messages from clients. I love it, actually but on the other hand, it goes a little bit over. And then it is quite difficult to keep them like a client. Because then it’s like oh darling, you’re the best, oh darling, you’re so great, of course, I miss you, blah blah blah. I have to say this to everybody. I have to say, okay darling, we have nice time but this is my job. Of course, they know it but they don’t like to accept it. So in the moment they understand clear because okay, she look at me like a job, then they just go away. They don’t like these things. They don’t like to feel like they’re my job. They like to feel like, when they come here, they’re something special. More special than everybody. So for me, in this way, it’s quite difficult. I also loose customers like that, like my friends. Because I was too friendly with them. Then they don’t come to see me as prostitute but like my personality, you know. So in this way, I loose customers but I win friends. But in this way, darling, if you keep going like that you are going to loose all your customers. Then I’m going to work here for charity, basically.”

“But it’s fine because with this job you can meet so many people and with this job you can learn so many things. We are like half psychology here. Because half of the people who are coming are coming with problems. No matter which way, they all have problems. So if they come here, some people they only come to tell me their problems. Just to speak, so kind of sex. I don’t even have to take my clothes off. Nothing! And they just pay and speak with their problems in the family and how he had a fight with the wife or this and then they just go away. But in this way, sometimes they are more, you can speak with a person you’ve never seen in your life much more open than you speak with the people who you know. It’s the psychologic stuff, which can be quite hard also. Sometimes, at the end of the day, I hear so many problems and then my head is full with all these stories. And I think, this man, oh what is he going to do now? I think, it’s not a good way, but it’s not your life. They just come and bring all the garbage they had yesterday and go out happy, you know. In the end, I also need therapy from all the people. But in all, this job is very funny. Sometimes, you have hard days, but mostly, I don’t feel like I’m coming into work. We have
a lot of fun with the people. A lot of laughs, and in this way, the job is just lovely. But also, it depends on what kind of person you are because, yeah, if you are kind of the person like what the fuck, I don’t know and you are not friendly, then you cannot speak with different kinds. My job has so much freedom – I love it! So cool.”

“All around me, I love the girls because in this job, it is quite difficult to do with other girls who you work. You know the girls, they play like, okay, I’m your best friend but if they can put a knife in your back, they will do it with pleasure. Especially in this job, it is very hard to have a real friend. The girls in this job can never be friends, except Josje. But for the others, it’s quite concurrentie [Dutch for competition], if you know what I mean. If one day you work more than the girl next to you, then she think okay she do some dirty things, she suck without condom or something because some of them, if you work more than you do something shit. ‘Oh she don’t use condoms, that why she has more people.’ Hello, are you crazy? It’s nothing about that because it’s not about condoms at all. It’s when you take the people inside, what kind of attention you give to them. It’s not for how much money or what you do because they can pay 10€ and you give them shit time, then next time, they won’t come back. They will go to a girl who gives them nice time and laughs. They are going to go there, even if they have to pay more money for that. It’s not about what you’re doing, it’s about what kind of person you are. And many men do not like to go by girls and she’s not in the mood. The wife of him at home, she’s not in the mood. And so he goes by girl and they have nice time. He don’t like to sit in the window with his wife, you know what I mean? So between the girls, it is just impossible to have relationship. But I respect them. We are like colleagues, we understand each other perfect. Okay, well something can happen for a misunderstanding and fight but it’s normal, we’re girls.”

“Here the girls are mostly Dutch. So we are close. We are mostly like a small society here. So if we can, we help each other and blah blah blah. We work perfect together. But in the moment, we working it’s a fine time. But when we are not, everybody has her own life and we don’t see each other. Except Josje, we go out and have a lot of fun. I expected, when I came here, like all the girls to have that fun, because in this way, it’s much more easy. In this way, you’re from the same job so you’re not embarrassed if you’re with other people. So it’s just cool. Because when I was in Bulgaria, I also work with nice girls. When I go to work with other girls, they were so like that, ‘girls, what the fuck, let’s have tonight fun.’ Then they have one drink and wait for clients. Like what the fuck, it’s cool but how are we having fun when we are not on work? Oh my goodness, and so I organize that one time on the month and we go after work for a drink or to a restaurant and we have a lovely time. Because anyway, you’re still human, it doesn’t matter what your job. If you worked a normal job, you’d do the same thing with your colleagues when you go out. I think, it’s easier in a way because many women are ashamed to say they’re a prostitute so when you’re with the same people, you can be yourself because you don’t have to be embarrassed for nothing. Because you are all the same. So I think in this way, the girls here do all the same. But most of the time, the girls are coming here to go to work and then they are going home.”

“I have some idea but I cannot say at all because I don’t know them that well at all. For me, I have no pimp so I have much fun. Josje also, because we go out together and we enjoy so much. But the rest of them, they are a little bit in this way, more cold. Not like that funny stuff. Nothing bad with them, everybody is different but I still think if you work together in one place, it is cool to go out together and have fun. But for most of them, they
just go home and I don’t know what they do, but I don’t expect everybody to like me and I don’t expect to come into work and make friends with everyone. Like I said, it’s concurrency*. So it’s not possible they can play like they’re your friend so nice and at the same time, be like you mother fucking bitch, you work more than me. So between, for me, like I say, I’m a very open person so for me, before I have problems for that so I have to learn when I turn and tell the truth to the people. So if you want people to hate you, just go and tell them the truth. It’s the easiest way to get people to hate you. Sometimes because I was a little bit too nice with them and I say what I think, I get in troubles. Because I say my opinion. So in this way, it was quite hard to learn that. Like what the fuck, you gonna play cool, then I’ll play cool. And I get a little bit of distance from the other girls, we see each other and talk but we are not that close. You just cannot be close to somebody in that way. When you are close to somebody, then they can put a knife in your back. So in this way, they are distant. It’s funny because at work, we are like perfect, we’re just great. And I am so happy I am nearby them because on the other streets, you always see fights and you always see problems. Bulgarians and Romanians don’t like each other, always something. But here we don’t have that. Like colleagues, just great thing. I love us, you know. I like my colleagues, I love them.”

I asked Lena how she prepares for work, and she explained, “I make my things and I get dressed. My dress is always simple. I am most of the time with black. Sometimes I can change the color, depends on which mood I am but mostly I am always in black bikini and hat. I love hats! I’m crazy about it. The funny thing is, listen, one time, normally I am always with hat. So people are so used to seeing me with hat and sometimes my clients they pass and they stare with the hair, and they stop and look and I think, what the fuck? Are you just crazy? These people, even if they don’t come inside and they pass by, they always come and say hi, always. I say, what the fuck, what is wrong with this man? And in two seconds, they come back and say, you look very strange. What do you mean I look strange? I look all the time the same. Ah, I said, because I am not with the hat! Yes, I cannot recognize you without it. What are you an idiot or what? I am me with the hat. Oh but you have hair. Of course, I have hair! What do you mean, are you crazy? Why just like that, and even in internet, you know I have a page. The clients make a sense for the girls. My best friend, he found this site and showed me. And I was so happy because I didn’t have anyone say something bad about me! I was so happy, so proud of myself. Of course, I don’t expect everybody to like me but in the site, all the comments [were good] and I’m always reading a book, so they write ‘the girl with the hat always reading a book.’ People just know me as the girl with the hat. And sometimes I have people from other countries and when they come, they don’t look for me, they look just for the girl with the hat! I stay with the hat, not because of the clients but because I like it. I love this kind of show star because I come from a little bit creative family with theatre and all this stuff.”

“Yeah, because the only thing I don’t like with my job, I love my job, everything about that, only the problem is, because, I stop thinking, I don’t work that much with my mind, you know? So for me, that’s quite difficult because I’ve always been a very creative person. In Bulgaria, I was always prefer this way. I was always busy with many things. My day was full and I have appointment, and theatre, and I make toys, I go to courses for fashion, painting, and a special course for writing books because I already have one book in Bulgaria. So in this way, I was very creative. But when I start this job, it was quite hard because sometimes I am so lazy and I don’t have to think of nothing to make money. Not
because I’m stupid but you know. Darling, this is for me why I like to read stories because I don’t work with my mind that much. So I start to read books because most of the girls who work in the window like to shake their ass or make you some show. And I just pass them, dancing, or shaking their ass or something, and this kind of show is not for me. And the things I cannot sit in the window and do nothing for me. It’s not for me, it’s not my thing. I just can’t sit and smoke and look off at nothing somewhere.”

I asked Svetlena what she read, and she answered with a laugh, “Now, at the moment? I read the Bible. It’s quite funny because you know, it’s prostitute and Bible. It’s totally different things. But many people think, ‘okay, she’s a prostitute, she’s a shit person.’ And this is also what I don’t like on the people but this is people with stupid thinking or so. And funny, when they see me, ‘oh you read the Bible?’ And I’m ‘what the fuck, of course, I can read, doesn’t matter because I’m prostitute. But it’s funny because they think because I’m prostitute you are the most shit person in the world that you can be. You know, they think we cannot do nothing except put our legs open. But that is not quite because now in the moment it depends on your choice. Before I don’t have choice, but now it’s my choice. And I like it but this doesn’t make me stupid person or shit person. I have much more nice life and I am much more nice person then people that work in the shops or in the bar. I’m totally much more normal. And in my life, many of them think, oh you are prostitute, you are throwing parties and that. You are nothing but I have much more boring life than my job. I am totally different outside my job but many people think, okay, you’re a fucking whore, you’re nothing. And sometimes they’re surprised because you can think or say something smart. What, are you crazy? What the fuck? Just because I am prostitute that does not make me whore. Of course, between prostitute and prostitute there is huge difference and the problem is many people have a totally wrong imagination for prostitutes. They think because what they see on the tv or in the movies with some girl on the street with just terrible clothes or make up and just they are acting very stupid and very low level. But okay, and sometimes it’s very funny because the guys who are coming to Amsterdam with their girlfriends, say ‘okay let’s go now and see prostitutes and have little bit laugh and jokes’ and then when they are coming here and pass through the street, the guys are so fucked up because they don’t expect that in the windows you have very beautiful girls. You just, sometimes you can be shocked. Very beautiful and stylish girls. But for most of the people, they think, they are bitches and all are fat or look terrible. And sometimes, like what the fuck, this cannot be true, you know what I mean”.

“People look at us like we are just nothing, but we are actually, we have very good life. And they treat you like you’re nothing in most of the case. Because sometimes when I speak with people, it’s hard. Because when you don’t tell people you’re a prostitute, they accept you totally normal way. But in the moment they are, ‘so, what do you do for work?’ then I say; I make the men happy’. And first time, it takes them a little bit to think about and I say, ‘ah yeah, I’m prostitute’. Okay, so you just feel, they totally change. They just step off. Most of the people, they really don’t like to walk with them and they ‘oh you walk with prostitute’. And they don’t like us, but everybody come by us. Some people get so embarrassed when I tell them I’m prostitute, they start to think, ‘Oh but why you doing this, why you waste your time, you so beautiful’. I say, ‘Excuse me? Darling, what is wrong with that?’ I don’t like the people to feel for me in this way, ‘ah, poor girls.’ Most people feel sorry for us but why? Not all girls have pimps. There are some girls like me who enjoy this job and we love this job. Like Josje and whoever. You don’t have to be sorry. Sometimes I think,
‘oh poor people, you judge me in this way’. Not ‘oh poor you…..’For them, they accept us but for them, if they have nothing to do with you, that’s just perfect. And you know in other country, for example in my country, when you are prostitute you are just totally fucked up. I mean, they look on you like you are just the biggest garbage in the world. They look at you like you’re sick. If people know you’re prostitute, for them, you are just nothing. Here at least, the people accept that, it’s not that big deal. But it’s different in my country. You’re totally fucked up there, to be prostitute. You are just one big nothing. Just people don’t let you do to change your life or go a little bit more up. No, people go over you more, darling, and if they can make more and more and more from you, for them, it’s perfect. Here, in this way, that’s good because you can do whatever you want. Nobody will stop you or whatever. Nobody care about that. But in Bulgaria, and I believe in other countries, you are just nothing. You cannot survive there. And the thing is here, if I want to go and do other job than this, normal job, nobody care that I’ve been prostitute. They going to look more at what I can do. But if you’re in Bulgaria, and you decide to change your life, people don’t give you that chance even. Doesn’t matter if you are perfect in something you want to do, wherever, they don’t judge you on this, what you can do. They judge you on what you’ve been before like, ‘okay, she’s a prostitute, no way can she work for me.’ They don’t look at what you can do. You can be very useful in some kind of job. If you have the name prostitute with you, it’s finished. It’s the same in my city. I come from a small city. And of course, I believe that the people know there what I’m doing. And I don’t care, I’ve had a very hard life. Nobody just came and helped me just like that, for free. So the thing is, if I go back in my city, the people are going to look at me, ‘holy shit, she’s a prostitute.’ I can never get away from this name of me. Doesn’t matter what I’ve done or if I’m in a good position, once they put you as prostitute, you can never get away from this name”.

“Sometimes it’s quite difficult because I’m strong person, you know, for here, I don’t care but if I go back to Bulgaria, even for one week or whatever, everyone knows what I’m doing. It’s just like, what the fuck, it’s terrible. It’s just awful for my family because they also know what I’m doing. I cannot say they are mad but they are quite disappointed for me because I am coming from very conservative family, and my mom is very proud woman. She’s a singer in my city, she’s famous. And for her, she’s always had a good name. Always, never can say bad word. So for her, it’s like she’s famous, she has good name, and she has daughter who’s prostitute. This not the right combination at all. So she’s like ‘you’re not my daughter and blah blah blah. I cannot have that.’ What I don’t like because she’s following what the people think, you know. It doesn’t matter what I’m doing, I’m your daughter. And if I do or quit this job, it doesn’t make me a worse person. I’m a totally normal person, you know. So of course, she’s not happy but for me, it’s good for her to know because it’s going to be more shitty if they hear it from someone else. At least I’m clear with them. “

Of course they don’t like. Of course, if I one day have family and I have a daughter and she’s prostitute, yeah, I’m not gonna say I’m very happy about that but if it’s her choice and she feels happy in this way, okay, what the fuck, then do it. Yeah, she will be my daughter and I won’t care. And it’s not because I do this job, it’s not about that. I have always known if I have kids or whatever, I will be happy no matter what choice they make except they speak in a good way, of course, you know. If I have daughter in the future and she decides, she want to do that, for example, I’m not going to stop her. As long as she’s happy in this way and she as much as she’s safe and doesn’t hurt other people or do stupid things, okay for me, it’s great.
You know, it’s better than the girls who go in the bars and fuck for a drink. Because I look on the women in two ways, there are two kinds of prostitutes. Just like me, they just fuck but they fuck for money. And the rest of them fucks for drinks, for car and for houses. There’s two kinds, but the other one just doesn’t take the money. It’s like that you know. In my city, I know so many girls, they just fuck for one drink. For me, it’s very sad. I’m proud of myself. Yeah, okay, I fuck for money but what the fuck, I don’t let the people make me crazy and let somebody fuck me for one drink. I respect myself in this way. And many people are like “yeah right, you respect yourself but you’re prostitute.’ And you know, what the fuck, I love it. Actually because I respect myself and I don’t take everybody because I do this job. I have kind of respect because I’m happy with myself and I don’t do nothing. I cannot go and fuck for a drink because I would feel so terrible in front of myself. And many girls do that. I say, ‘darling, I can find you a window if you like. No problem, I can help you.’ But I love it. It’s not normal. Maybe in the future, the girls going to dream to be prostitute because it sounded so good.”

“For two or three years, I was sleeping one year in the street in Bulgaria. One year. For me, it was, what the fuck because Bulgaria don’t care about me. Nobody cared. Darling I didn’t have any friends in Bulgaria. All the friends I have I loose them when I started with this job, at first I met this guy and we have quiet. Before that, I work in a bar, just a normal bar. But I met this one guy and from the moment when I met him, I become prostitute. So in this way, how I tell you the girls fall in love and blah blah blah, you know what I mean?”

“I cannot say for me it was falling in love but I did have quite nice time with him. And I miss for very long time that. And at some point, he was my possibility to run from my family. I have quite hard life with my mom also. So when I met him, he live by me in another village like 5 km. so next week, I just move by him. Oh goodness me, terrible. And in that moment, I stopped with the job I do. In the first month, we didn’t do nothing because every time someone send him money from Greece, okay, but I don’t ask because it wasn’t my business what he was doing. If somebody wants to tell me, okay, but I will not ask. With him, he got every time so much money from Greece, he was always with party and all this stuff. In the end, what’s happened is the person who send the money from Greece, she was prostitute and she was his ex-girlfriend but she kept going to work for him. She was very, very fall in love with him. I guess forever this woman gunna stay like that. So already, slowly I get to pick up the things. But, for me it was because, I couldn’t back home. I never go back to chase desperate person that I leave”.

“What this means for me, if I go to my mom and say ‘oh I’m sorry blah blah blah,’ she will make me crazy for my entire life. “ah you see, you run and now you come back. You’re in my house.’ Yeah, I don’t like that. I’m a big girl. I know when I’m wrong. So me it wasn’t possible to go back, no matter what. And okay, I pay the price for that, sleeping one year on the street. My boyfriend at that time take all my money and I loose all my friends and I start to have totally, very, very shit life. For one year. Very shit life. He spend all money for drugs and at that time, I also sometimes start to use drugs. So that why I liked to use it. From where I come from, I was so down, more than this I cannot be. And now in this case, now in this life, I need to go now to pick me up. When I was down, nobody helped me. I was like a dog in the street. And even I don’t know how at that time, nothing happened with me. For one year to be in Bulgaria on the street, girl? Holy shit, this means to be in hell”.

“So I come from so shit life, of course, with a little bit of luck, I am so happy with myself. Nobody help me so I don’t give a shit what the people think of me. I don’t care at all.
And at some point, I’m happy because my life is going in this way because I start to know myself better then if I was staying in Bulgaria or whatever. And I have everything, I wouldn’t. Of course with those things, I’ve had a very bad experience also. I’ve been raped a couple of times and all this shit but okay, what the fuck, I’m not going to stay depressed because I didn’t have that luxury to stay depressed or feel sorry for myself. I have to be very strong to survive. Otherwise I feel very depressed and probably on drugs and somebody cant know where I could have ended. So in this way, I am very happy because I know myself better and I am very strong person myself and I know I can survive. And the piece that I like of myself because before I hated myself, and now the person that I love most in this world is me. I am so falling in love with myself. I love myself so much! But at that time, there was a period where I hate myself. And when you don’t love yourself, nobody will love you, at all. And if you don’t respect yourself, nobody will respect you. This take me quite a time to learn it, but I am very happy I did.”

“Now at the moment, I really don’t care what the people think. Before I was like, what are the people gonna say for me, now, ah fuck you, I don’t care what you’re gonna think of me because this is me how I am. Fuck off, I don’t care, you know? You don’t play any kind of role in my life. But I hope I’m never gonna go down again, because you never know where it’s gonna bring you in life. I come from a very poor family and I know the price of money and because I put my ass to work for money, I know the price. If my city, it was like if you’re poor, you are sick or something, not for society. And I’d say, you know motherfuckers, you will see when I get rich. And I know some girls who laugh at the time, because I was poor and now I’m rich but that’s okay. Now they’re in such shit positions in marriage or divorce. They’re laughing to me? mother fucker bitch, oh goodness, I get so angry like that!”

“You know, sorry, I just love my job. And people shouldn’t look on us like ‘oh poor girls’ and people need to think, it’s what I don’t like about how people think, ‘oh this girl don’t work because she likes having fun.’ Me, before I start this job, I have very bad opinion for prostitutes. I think, those bitches, this is the most easy way to make money. Psh, it is totally one of the most hard way to make money. It’s not that easy. And I never think of that. I realize it when I start this job, these girls that sit behind the window, there is the reason behind that. Most of these girls do not have good life. But it’s not about that. Sometimes they have very hard story because if you have nice life and you’re happy, you will never come to this job. Never. I love this job, but if my life went in a different way, I never would think to be prostitute. It wouldn’t be my choice at all. So the people don’t think about that, these girls, not they are all nice girls but they have a totally fucked up life behind them. No one thinks of that. This is one of the very sad things. And sometimes when they passs, I don’t care at all, I’m a little bit like the building this way, they pass and they just look at you and make some stupid jokes and all these things. It’s very sad because I always say sometimes to stupid women, I say, are you laughing to me, darling? But you never know what life is going to bring you. You may be in my position. It could be any girl in my position. I never thought I was going to be prostitute. Never in my life. I am quite happy now but I never thought it.”

“In this moment, when I started this job, I totally changed my mind for prostitutes. It’s not at all how it looks. It’s all these girls like a candy shop in here. But the thing behind every girl who works this, is some story. And mostly, some sad story. For them, it’s not so much a choice. But the people don’t think that. All my friends, all my doctors, everywhere I
go, people know what I do. And it’s so cool. I love it. The thing is, because they accept me how I am with my job. This is the biggest pleasure for me. Especially my friends, sometimes they come to the window and see me and what I’m doing, and it’s so nice. I love this feeling. Darling, at my work, I love my job. If you do something that you love, you’re never gonna feel like you’re at work. If you love your job it means you’re never gonna go to work. I love this job and I’m never gonna leave it.”
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