

'What if the inability to refuse care work is baked into the very category of care?' asks Heather Berg. This article draws from Berg's 'reproductivism' to argue that people who labour on the margins of capitalist society articulate crucial critiques of and resistance to the system of work. Berg's arguments are brought together with 2020 interviews with indoor sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, where sex work was decriminalised in 2003. This article argues that those who reject straight work in favour of work that might broadly be better compensated and more flexible, yet remains stigmatised and marginalised, produce a critical standpoint from which to resist and eventually refuse work within a capitalist society, particularly the work of social reproduction.

'You Know What, It Is the Money': Sex Work and Anti-reproductivist Critique

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Heather Berg contends that the feminised labour of sex work 'occupies a margin in discourses of work and, as queer theory teaches us, margins can illuminate the perversity of the centre'.¹ Building on the Wages for Housework movement, Berg proposes 'reproductivism' as a conceptual tool to narrow the discursive border 'between labour that is subject to refusal and that which is not'.² In doing so, Berg extends an anti-productivist refusal of work to an anti-reproductivist *mode of refusal*. These modes 'might be individual or collective: quotidian resistance to work discipline (such as absenteeism or workplace theft), more formal direct action (such as strikes), or a whole sale refusal of work (such as chosen childlessness or opting out of waged employment)'.³ Here, Berg challenges a critical social norm about reproductive labour: that this labour, such as taking care of one's children, or treating sick people, 'should' always be done and thus cannot be easily refused. If workers must refuse such labour (by striking, for instance), they must do so

1 Heather Berg, 'An Honest Day's Wage for a Dishonest Day's Work:(Re) Productivism and Refusal', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 1/2 (2014), 171.

2 Berg, 'An Honest Day's Wage', 164

3 Berg, 'An Honest Day's Wage', 164

based on the needs of the very persons they are reproducing: mothers need more support to better mother; nurses need more support to better nurse; teachers need more support to better teach.

What, then, Berg questions, can be learned from moving away from the assumed sacredness of the reproduced and instead looking to those reproductive labours, such as sex work, that do not suffer from what she calls a ‘social necessity debt’? Berg defines this ‘social necessity debt’ as ‘a configuration in which workers are evaluated based on the perceived necessity of their work to the reproduction of society. This perceived value is in turn mobilised against workers as the reason they cannot refuse work’.⁴ This debt, Berg insists, can be explored through the metaphorical and generalised concept of ‘the Child’, a concept first articulated by Lee Edelman, who writes: ‘Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorised’.⁵ Berg argues:

Teachers striking for better pay who are constantly besieged by the blackmail of the social necessity debt—*what about the children*—might do well to embrace the estrangement in Edelman’s entreaty. This is, again, not a question of actual children, but rather of the symbolic Child (or other care recipients) whose image is mobilised toward the terrorism of the social necessity debt. Actual children are obviously implicated in the teachers strike, and while I do not call for harm to come to them, such a risk is not workers’ burden.⁶

Unlike teachers or nurses—whose refusal of work must be deradicalised to foreground the needs of the Child or the Patient over the needs of the worker—sex workers are positioned in a space of reproductive labour that might avoid reproductivism, and, as a result, they can radicalise the space of work refusal back to its economic centre.

4 Berg, ‘An Honest Day’s Wage’, 161.

5 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 29.

6 Berg, ‘An Honest Day’s Wage’, 168.

The nature of such critique, built upon the clients' lack of 'affective burden', disconnects and delinks social necessity as part and parcel of reproductive labour. The delinking of social necessity and reproductive labour would ask people not to clap and bang pots in gratitude for the 'service' of essential workers, but instead implores them to agitate for their wages and the betterment of their working and living conditions.⁷ The clapping and banging pots in gratitude for hazardous work would surely turn quickly to jeers should healthcare workers have refused to work in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even to discursively prioritise wages over the cared-for would be too at odds with the narrative system that normalises poor working conditions and substandard care, while tying them together in a paradox. Berg argues that though there are many benefits to declaring sex work as reproductive labour—specifically in efforts to align it with the work refusal projects of Marxist feminism—there is also a risk that the alignment 'push[es] workers to deliver demands in terms of redemption rather than refusal'.⁸ That is, sex work as reproductive labour might push workers to seek inclusion within labour practices deemed 'socially necessary' in a manner that stymies radical and oppositional positions on work and labour. The alignment of sex work with work, and subsequently with reproductive labour, can be understood as either an endpoint or radical provocation. Without a challenge to the institution of work, there is a danger that, as Kathi Weeks outlines, sex work becomes aligned with the work ethic. Moreover, the association of sex work with reproductive labour, as Berg suggests, risks saddling this work ethic with a social necessity debt.

In this article, I draw from Berg's provocations about reproductivism and the social necessity debt, arguing that anti-reproductivist critiques of sex workers have radical implications for feminist projects of work refusal, and to Left struggles more broadly. Reproductivism—the perspective where social reproduction is understood as obviously and naturally good,

7 Anna-Maria Murtola and Neil Vallety, 'Who Cares for Wellbeing? Corporate Wellness, Social Reproduction and the Essential Worker', *Organization* 30, no. 3 (2023): 510-27.

8 Berg, 'An Honest Day's Wage', 172.

and where ‘workers are assigned the ethical debts associated with the labour they perform’—provides a means to engage with and draw out the critiques made by sex workers of waged reproductive labour.⁹ By drawing on Berg’s ideas, alongside critiques from sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, I depart from sex work research that seeks respectability and acceptance within a reproductivist framework. Instead, I join those who critique the very idea of work itself by highlighting the resistances and refusals of workers who labour in a marginalised and gendered industry.

To frame the refusal and resistance occurring with the sex industry, I draw from Marxist feminist theorisations of reproductive labour, particularly waged reproductive labour situated within a capitalist society. My understanding of such a society is informed by Nancy Fraser’s conceptualisation of capitalism as an ‘institutionalised social order’ with ‘its non-accidental, structural imbrication with gender domination, ecological degradation, racial/imperial oppression, and political domination—all in conjunction, of course, with its equally structural, non-accidental foreground dynamic of (doubly) free labour exploitation’.¹⁰ By thinking of capitalism as more than merely an economic system, this paper draws from anti-capitalist feminist scholarship to map critiques of gendered work and reproductive labour within the ‘institutionalised social order’ of capitalism. To do so, I first outline the paradox of social reproduction in capitalist labour relations, before situating sex work within its legal context in Aotearoa New Zealand. I then turn to the critiques of work by sex workers within a capitalist society, with the intent to extend and affirm Berg’s construction of an anti-reproductivist critique.

Social Reproduction: A Paradox

The social necessity of reproductive labour takes place alongside a simultaneous obscuring of its social importance. Fraser articulates that such work

9 Berg, ‘An Honest Day’s Wage’, 163.

10 Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet and What We Can Do About It* (London: Verso, 2023), 57.

Being unpaid or underpaid sealed the matter: those who perform essential reproductive work are made structurally subordinate to those who earn living wages for surplus-value generating labour in the official economy, even as the work of the first is what enables the work of the second [. . .]. [Capitalist societies] make their official economies dependent on the very same processes of social reproduction whose worth they disavow.¹¹

The structural subordination of reproductive labour to wage labour is accompanied by an ideological formation in which social reproduction is ‘enveloped [. . .] in a cloud of sentiment, as if this work should be its own reward’, all while its feminine assignation subordinates women. To argue, therefore, that it is *not* an ethical good to work for substandard wages as a nurse, teacher, mother, for example, is no easy feat. It is even more difficult to do so without invoking those that they service, as Berg articulates: ‘I think it’s hard to separate care from the terrain of ethics and models of the good subject and attach it instead to politics and collective action aimed at structural change [. . .] *What if the inability to refuse care work is baked into the very category of care?*’¹² Agitating the very category of care, within a context of a capitalist society that ‘guzzles’ care, is a project rife with seemingly irreconcilable contradictions.¹³ Care work is undervalued in regard to wages, while its cloud of femininised sentiment means that ‘good’ workers would not dare refuse to do it.

The inability to refuse care work as a crucial element of the care work itself is compounded by its distinct characteristics under capitalism—not only the

11 Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 20.

12 Samantha Pinto, Kathi Weeks, and Heather Berg, ‘What Can Feminist Work Be?: A Conversation with WSQ Authors Kathi Weeks and Heather Berg’, *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2022), 118; emphasis my own.

13 Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 53.

ethics Berg names, but also the invisibility of such care work.¹⁴ Invisibility and devaluation are intimately connected, in turn, with naturalisation: it is easy to devalue what is understood as natural, and to name something as natural is to render it seemingly immovable, unchangeable.¹⁵ In more recent years, demands that were ‘reserved for women workers’, such as the demand ‘for one’s personality and affective life to be deployed in the service of one’s jobs’, are now becoming ‘part of the paradigm’ of not just women’s work but many other forms of work.¹⁶ This occurrence, which is part of a broader feminisation of labour, has not led to a re-evaluation of the structural dynamics of reproductive labour, because men performing feminised labour still tend to be valued more highly.¹⁷ Men are often paid more for waged reproductive labour than women, even as the labour expectations of women increase as they navigate the waged labour market (without abandoning their work in the unwaged reproductive sphere).¹⁸ The increasing feminisation of labour means that ‘there has been an expansion of temporary work coupled with a cheapening and flexibilisation of the workforce’, alongside the continued expectation of women to perform the unpaid reproductive labour of childcare, housework, and other such wifely

14 See Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972); Arlene Kaplan Daniels, ‘Invisible Work,’ *Social Problems* 34, no. 5 (1987): 403–441; Erin Hatton, ‘Mechanisms of Invisibility: Rethinking the Concept of Invisible Work,’ *Work, Employment and Society* 31, no. 2 (2017): 336–351.

15 See Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, ‘The Precarity of Feminisation,’ *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 27, no. 2 (2014): 191–202.

16 Shiloh Whitney, ‘Byproductive Labor: A Feminist Theory of Affective Labor beyond the Productive–Reproductive Distinction,’ *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 6 (2018), 640.

17 Christine Williams, ‘The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in the “Female” Professions,’ *Social Problems* 39, no. 3 (1992): 253–267; Christine Williams, ‘The Glass Escalator, Revisited: Gender Inequality in Neoliberal Times, SWS Feminist Lecturer,’ *Gender & Society* 27, no. 5 (2013): 609–629.

18 Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (London: Penguin, 2012).

duties.¹⁹ Social reproduction remains an ‘indispensable precondition for economic production’ *and* it is deeply embedded as ethically necessary for workers to perform—all while reproductive labourers are systemically under or unvalued. To resist the devaluation and exploitation of those who socially reproduce our society, we must first resist the social necessity debt assigned to those very workers.

Legal Context of Sex Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Before I look at how the paradox of social reproduction and an anti-reproductivist critique of work plays out in sex work, let me first provide the legal context of sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully outline the legislative debates here, but it is important to have a basic grasp of sex work policy to set the stage for the broader critique produced by workers within the sex industry in Aotearoa New Zealand. On 25 June 2023, the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) turned twenty years old.²⁰ The PRA made Aotearoa New Zealand the first country to fully decriminalise sex work (except for migrant sex work, which remains criminalised under Section 19).²¹ The Australian state of New South Wales had largely decriminalised sex work a few years before the PRA, but a country-wide decriminalisation was not to be seen elsewhere until 2022, when Belgium removed sex work from their criminal codes.²² In the years since the PRA became law, much research has been conducted

19 Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, ‘The Precarity of Feminisation’, 192; Hochschild and Ma-chung, *The Second Shift*.

20 Dame Catherine Healy, Annah Pickering, and Channelel Hati, ‘Stepping Forward Into the Light of Decriminalisation’, in *Sex Work and the New Zealand Model*, eds. Lynzi Armstrong and Gillian Abel (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), 39–60.

21 Calum Bennachie et al., ‘Unfinished Decriminalization: The Impact of Section 19 of the Prostitution Reform Act 2003 on Migrant Sex Workers’ Rights and Lives in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *Social Sciences* 10, no. 5 (2021): 1–19.

22 Eurydice Aroney and Penny Crofts, ‘How Sex Worker Activism Influenced the Decriminalisation of Sex Work in NSW, Australia’, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 8, no. 2 (2019): 50–67; Maïthé Chini, ‘“Historic”: Belgium First in Europe to Decriminalise Sex Work’, *The Brussels Times*, 19 March, 2022.

both locally and globally on the material benefits of decriminalisation for sex workers.²³ Aotearoa New Zealand is heralded as a global best practice policy model, and the hard work of the NZPC, sex worker activists, and allies continues to be highlighted in the scholarly literature.²⁴ Despite research and activists overwhelmingly calling for decriminalisation, other policy models, such as the Nordic Model (a partial criminalisation model which criminalises the client), full criminalisation, or legalisation dominate legislation globally.²⁵ Research and activism have shown time and time again that decriminalisation is best practice, and this work need not have happened to such an extent if policymakers listened to the workers that these policies affected in the first place.

Methods

The following research draws from interviews conducted in 2020 with 28 indoor sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. The project uses feminist standpoint methodologies alongside corporate-style workplace assessment surveys to explore the ‘work like any other’ decriminalised sex industry within a feminist and sex workers’ rights framing. Questions asked of workers included: ‘do you have job satisfaction?’ or ‘do you feel like your input equals your return?’. Most quotes referenced in this article are answers to those two questions. Sex workers rarely spoke about job satisfaction or ‘return’ as being affective, or satisfaction or return borne of feelings and emotions from the activity of labour itself.²⁶ Rather, workers

23 Gillian Abel et al., *Taking the Crime Out of Sex Work New Zealand Sex Workers’ Fight for Decriminalisation* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2010); Elena Jeffreys, Jane Green, and Christian Vega, ‘Listen to Sex Workers: Support Decriminalisation and Anti-Discrimination Protections’, *Interface* 3, no. 2 (2011): 271–287; Smith and Mac, *Revolted Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (London: Verso, 2018).

24 Armstrong and Abel, eds., *Sex Work and the New Zealand Model*; Smith and Mac, *Revolted Prostitutes*.

25 Smith and Mac, *Revolted Prostitutes*.

26 The workers that did speak to that form of satisfaction—emotional satisfaction, or feeling positive because they altered someone else’s affective state—coupled it with the financial motivation.

concentrate on the financial satisfaction or return, refusing to allow for the economic conditions and structures of their labour to be mystified or ignored. I informed participants that I borrow some questions from corporate workplace assessments, wondering how they might be answered by workers whose labour was criminalised a mere twenty years before. I hoped that in articulating my intent in the choice of questions that I formed a space between participant(s) and myself that exists as an extended inquiry of ‘work’ itself.²⁷

The research is feminist in large part because of its grounding in the social category of ‘women’ within a labour framework. Gendered labour experiences are the crucial intersection here. That is, as Weeks argues in her account of a feminist standpoint located in gendered labouring practices, the activity of labour does not just produce capital.²⁸ Rather, the activity of labour ‘produces society itself’.²⁹ If labour produces society itself, and labour divisions are highly gendered, recounting experiences of that gendered labour gives ‘direct access to the necessarily social character of people’s worlds’ in order to access knowledge of ‘what is tacit, known in the doing, and often not yet discursively appropriated’.³⁰ The feminist perspectives in the following interviews do not seek an ‘actual truth’, but rather form a call to rectify problems of power and knowledge and to locate focus on *experiences of labour*. More specifically here, I aim to focus on gendered labour experiences and their epistemic importance in knowledge production when conceptualising and critiquing work in a capitalist

27 See Shulamit Reinharz and Lynn Davidman, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42.

28 Kathi Weeks, ‘Labor, Standpoints, and Feminist Subjects’, in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra G. Harding (London: Routledge, 2004), 181–193.

29 Weeks, ‘Labor, Standpoints, and Feminist Subjects’, 185.

30 Dorothy E Smith, ‘Comment on Hekman’s’ Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22, no. 2 (1997), 394–95.

society.³¹

Anti-reproductivism and Sex Work under Decriminalisation

If sex work is accepted only alongside a valorisation of work, work ethics and scope of capitalist society ‘expand to new groups and new forms of labour [. . .] to reaffirm its power’.³² Thus, decriminalisation as an endpoint means reducing overt and formal state power but keeping (and even adding) covert powers of work ethics, norms, and values. Decriminalisation precipitates, then, an improvement in the material lives of sex workers and a reduction of overt enemies at the site of labour, but it also creates a space where the boundaries and borders of work ethics and the norms of capitalist work become more visible and more powerful.

There are ‘moments of real potential’ to make space for the refusal of (the institution of) work when we place less emphasis on ideas of assimilation into normative work and instead use the language of ‘work’ as a base from which to move forward.³³ These moments of real potential might be present in turning to sex work ‘as an alternative to “straight jobs”, due to employment discrimination or for flexibility to manage chronic illness,

31 Prior to recruitment of participants and interviews, I engaged with feminist sex work-inclusive methodologies to establish best practice ethics. These writers and activists centre lived experience at the centre of knowledge production, sex workers as experts in their own lives, and highlight the difference between research ‘on’ and ‘with’ sex workers. On best practices, see Stéphanie Wahab, ‘Creating Knowledge Collaboratively with Female Sex Workers: Insights from a Qualitative, Feminist, and Participatory Study’, *Qualitative inquiry* 9, no. 4 (2003): 625–642; Kate D’Adamo, ‘Sex (Work) in the Classroom: How Academia can Support the Sex Workers’ Rights Movement’, in *Challenging Perspectives on Street-based Sex Work*, eds. Katie Hall-Janes et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017).

32 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 68.

33 babylon and Berg, ‘Erotic Labor within and without Work: An Interview with femi babylon’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 3 (2021), 632.

disability, study or care responsibilities'.³⁴ Moving outside of the normative work structure to a space of intense stigma and even criminalisation produces a standpoint that holds tension between participation and anti-participation: sex workers are doing work, but not the way work is 'meant' to be done:

I'm a bit chronically ill, so this job has been a saviour. So, when I can't do a 9 to 5, I can work for a few hours and still pay the rent.
(Katie)

A lot of time [sex workers] need to make a living to supplement disability [payments]. [. . .]. There are people I know who are working right now who are in a wheelchair when they are not working. But [they] have the ability to not be in a wheelchair for four hours at a time, five days a week. Lots of people with back injuries, lots of people like me who have a whole bunch of random stuff going on. (Maya)

It is in this non-normative space that sex workers have organised against the 'glorification of work' to demand that 'access to social services, healthcare, housing and dignity should not be conditional upon the status of work'.³⁵ Rather, sex workers refuse these systems of straight work.

Flexibility and appropriate compensation are the two reasons most cited by workers in these interviews for their exit from straight work and entry to sex work. For workers whose options are overwhelmingly constrained within the straight social reproductive labour sphere, any flexibility and capital are often captured by the manager/owner of the workplace rather than by the worker. Flexibility captured by the management class is simply precarity for the worker (for example, hospitality workers, administrative

34 Stardust and Hester, 'Sex Work, Automation and the Post-Work Imaginary', *Autonomy*, 13 September, 2021.

35 Zahra Stardust, 'Critical Femininities, Fluid Sexualities and Queer Temporalities: Erotic Performers on Objectification, Femmephobia and Oppression', in *Queer Sex Work*, eds. Mary Liang, et al. (London: Routledge, 2015), 67–78.

workers, nurses, teachers, retail workers), mainly accompanied by low wages in the feminised sphere as the owning class pockets profit and remains immune to the social necessity debt.³⁶ Flexible labourers and immunity to social necessity debt compounds the surplus value that the owning class wields to their benefit. Sex workers may speak, unlike straight workers, to the financial benefits of sex work as the most significant part of their choice to move into the industry:

I could make the same amount in a night [of sex work] that I could make in a week at my other job [. . .]. It just seemed like a no-brainer. (Ella)

I tried to still be in the office and do a little bit of sex work, and it was awkward because I just got so much money for the sex work. I could make like a fortnight's pay in three jobs, compared to the office. (Melody)

The oft-singular emphasis on financial survival that sex workers share when discussing their work—which cannot be separated from material survival—circumvents the social necessity debt that other reproductive labourers must answer to and that the owning class avoids.

The social 'duty of care' for reproductive labourers insists, too, that they not demand more compensation, or else they are somehow selfish and in need of priority realignment. Here, too, we can learn from those who have moved into the sex industry:

There was no point in getting a [civilian] job because what I could earn in an hour would be a [civilian] job's pay in a week. (Dana)

36 See the following for discussions of the feminisation of labour accompanied by precarity and low wages: Guy Standing, 'Global Feminization through Flexible Labor', *World Development* 17, no. 7 (1989): 1077–1095; Kathi Weeks, 'Life within and against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics', *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 7, no. 1 (2007): 233–249.

Financially, I absolutely hate working a regular job. Working so fucking hard for nothing [. . .] I worked in hospitality, so being on your feet for 10 hours at a time and having to smile and be wonderful to people, and just so busy. And in a pretty toxic environment sometimes, and get paid you know, minimum wage. Horrendous. (June)

Dana and June's words make clear that straight labour market options do not pay workers enough and the work is often inaccessible. Amara points to the political potential of sex work as an alternative to straight work:³⁷

I feel like I'm getting paid what I'm worth doing this, so it's very unlikely that I'd even go to a 'normal job' because I know how much they're making from my labour. And I literally would rather fuck for cash. Like, I mean, for every hour of work, you're making about a 100 or more dollars per hour of work that you're doing for a boss. And they're only giving you 18 or 20 dollars an hour, and it's like mmm no, I don't want you to make profit off my labour. If I'm going to work my ass off and come home tired, I want to be paid 80 dollars an hour. You should be making very little to no profit. Because I'm doing all the work for you [. . .] I am unashamedly a communist slut [. . .] I think it's one of the things that sex work has shown me, that I can actually make what I'm worth. (Amara)

In experiencing or describing sex work as an alternative to the 'regular' workforce, sex work is not 'othered' as in stigmatised, but is rather 'othered' in a political sense as sex work is understood as a strategy to resist the low-wage, inflexible conditions of the labour market.³⁸

Berg's use of queer theory to provoke us to learn from the margins of labour is an especially useful framing to draw together a critical labour standpoint and the experiential knowledge of marginalised workers. Sex

37 Pinto, Weeks, and Berg, 'What Can Feminist Work Be?'

38 Pinto, Weeks, and Berg, 'What Can Feminist Work Be?'

work is work on the margins—the margins of law, in some areas, the margins of acceptability, and, for some workers, on the social margins of intersections (for example, disability, race, queerness, chronic illness, single motherhood).³⁹ As sex workers refuse straight work, there is much to learn in that refusal, particularly about the straight work that is being resisted due to its inflexibility, inaccessibility, and low wage:

Being sick is expensive. Doctor's visits, medications. By the time I had paid my rent and all of my doctor's stuff, I would have maybe ten dollars left for food and everything else a week, which was not really liveable. So, it got to the point where I was meeting up with people off of a website, and I would exchange sexual favours for food. (Amy)

Here, Amy demonstrates not only the inability of straight work to financially provide or account for illness, but also the shortcomings of wider society—to experience instability in health and income is to be left behind socially:

[Sex work has] been a really good thing in my life [. . .] The reward or benefit to input ratio is good [. . .] It is better than other jobs that I've done [. . .] I would go from one job to the other and I would feel like I was being kind of shafted at my caregiving work [. . .] When I was working two jobs, I felt that the reward ratio was much greater in sex work. (Caroline)

Listening to the stories of those that resist straight work, particularly care work that is often available to underpaid or unpaid feminised labourers, illuminates crucial relationships in the gendered labour market.

39 Angela Jones, 'For Black Models Scroll Down: Webcam Modeling and the Racialization of erotic Labor', *Sexuality & Culture* 19, no. 4 (2015) 776–799; Angela Jones, "I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal Job': Disability, Sexual Ableism, and Sex Work", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2022): np.; Angela Jones, "It's Hard Out Here for a Unicorn": Transmasculine and Nonbinary Escorts, Embodiment, and Inequalities in Cisgendered Workplaces', *Gender & Society* 37, no. 5 (2023): 665–698.

‘Labour’s Vanguard’

Gregor Gall argues that the decriminalisation of sex work ‘provide[s] a low baseline of rights, namely, the same employment rights as other workers’. In other words, the fight for sex workers’ rights is inextricably tied to the achievements of broader workers’ rights, and sex workers’ resistances and refusals are thus crucial to Left movements.⁴⁰ Berg writes that sex workers, or ‘labour’s vanguard’, are ignored by the Left at its peril. Engaging with sex workers’ rights movements as vanguardist—for instance, the Fired Up Stilettos movement currently organising in Aotearoa New Zealand—is a way forward for the Left’s understanding of and resistance to contemporary labour conditions.⁴¹ For example, Amara’s articulation of job satisfaction centres the economic conditions of capitalist society, rather than succumbing to discourses of work valorisation: ‘For me to be satisfied with the job is kind of irrelevant, because as long as I’ve got money to survive, I don’t really care’.⁴² In many ways, then, sex work may expose the ideological foundations of work in capitalist societies.

To enter into a space such as sex work, where wages may be inconsistent but are broadly more substantial for feminised workers, is to perhaps access a financial stability that is not easily accessed through other feminised (and underpaid) industries. To reproductively labour *for money* rather than to a nebulous social good that suppresses workers’ rights is to demystify gendered labour relations, and to articulate the unjust system of gendered capitalist work:

It’s not the money, it’s the freedom. [. . .] You know what, it is the money. Because it’s afforded me a kind of more relaxed lifestyle, to

40 Gregor Gall, *Sex Worker Unionization: Global Developments, Challenges and Possibilities* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 94.

41 Heather Berg, ‘Freedom, Not Benefits’, *Boston Review*, 21 July, 2022. Giles Dexter, “No One Should be Exploited at Work”—Frustrated Strippers Meet with MPs’, *Radio New Zealand*, 4 June, 2023.

42 See, also, Kathi Weeks, ‘Down with Love: Feminist critique and the New Ideologies of Work’, *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 3/4 (2017): 37–58.

be quite honest. [. . .] Like, we live in a capitalist society, money controls absolutely everything. So, when you feel like you've got money, you feel like you can do the things you enjoy. And you can buy the things that bring you happiness, that's a huge thing. When loads of people are like, whores are just money hungry. It's like, umm everyone is money hungry? That's why we go to work? So, no, as much as I hate to say it. Money is a big happiness of sex work. (Emma)

What Emma describes here can be understood as a journey to what Weeks, borrowing from Stanley Aronowitz et al., calls 'getting a life'.⁴³ Emma's movement into the sex industry gave her access to freedom, not benefits, *because* of the money she was making. She could begin to 'get a life' because she was no longer working excess hours for little pay, relying on a paltry unemployment benefit, or working long hours and being time poor. Rather, she traced her experience of freedom, of lifestyle, back to the financial freedom borne of resisting other feminised work, other reproductive labour options. Similarly, Rose highlights the difference in access to *life* once she stopped singularly relying on the supported living benefit:

I have several chronic illnesses. And it's just, it's hard, you know [. . .]. Before I was just on the supported living benefit, and do you know what my life was like then? It was like, maybe I'll go for a coffee. Can I have money for a coffee? Yes, I'll go for a coffee and I'll go for a walk and then what do I do with my day? I had no purpose or direction whatsoever. So, on that level, it's been amazing [. . .], so yeah, it's [given me] purpose. And I can't do any other job. I've really tried. I think COVID has sort of shown that we have more adaptability than we were letting on before, like I could do data entry work from home for fuck's sake, and I've been saying that for the last ten years. (Rose)

43 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 231; see Stanley Aronowitz et al., 'The Post-Work Manifesto', in *Post-work* (London: Routledge, 1998).

To push ‘getting a life’ from an individual temporality to a collective reality, as Weeks argues we must, is a ‘collective effort [. . .] both to contest the existing terms of the work society and to struggle to build something new’.⁴⁴ Sex workers might—collectively, discursively—contest the existing terms of the work society *and* struggle to build something new, even as their work still exists within capitalist modes of work.

To join these workers in the rejection and refusal of both participation and non-participation is the radical provocation here, the space for a resistance to be made. As Amara shares:

[I’ve got] a whole bunch of various health problems that require me to, if I am to do any work of any kind then I need it to be flexible. I really wish every job was like this. Because I would be more inclined to work if I could just work my hours whenever I felt like it. And that’s the other thing that pisses me off with bosses in other jobs as well. They have no flexibility at all. They’re like, either ‘come in or you don’t’ and it’s like, what if I’m sick? And I can’t? *I’m going to come in when I’m feeling better! Fuck you! You know? Like, the way work in general is set up. If you’re not flexible, if you can’t come in then don’t come, then you’re useless to capitalism and our society.* (Amara)⁴⁵

Present, then, in the articulations of work and labour relations of sex workers, is a crucial guide *towards* refusal and *against* the valorisation of work, in which it is especially useful to consider the work of social reproduction. As long as reproduction, as long as care, prioritises the Child, the Patient, or even the Customer (who is always right, Berg reminds us), the rights of those who are doing the care, providing the service, come third at best. The Child, the Patient, the Customer, acts only as narrative for moral panics that maintain and ingrain the capitalist status quo (for if the Child were to come first, our world would look very different).

44 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 233.

45 Emphasis my own.

To argue, however, that any collection of individuals lands ahead of capital would most certainly be short-sighted and overly optimistic. It is in this space of agitation—saying that a ‘uselessness’ to capitalism is not a uselessness to our society—that challenging ‘traditional work-ethic discourses’ is most possible. Weeks, borrowing from sex work discussions as a text to reason through anti-work critique, argues that there is danger in landing on ‘sex work’ as a final discourse, as it risks representing work ‘as a site of voluntary choice and of the employment contract as a model of equitable exchange and individual agency’.⁴⁶ Weeks argues that while declaring sex work as work defeats some moralistic sexual ethics, it might simultaneously reinforce other ethics, especially the valorisation of work—in particular, socially reproductive work.

Sex Work is Work. But is Work Good?

When women move into sex work, which is rife with stigmatisation and only relatively recently decriminalised, they labour in the margins of work.⁴⁷ In doing so, sex workers refuse the options that capitalism leaves the vast majority of us, even as they enter an industry stigmatised for its relation to body, the dirty feminine, and its purported criminality and desperation.⁴⁸ They still must, like in other feminised workforces, labour in a space making use of gendered norms, but they are often paid more for that feminine performance.⁴⁹ Sex work also presents an option to women

46 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 67.

47 Healy, Pickering, and Hati, ‘Stepping Forward Into the Light of Decriminalisation’.

48 Carol Wolkowitz et al., *Body/Sex/Work: Intimate, Embodied and Sexualised Labour* (New York: Red Globe Press, 2013); Blake E. Ashforth and Glen E. Kreiner, “‘How Can You Do It?’: Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity”, *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 3 (1999): 413–434; Maggie O’Neill and Alison Jobe, ‘Sex Work, Criminalisation and Stigma: Towards a Feminist Criminological Imagination’, *Criminal Women: Gender Matters* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), 63–86.

49 Eva Pendleton, ‘Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality’, in *Whores and Other Feminists* ed. Jill Nagle (London: Routledge, 2013); Stardust, ‘Critical Femininities’.

where they may be both reasonably compensated for their labour and experience a flexibility that is not usual of other labour market options.⁵⁰ Despite having flexibility of schedule and often comparably higher pay, sex workers still, however, suffer from precarity.⁵¹

Prevailing sex work research in Aotearoa New Zealand focuses on the impacts of decriminalisation since 2003, the changes in legal rulings in favour of sex workers since the PRA passed, the abilities of local councils to make moralising restrictions about where and how sex work may take place, stratifying depictions of sex workers in media, and the lack of protections for migrant sex workers due to Section 19 of the PRA.⁵² Much focus has rightly been on the many strides that have been made post-decriminalisation

50 Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; JaneMaree Maher, Sharon Pickering, and Alison Gerard, *Sex Work: Labour, Mobility and Sexual Services* (London: Routledge, 2012).

51 Raven Bowen, *Work, Money and Duality: Trading Sex as a Side Hustle* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2021); JaneMaree Maher, Sharon Pickering, and Alison Gerard, *Sex Work: Labour, Mobility and Sexual Services* (London: Routledge, 2012).

52 Gillian Abel and Melissa Ludeke, 'Brothels as Sites of Third-Party Exploitation? Decriminalisation and Sex Workers' Employment Rights', *Social Sciences* 10, no.1 (2020): 1–15; Gillian Abel, Lisa Fitzgerald, and Cheryl Brunton, 'The Impact of the Prostitution Reform Act on the Health and Safety Practices of Sex Workers', *Report to the Prostitution Law Review Committee*, Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Christchurch (November 2007); Gillian Abel, Lisa J. Fitzgerald, and Cheryl Brunton, 'The Impact of Decriminalisation on the Number of Sex Workers in New Zealand', *Journal of Social Policy* 38, no. 3 (2009): 515–531; Gillian Abel, 'A Decade of Decriminalization: Sex Work "Down under" but Not Underground', *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 14, no. 5 (2014): 580–592; Bridie Sweetman, 'The Judicial System and Sex Work in New Zealand', *Women's Studies Journal* 31, no. 2 (2017): 61–68; Peyton Bond, 'The Dunedin Model: Dunedin Sex Worker Experiences Under Decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* (2021); Catherine Zangger, 'For Better or Worse?: Decriminalisation, Work conditions, and Indoor Sex Work in Auckland, New Zealand/Aotearoa', PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia Vancouver, 2015; Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith, 'Resisting Division: Migrant Sex Work and "New Zealand Working Girls"', *Continuum* 35, no. 4 (2021): 546–558; Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith, *Producing the Acceptable Sex Worker: An Analysis of Media Representations* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022); Lynzi Armstrong, Gillian Abel, and Michael Roguski, 'Fear of Trafficking or Implicit Prejudice? Migrant Sex Workers and the Impacts of Section 19', in *Sex Work and the New Zealand Model*, 113–134.

for sex workers, though stigma and discrimination remain. Although the dominant literature in Aotearoa New Zealand approaches sex work from a labour rights' framework, through the focus on decriminalisation and its impacts—and thus often the shortcomings of decriminalisation for achieving 'full' workers' rights—I extend a more specific critique of the reproductive labour and 'work' of sex work.

I therefore have focused here on the importance of addressing the organisational difficulties of 'sex work as work', or sex work as reproductive labour, as an endpoint rather than an ongoing process. A recognition of the subordinate nature of feminised labour—or what JaneMaree Maher et al. call 'women's constrained options in labour'—is a critical starting point for sex work research within an anti-capitalist labour framework.⁵³ I more specifically situate this project within the work of anti-capitalist sex work scholars.⁵⁴ These scholars challenge efforts to assimilate sex work into a normative work schema, and instead propose using the language of 'work' as a ground from which to agitate for a broader refusal of work. Juno Mac and Molly Smith, for example, use 'the Erotic Professional' to name what Berg may call a reproductivist framing or the narrative of sex workers as acceptable workers because they provide social value.⁵⁵ That is, Mac and Smith critique the assumption that when sex work is called work, it means that work is good. The Erotic Professional, they argue, is 'an inadequate approach to sex workers' rights, which should hinge on workers' rights to

53 Maher, Pickering, and Gerard, *Sex Work*, 16.

54 See Brooke Meredith Beloso, 'Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 1 (2012): 47–70; Noah D. Zatz, 'Sex Work/Sex Act: Law, Labor, and Desire in Constructions of Prostitution', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22, no. 2 (1997): 277–308; Katie Cruz, 'Unmanageable Work, (Un)Liveable Lives: The UK Sex Industry, Labour Rights and The Welfare State', *Social & Legal Studies* 22, no. 4 (2013): 465–488; Katie Cruz, 'Beyond Liberalism: Marxist Feminism, Migrant Sex Work, and Labour Unfreedom', *Feminist Legal Studies* 26, no. 1 (2018): 65–92; Smith and Mac, *Revolt Prostitutes*; Zahra Stardust and Helen Hester, 'Sex Work, Automation and the Post-Work Imaginary'; babylon and Berg, 'Erotic Labor within and without Work'; Jones, "I Can't Really Work Any 'Normal' Job."

55 Smith and Mac, *Revolt Prostitutes*.

safety, not on the purported social value of the work'.⁵⁶ Zahra Stardust and Helen Hester outline the organising that sex workers have already done against the 'glorification of work', and, like Katie Cruz, they articulate ways that sex workers disengage with the idea of the wage relation as a means for dignity and access to a comfortable or even manageable life.⁵⁷ The disentangling of sex work from the supposed moral goodness of work, particularly that of the goodness of reproductive labour, is not easy, especially as the organising to establish sex work as work, and thus worthy of decriminalisation, is still ongoing.

The social necessity debt is entangled with what Berg critiques as reproductivism, this 'attitude toward reproductive labour that assumes that social reproduction is self-evidently good and necessary and subordinates disruptive desires and practices to its dictates'.⁵⁸ If sex work is valid as reproductive labour only in a manner that favours reproductivism, which seeks to pay the social necessity debt, its economic roots and relations are further mystified in favour of an implicit and explicit argument of any social value that sex work brings to clients, society, and a broader and fuzzy wellbeing that distinctly does not belong to the (sex) worker. The social value that is ignored is that which ties sex work, and reproductive labour, to capitalist society and its hegemonic work modes—and therefore unties sex work from labour organising centred on the worker, their experiences, and their conditions. Instead, the value is inextricably tied to the unnamed client or society that ostensibly benefits from, and becomes the crux of, legitimising their labour.⁵⁹ Thus, the alignment of sex work with work, and reproductive labour, misplaces the social value of sex work—as an economic saviour for those engaging in sex work—in favour of a social value of work ethics or benefit to society/client. If sex work is discursively abandoned within work and reproductive labour as an endpoint, it is

56 Smith and Mac, , 41.

57 Stardust and Hester, 'Sex Work, Automation and the Post-Work Imaginary', 470; Cruz, 'Unmanageable Work'.

58 Berg, 'An Honest Day's Wage', 162.

59 See also Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*.

caught and stymied by both work ethics and social necessity debt, and projects of refusal are over before they begin.

Conclusion

Berg argues that sex workers as reproductive labourers, gig workers, feminised workers, and those that have long been operating within a 'liminal legal status' can push the imagination of political demands 'beyond the categories of employee and citizen'.⁶⁰ If we can push our imaginations past those categories, and challenge simultaneously the models of the good subject, of the good care worker, we may imagine and perhaps even demand a politics that rids itself of gendered, individualised, and exploitative models of care and labour. Instead, our demands may envisage an organisation of community and life untied from entrenched and linked modes of oppression, such as those embedded in and reproduced by the structures of normative work. We must not fail in solidarity with those that are already resisting 'the enclosures that subordinate us', because to do so would limit not only our imaginations but also our possibilities. Weeks argues that this standpoint can 'lead us to a field of constitutive practices, forces of assertion, or lines of movement that provides us with a particular angle of vision on and site of intervention into the social construction of subjectivities'.⁶¹ In not limiting our possibilities, labour presents as key critical standpoint from which to evaluate, learn, and change.⁶²

The social construction of subjectivity within marginalised labour is an invaluable subjectivity of *critique*. Critique of work, critique of feminised and reproductive labour, critique of ableism, critique of the mirage of inevitability around valorisation of (re)productivity, critique of the norms that govern us and halt the project of workers' and human rights are all crucial here. A subjectivity produced in marginalised labour systems may reject the understanding of the decriminalisation of sex work as an endpoint to sex workers' rights, reject accepting the current conditions of workers'

60 Berg, 'Freedom, Not Benefits'.

61 Weeks, 'Labor, Standpoints, and Feminist Subjects'.

62 Berg, 'Freedom, Not Benefits'.

rights more broadly, and is not indebted to the Child or the Patient when the conditions of work are challenged or refused. Berg's arguments, of sex worker critiques of reproductivism in the United States, hold true for sex worker critiques in the Aotearoa New Zealand decriminalised context, highlighting even further the necessity to move past decriminalisation, past the work ethic, and past reproductivism as the foundation or reasoning for fair treatment of workers.

To smile all day for minimum wage, as June says, or to work all day only for someone else to pocket the bulk of the profit, as Amara says, should not be acceptable. The focus here is the agentic refusal of straight work, the resistance to service others for low financial return, by people who have moved into the sex industry. Sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand do not centre the client as other reproductive labourers must centre the metaphorical and literal Child. Society does not position the purchase of sex as socially necessary (that is, to be frank, what heterosexual marriages are meant for under patriarchal capitalism).⁶³ Sex workers do not centre clients in their demands for better treatment, better conditions, and more money. While teachers, mothers, and nurses might have to couch their work refusal or demands in the Child or the Patient—'we can meet the needs of the Child/the Patient only if we are given this or that'—the work refusal of the sex worker is not couched in a care for the clients, but in a right for fair conditions because that is what is just. There is a critical standpoint of resistance and refusal that exists where marginalised people labour, in which it is imperative that the wellbeing of those socially reproduced does not discursively or materially diminish the rights of those who reproductively labour, and where learning from—and crucially being in solidarity with—the people who live and labour in the margins is our way forward.

63 Zatz, 'Sex Work/Sex Act'; Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020).