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Motherhood, Subjectivity, and Work

Resisting silence and stigma: Mothering and sex work

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Abstract

This article will critically explore differing representations of sex work and motherhood linked to competing ideological perspectives on sex work from the perspective that frames it as the definitive transgression of gendered norms, to that which calls out the lack of necessary support and protections for sex workers. Central to this will be the foregrounding of evidence from sex workers' own management of subjective identities and their narratives of working and mothering, which resist stigma and shame.

KEYWORDS

motherhood, sex work, stigma

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is much need to illuminate the important focus of personal subjectivity and human agency in the everyday work contexts of mothers. Indeed exploring the mediation of dual identities as mother and worker in shaping subjectivities, which transcends traditionally the ways of knowing individuals through collective units such as the family is long overdue. Yet, for mothers who sex work, such dual identities fall outside of normative gender expectations and are socially circumscribed in ways which often delegitimize subjective experiences. This raises critical questions for the study of gender and subjectivity and indeed for the wider enterprise of knowledge production. How do framings of motherhood implicate our understanding of sex work? How do framings of sex work color our understandings of sex-working mothers? And how do the perspectives of sex-working mothers challenge dominant ideas of mothering and working? Drawing on conceptual frameworks around the politics of gendered stigma (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010), this article will bring together a critical review of the literature on sex work and motherhood in order to present key questions and new avenues of inquiry for gender, work, and subjectivities. By

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drawing on social abjection (Tyler, 2013) as a conceptual tool to understand the structuring of and responses to stigma in neoliberal contexts, we can trace the nexus between gender, sexuality, and power as it relates to the experiences of sex-working mothers. To illuminate this further, we present a case study of sex-working mothers' activism in the UK, and argue that highlighting the narratives of motherhood by sex workers becomes a strategy itself to resist the stigma surrounding sex work.

A sadly stark example of how structures of stigma operate to oppress sex-working mothers can be seen in the case of Petite Jasmine in Sweden. In July 2013, a Swedish sex worker named Petite Jasmine was brutally murdered by her ex-partner. Her children had been taken into care after a family member informed Social Services of her sex work. Despite pleas to the Swedish court about her abusive ex-partner, Jasmine lost custody of her children through the courts following a ruling that she was an unfit mother due to her sex working (Dziuban, 2015). Her ex-partner was granted full custody and she was murdered by him during a supervised visit with her children. She was 27 years old.

This article will employ a critical feminist analytic lens to understand (1) how structures of stigma and shame operate to shape the experiences of sex-working mothers and (2) how sex-working mothers experience and respond to stigma. Our qualitative methodology involves a critical discourse analysis as guided by Law's (2004:149-40) idea of "performativity of method," as both tool and process in uncovering and shaping knowledge on sex workers' lives. Critical discourse analysis is set apart from other types of discursive analysis by its focus on the study and critique of social inequality and the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance (Van Dijk, 2011). To this end, our methodology is informed by Foucauldian ideas seeking to understand how discursive practices operate and oppress (Bacchi, 1999) and how such practices can be resisted. Foucault (1980, p. 93) called for "thinking problematically to uncover how governing occurs through the production of truth," and this inspired the development of Bacchi's (2009) methodological framework for studying "problem representations" or policy problematizations. Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be" (WPR) approach is a six-point framework,¹ yet for the purposes of this article, we draw more generally on the framework to explore how knowledge on sex work and motherhood is represented and to look at how these representations are resisted and disrupted. This involves a critical literature review drawing out key themes from empirical and theoretical literature in order to uncover contested conceptualizations of "motherhood," "sex work," and "sex work and mothering." In order to establish parameters for our analysis we limit our review to a number of key questions, namely (1) how can we understand the shaping of meanings around sex-working mothers? (2) What are the lived effects of these dominant discourses? (3) Where can we see examples of sex worker resistance to such discourses? Due to resource and time constraints, our geographical focus of study is largely limited to sex workers' experiences and policy contexts in the global North and we acknowledge the limitations of this and the particular problematization shaped by such an analysis. We look specifically in our analysis of the literature for strategies of resistance. Key to the resistance of stigma are the voices of sex-working mothers themselves and their "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988). O'Brien (2019, p. 83) describes subjectivity as "a key site of contestation vis-à-vis gender identity, replete with multiple and contradictory possible outcomes. Women can choose to inhabit, perform, deny or refuse various aspects of the gendered identity available to them." Our article will consider that though existing evidence is limited, the "unsilencing" of such experience and resistance is crucial for advancing knowledge on gender and work and the socio-political environment, which mediates subjectivities and work.

Bacchi and Eveline (2010, p. 336) set out an approach to policy analysis, which treats policies as gendering practices, which constitute "women," "men," and "gender relations." This provides a valuable basis for understanding the structures of stigma shaping sex workers' lives which are argued to be compounded by law and policy which criminalize sex work and limit well-being and harm reduction supports to sex workers (Grenfell et al., 2018; Levy, 2015; McGarry & Ryan, 2020). Further, Bacchi and Eveline (2010, p. 341) advocate a *politics of movement*, based on the notion that decisions on the fixing and unfixing of meanings, attached to identities for example, are temporal: "fixings are recognized as temporary and political, rather than essential, in nature ...therefore require further scrutiny and reconsideration when the circumstances change, in order to generate new meanings." We turn

now to consider meanings attached to motherhood and how fixed ideas around “mothering,” “sex work,” and “motherhood and sex work” shape the experiences of sex-working mothers.

2 | HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE SHAPING OF MEANINGS AROUND SEX-WORKING MOTHERS?

2.1 | Contested constructions of motherhood

As argued by Heffernan and Wilgus (2018, p. 2), “feminists have long pointed to the power of discourses of the ‘good mother’ over women’s practices of motherhood” (see also Goodwin and Huppertz, 2010; Hays, 1996; Thurer, 1994). These, along with some other important contributions, have explored the diversity of representations of mothering (Feasey, 2012; Heffernan & Stone, 2021; Podnieks, 2012) as well as mothering experiences that do not reflect conventional familial models (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018). Heffernan and Stone’s (2021, p. 339) analysis provides much resonance for our thinking and theorizing on meanings inscribed around motherhood and the “myths about the ‘good mother’.”

Notions of “good mothers” predominately refer to concepts of selflessness and prioritizing children’s needs over one’s own (Ma et al., 2019 citing Malacrida, 2009). Conversely, those who fall short of these societal expectations are framed as bad or inadequate mothers (Ma et al., 2019) and subject to moral judgment, marginalization, and silencing. Indeed the pathologization of bad mothers is a subject explored by Rubin (1993) and illuminates the manner in which such transgressors are framed as social pariahs.

By choosing in this paper to focus on sex-working mothers we are mindful of the discursive effects of binaries; that is, sex workers versus non-sex workers; sex-working mothers versus non-sex working mothers; sex-working mothers versus sex workers who are not mothers or parents. It is important at this juncture, as Mellor and Benoit (2023) point out, to emphasize the homogenizing tendencies of knowledge production on sex work. While we commit to challenging and displacing such homogenizing, a focus on sex-working mothers indeed could be charged with further contributing to limiting the lens. While conscious of the implications of such a focus, our intention is to recognize rather than blur the intersecting identities of sex workers, which directly affect stigmatization processes. As a gendered phenomenon, sex work is reflective of the macro structuring along intersections of patriarchy, sexuality, race, class, citizenship, and local sex market conditions (Outshoorn, 2005; UN, 2023). Moreover, while we have acknowledged that our focus is limited to the policy context of the global North, we are conscious of the geo-political economy which impacts particularly women as carers and effects gendered migration patterns (Williams, 2018). Indeed the experiences of the many migrant sex-working parents are often invisible in the politics of sex work globally. Yet despite these complexities in terms of identities and subjectives, the experience of sex work has been discursively reduced to two polarized ideological views; sex worker as a victim or sex worker as a rational agent (see Scouler, 2004). Another fallacy of these debates is the unquestioned assumption of the social elevation attributed to motherhood. Yet we know that for sex workers there is a complex interplay between the “rightness” of motherhood and the “wrongness” of sex work. Focusing on sex workers who are mothers is not intended to suggest a greater legitimation for sex work. Focusing on sex-working mothers does not intend that sex workers who are not mothers or parents are a less “deserving” focus of academic or policy attention. Instead our intention is to contribute to knowledge production which focuses on the range of human experiences of sex workers, moving beyond tired binaries and the disqualifying stigmatizing effects of policy narratives on those more “deserving” of being destigmatized. This article aims, therefore, to expand on the complex relationship between the “rightness” of motherhood and the “wrongness” of sex work, as means to recognize and ultimately respond to the spectrum of human experience of sex workers. In the words of hooks, b. (1989, p. 20), this article seeks to contribute to the formation of “counter-hegemonic cultural practices,” and identify spaces through the presentation of sex workers narratives of resistance, where a reimagining of sex worker lives can begin.

2.2 | Contested constructions of sex workers

This sparks much questioning in terms of the social effects of “multiple transgressions” whereby sex workers as mothers are seen to doubly deviate from normative gendered and moral behavior. Boyd (1999, p. 6) argues that “women who do not conform to familial ideology are regulated and punished.”

A woman engaged in prostitution is seen to be explicitly violating normative gender expectations by selling something which should only be confined to the private sphere of a loving, intimate, (heterosexual) relationship (Barnard, 1993). By operating outside of the acceptable female sex role, women in prostitution are dichotomized from other “respectable” women along a Madonna/whore continuum (Stanko, 1985). As Vanwesenbeeck (2001) argued, sex workers are routinely constructed as deviant, and such misrecognition and misrepresentation validate the denial of social rights enjoyed by other citizens (Benoit et al., 2018). Pheterson (1988, p. 225) comments that women in prostitution “serve as models of female unchastity. As sexual solicitors, they are assumed to invite male violence.” This conceptualization is embedded in the grave notion that, as female prostitutes already violate the established gender and sexual order, they cannot be further violated (Barnard, 1993; McGarry, 2009). This lends itself to the idea of prostitution as “social death” and the prostitute herself as socially dead (O’Connell Davidson, 1998, p. 134; Patterson, 1982).²

Indeed, drawing on foundational ideas on the phenomenology of risk, Douglas (1966, p. 113) points to the stigmatizing and contaminating position of a person who transgresses cultural boundaries. This raises some important questions for consideration as we explore mothering experiences of sex workers and the subjective effects of stigmatizing practices on the lived lives of sex workers and their families.

3 | WHAT ARE THE LIVED EFFECTS OF THESE DOMINANT DISCOURSES?

3.1 | Sex work and stigma

Goffman (1963) in his seminal text *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* differentiates between the “discredited” and the “discreditable.” The former usually possesses a visible or apparent mark of her/his stigma to be managed on a daily basis as face-to-face contact often means immediate exposure of their stigma. The latter “discreditable” individual does not face this problem but is subject to constant deliberation regarding concealment or disclosure. As Goffman (1963) contends, stigma relates to a discrediting attribute when an individual’s social identity deviates from their expected, normative social identity. In Tyler and Slater’s (2018) work “Rethinking Stigma” they argue how traditional theories of stigma often sideline questions such as where is stigma produced, by whom, and for what purposes. So exploring ideas of sex work, motherhood, and stigma challenges us to acknowledge not merely the effect of the existence of stigma in the lives of sex-working mothers but the manner in which stigma operates. In other words, rethinking stigma in the lives of sex-working mothers calls for recognition of the discursive and subjective effects of stigma in the shaping of both the contexts within which sex-working mothers live their lives and the responsive practices of sex workers to such contexts. Indeed this may involve an acceptance, disruption or displacement of stigma, which ultimately produces and reproduces these temporal, situated spaces where stigma operates.

The stigmatization of sex work and the stigmatization experienced by sex workers is pervasive and well-documented (Pheterson, 1989; Sanders, 2017; Scambler, 2007; Weitzer, 2017). Benoit et al. (2018) point to the layered sources of sex work-related stigma at the macro level (law and policy and media); the meso level (justice system and healthcare system); and the micro level (the public and sex workers own internalizing of stigma). As “sex workers also frequently face censure, judgment and blame for being seen to transgress social or sexual norms and/or to not conform to gender roles and stereotypes because they are sex workers” (Amnesty International, 2016, p. 6); this raises many questions about the lived effects of the stigmatization of sex work and the repercussions this

has in terms of sex workers' well being, safety, and their freedom to enjoy a family life free from threat. Mounting international evidence shows that in states where sex work is criminalized, sex workers are impeded in their ability to manage their health and well-being and face adverse health including mental health risk (Amnesty International, 2016; Krüsi et al., 2014; Levy & Jakobsson, 2014; Platt et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2008; Svanström, 2004; Visser et al., 2004). McGarry and Ryan (2020) found that for sex workers living in a criminalized environment, their experiences of stigma were exacerbated as they attempt to conceal their sex work for example, in health settings, impeding their access to appropriate health care (see also (Benoit et al., 2018; Lazarus et al., 2012; Slabbert et al., 2017)). The ability of sex workers to manage their safety and exert their rights not to be subjected to degrading treatment, exploitation, or violence in such circumstances is severely constrained when officially, sex work is not recognized and thus sex workers are silenced and invisibilized. This limits sex workers' access to legal due process, police protection, support services, and other safety mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2016; Brooks-Gordon et al., 2020; Levy, 2015; Platt et al., 2018).

Applying theories of stigma, McGarry (2009) explored the lived experiences of sex workers in Ireland and found evidence of major emotional risk management efforts by sex workers to protect their families and to keep *public* lives and *private* lives separate. The discrediting attributes of sex work framed in dominant social and legal discourse associated with abolitionist and criminalized systems force many sex workers to manage the concealment of their "stigma" in order to protect family and friends from what Goffman (1963) refers to as "courtesy stigma."

Societal hierarchal ordering is flagged by Mellor and Benoit (2023, p. 2, citing Graceyswer, 2020) as creating binary divisions between sex workers ranking them as "privileged" to "lesser"; as they argue "[t]his 'whore-archy' detracts attention from the most marginalized workers and strengthens horizontal stigmatizing attitudes within the sex worker community, preventing access to supports." For example, in relation to the issue of race K. Kempadoo points out, women of color in the West are usually perceived as "highly sexualized by nature" and overrepresented as skilled for only manual work. Therefore, the radical feminist victimization approach in the debates regarding the industry of prostitution enables their stigmatization even further (Kempadoo, 2017). Another example could be migration. Jacobsen and Skilbrei (2010) study on Russian women migrants who engaged in sex work in Norway, pointed out that, due to the fact of migration "as migrants and as women selling sex, they are represented both as 'victims' and as 'prostitutes'. As 'victims' they are believed to lack the qualities of an active choosing self, while as 'prostitutes' they are singled out as different from other women and deserving of the shame and blame attached to prostitution" (Jacobsen, Skilbrei, 2010).

3.2 | Motherhood and sex work

Applying Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach to problematizing the literature, our critical review explores how knowledge on sex work and motherhood is represented and how these representations are resisted and disrupted. The dual identity of mother and sex worker is a theme explored in some important literature, which fills an otherwise telling gap in the knowledge base. The gap in knowledge regarding sex work and mothering is regarded as an issue by those who have sought to rectify this deficit—as Dalla (2004) argues, women in prostitution are unlikely to be acknowledged and identified as parents. McClelland and Newell (2008, p. 438) argue that gaps in the knowledge base regarding sex work and mothering may be in part due to methodological and ethical challenges; "unless researchers chart new territories and try to access marginalized groups, their views and aspirations may remain essentially unknown." Indeed the silences in the knowledge base around aspects of lived experiences of sex workers could be argued to service pervasive injustices, which shape thinking about and responses to sex workers (McGarry & FitzGerald, 2017).

The duality and intersection of sex worker identities pose a challenge to the traditional tendency to homogenize sex worker experience that has long been a feature of the knowledge base on sex work. As O'Brien (2019) notes subjectivity is not a unitary process as if everyone inhabits identities or responds to contexts and structures

in the same manner. And so the subjective experience of sex working mothers, an understanding of oneself in relation to one's sex work, can never be reduced to one single essence. A recognition of the complex, multifaceted nature of human experience is as much a feature of sex workers' lived lives as any other, yet the tradition of knowledge reporting on sex workers' lives has reduced the essence of sex workers' lived experience to their engagement in sex work. This misrecognition of sex workers' lives and the monopoly over the frame-setting of sex work by dominant abolitionist voices in many European and wider policy contexts has rendered sex workers themselves and their multi-faceted identities as silenced, ignored, and deemed irrelevant (McGarry & FitzGerald, 2017). Indeed, the work of McGarry and FitzGerald, which explored the political misframing and misrepresentation of sex-working women as key strategies by neo-abolitionists in Ireland, found that sex workers "identities as mothers were discredited and dismissed as part of public debate, despite a challenge by sex worker activists calling for a reframing of sex work as a policy issue":

I've been working with the International Prostitutes' Collective for over 20 years and I've worked with hundreds of women and one thing we do know is that 70 per cent of sex workers are mothers, mostly single mothers, and we feel that if prostitution policy were framed by that fact we would come up with a very different conclusion.

(Nicki Adams of the International Prostitutes' Collective speaking on Irish political TV debate *Prime Time*, 2014 cited in McGarry & FitzGerald, 2017, p. 18)

The persistent stigmatization and marginalization of sex workers have rendered sex-working lives as transgressive and have framed sex workers themselves as deviant and immoral (Ma et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2011) as well as being inevitably exposed to and deserving of violence (McGarry & Ryan, 2020). But what of sex workers who are mothers? Having being framed as transgressive of normative social behavior for engaging in sex work, how transgressive are sex-working mothers deemed to be through similar misframing?

Ma et al. (2019, p. 535) argue that; "the effect of criminalization, stigma, and other forms of discrimination could extend into their family lives and impair their capacities as mothers. In extreme circumstances, [female sex workers] may be susceptible to arbitrary moral judgments of them as unfit mothers and experience termination of their parental rights" (Dziuban, 2015). Yet, in terms of sex workers' responses to social expectations on what constitutes a good mother, the literature reveals that the justification of sex work discourse is strong, including the rationale that the money earned from sex work allows for a better life for their children (Basu & Dutta, 2011; Dodsworth, 2014; Praimkumara & Goh, 2015). We turn now to look into more detail at some key literature on the experiences of sex-working mothers.

3.3 | Understanding the lived realities of sex workers who are mothers

It is critical to emphasize how the intersectional experience shapes the lives of sex workers who are mothers. Such analysis is critical not solely for an appropriately robust sociological analysis but as a response to the limited dimensionality of discussions of sex work. O'Neill and Campbell (2010) draw on frameworks of intersectionality, which allow for a cultural-materialist analysis of the intersections and ambiguities between sex, work, complex identities, and material processes. In their work on feminist cultural criminology and intersectionality, O'Neill and Campbell (2010, p. 163) describe intersectionality as 'the way in which any individual is situated at the crossroads of multiple subject positions, groups, identities and power relations'. For Taylor (2009, p. 194) "it is not an abstract concept; it is something that lives, breathes and moves." This embodied sociological analysis as a critical perspective at once signals both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of these crossroads and the fluidity of positionality, which shape a person's experience.

In order to understand the experiences of sex workers, O'Neill and Campbell (2010) argue for an illumination of the structural and relational interconnections of gender, class, sexuality, and space/place found in women's narratives (p. 165). A systematic review of the literature on motherhood and sex work is offered by Ma et al. (2019, p. 534), incorporating perspectives from the global North and South. They argue that the social and cultural constructions of motherhood and expectations around "good mothers" pose challenges to female sex workers as they negotiate both their maternal identities and their stigmatized sex-working identities within different regulatory contexts. They explore two key themes as part of the systematic review (1) conflicting identities between sex work and motherhood, and (2) responses to the social expectation around ideal motherhood.

Findings from Ma et al.'s (2019) systematic review around conflicting identities for sex-working mothers included "internalizing stigma" (see Sloss & Harper, 2004), where many sex workers felt guilt and shame, fearing negative consequences for their children and many sex workers fearing that their children would be stigmatized (Basu & Dutta, 2011; John-Fisk, 2013), some used drugs for self-medication (Dodsworth, 2014). Other conflicts included exposing children to unsafe environments, which could increase their children's vulnerability and exposure to violence, sexual abuse, drug misuse, underage sexual activity or engagement in the sex industry (Bletzer, 2005; Dalla, 2004; McClelland & Newell, 2008), and stigma and laws undermining sex worker abilities to be mothers (Basu & Dutta, 2011). Many studies also reported that sex workers lost custody of their children or were reported to Child and Family Services due to their sex work, including in the US (Dalla, 2004; Sloss & Harper, 2004), the UK (McClelland & Newell, 2008), and Canada (Duff et al., 2015).

Another important aspect in the realities of sex workers' children, is that the stigma surrounding sex-working mothers can be passed on to the child, who then experiences the same social downgrading as their mothers. A study published by Sircar and Dutta (2011) is focused on the voices of sex workers' children in Kolkata's Sonagachi red light district. The article points out that these children are labeled in society as "children of a sex worker," are stigmatized, and experience the "politics of pity," which is centered on the notion of "rescue." As the authors conclude: "The problem with monochromatic representations of suffering in the lives of children of sex workers is that they singularly invoke compassion and continuously propagate half truths about the lives of these children and their families. These images have clogged almost every mode through which knowledge about their lives gets circulated, effecting an erasure of the daily practices of resilience and resistance in their lives" (Sircar & Dutta, 2011).

Research from Dodsworth (2018) in the UK explores both the lived realities of sex work and its influences on perceptions of agency. For some sex workers who are mothers, the abilities to care and provide for their children are the biggest motivation and are presented as strategies of resistance in the context of criminalization and stigmatization (Dodsworth, 2018; McGarry, 2009). Other studies have shown, that while the central invoking stigma narrative about sex-working mother is that she is locked in sex work in order to survive and feed the children, it can be quite the opposite: good income, time planning, personal ambitions, and other attributes let these women consider themselves particularly good and able mothers (Rivers-Moore, 2010; Vijayakumar, 2022).

Dewey (2011) in her anthropological study in the "rustbelt" of upstate New York, examines the dynamics of life for sex workers who are mothers and the perceived incompatibly sex work has with motherhood. Dewey's account usefully sidelines what she describes as "naïve assumptions of sisterhood and unity in social struggle" (p. 9). Her analysis explores the narratives of sex workers in a profession culturally constructed as the antithesis to the normative roles of woman, partner, and mother by laying bare the economic wasteland, which serves as a backdrop and barometer of the experiences of disenfranchised women. The intersection of gender and class becomes a cold lesson in the lives of sex workers, aptly summed up in Dewey's (2011, p. 139) words:

The operations of power take myriad forms in the lives of poor women. From post-TANF welfare programs that stress economic self-sufficiency on impractical terms that fail to account for women's child-care responsibilities to labor practices that virtually guarantee the global feminization of

poverty, neoliberal economic policies work their strange and terrible magic in infinite ways. These everyday forms of structural violence are compounded for sex workers, whose lives present evidence that focuses the stark inequalities inherent in these practices even more sharply due to the heavy weight of social stigma framing them. Their stories, although situated at the social and legal margins of life in the United States, consistently speak to the exclusionary forces at work that impact everyone, albeit in very different ways.

How different is a sex worker from another low-paid, precarious worker who lives without health and other benefits, without job security, with the threat of no income? Like Dewey (2011), we must consider that selling sex is insignificant in the grander scheme of understanding stigmatized work and motherhood within a context imbued by the feminization of poverty on a global scale (Williams, 2018), yet for sex workers the sale of sex becomes the defining feature structuring their realities with little consideration of the myriad structuring dimensions which exist at the "intersections of injustice" for sex workers (Fraser, 2010; McGarry & FitzGerald, 2018).

Other studies emphasized the mothers' responsibility, for some this emphasis was on sex workers' increased responsibilities around harm reduction, as found by Beckham et al. (2015). In Dalla's (2004) study of sex-working mothers in the US, she found that sex workers reported feeling that their children would be better off being cared for by others. While some expressed a desire to leave the sex industry (Dodsworth, 2014; John-Fisk, 2013; Praimkumara & Goh, 2015), another key discourse under the response to social expectations arising in the literature was the restoration of a positive social identity (Ma et al., 2019) as sex workers reported how sex workers described strong emotions about their children and how the children motivated the mothers to complete drug treatment programs (Dalla, 2004).

3.4 | Effects of criminalization and stigma on mothering

Turning to look specifically at how law and policy can stigmatize or empower sex workers as mothers, we draw on a number of key studies that explore the impact of laws on sex work on the lived experiences of sex workers who are mothers. This includes environments where sex work is criminalized, for example, as well as looking at experiences of sex-working mothers in decriminalized contexts, such as looking at mothering in the context of New Zealand's model of decriminalization (see Armstrong, 2017). The potential for learning from New Zealand's model of decriminalization is argued (see Abel & Fitzgerald, 2010; Armstrong, 2017) as a valuable lesson in empowering sex workers and increasing their safety, addressing power structures in society that cause disproportionately negative effects for sex workers and instead enable them to access health and other social services without restriction. The knock-on effect of such a model for sex-working mothers is argued to offer much potential in enhancing the lived lives of sex workers and their children (see Benoit et al., 2018; Dziuban, 2015; Grenfell et al., 2018).

A qualitative study by McClelland and Newell (2008) in the UK describes the experiences of street-based sex workers who are mothers, negotiating their lives within a context of problematic drug use. The research undertaken by McClelland and Newell (2008) involved a number of focus groups with sex-working women attending a drug treatment clinic in the North of England. The questions for discussion as set out by the researchers prompted a certain problematization of the issue and a certain discussion narrative to unfold as the first key question for discussion was "How does (did) your drug use and lifestyle affect you and your child/children" (p. 439). In some circumstances, stigmatizing environments and criminal laws compromised sex workers' abilities to be mothers and to seek equal treatment and services for their children, including ineligibility to apply for public housing or school admission for children because of their sex-working (Praimkumara & Goh, 2015; Willis et al., 2014; Yerpude & Jogdand, 2012).

The review by Ma et al. (2019) calls for the recognition of the multiple identities of female sex workers who are mothers and an awareness of the circumstances which shape their experiences and which demand a holistic approach through law, policy, and practice. As they argue, "Sex work itself does not affect competence in the maternal role. However, stigma, criminalization, and other marginalizing factors constrained FSWs' (female sex workers') maternal capacity and challenged their and their children's health, safety, well-being and human rights. A critical approach in dealing with conflicting dual identities is the needed policy change" (Ma et al., 2019, p. 554). Indeed our review reveals that the shaping of the mothering experience is, to borrow Bacchi's (1999) term, subjectively affected by factors other than sex work, while the discursive effects of sex work stigmatization discounts any other dimension as superceding the impact that being a sex worker could have on being a mother, or indeed that being a mother could have on being a sex worker.

4 | WHERE CAN WE SEE EXAMPLES OF SEX WORKER RESISTANCE TO SUCH DISCOURSES?

4.1 | Resisting stigma

In her seminal work "Revolted Subjects," Tyler (2013) illuminates the intersection of gender, sexuality, and class in neoliberal contexts and allows us to think through the operation of stigma and the materiality awarded to discourses which shame and "other." Tyler's insightful work foregrounds the concept of "social abjection," exploring how social processes serve to figure some people by virtue of who they are as "revolting" and how in turn those groups seek to revolt against their abject subjectification. Tyler draws on the examples of "chavs," asylum seekers, travelers, and gypsies and the manner in which they are "othered" and maligned in contemporary Britain. For Tyler social abjection as a framing concept allows us to think through forms of violence and exclusion on multiple scales and across multiple perspectives. Tyler describes how at the essence of her work on social abjection is the question of how *states—states of being* (human life) and *states of belonging* (political life) are shaped and reshaped and how we might critically engage in this process of shaping (Butler & Spivak, 2007; Tyler, 2013). The clever use of the "revolting" concept at once draws our mind to processes which marginalize in terms of subjective effects of being maligned and "othered"; while also foregrounding the resistance to such processes and to the circumscription of such experiences in "revolting times" which are shaped by geo-social, economic, and environmental politics.

As Tyler (2013) argues; we need to shift the focus toward the effects of being made abject within specific historical, social, and political contexts in order to understand how this experience gives rise to resistance; which allows us to uncover empirical understandings of the lives of those constituted as abject in order to give meaning to political agency and resistance from the margins. "Only through an empirical focus on the lives of those constituted as abject can we consider the forms of political agency available to those at the sharp edge of subjugation within prevailing systems of power" (Tyler, 2013, p. 38). It is to this agency we focus our attention in this paper as we "revolt" against the dominant paradigmatic frameworks for knowledge production on sex workers' lives, seeking to question the epistemic privilege awarded to knowing sex workers' lives and knowing how stigma operates. "Stigmatized groups are not passive actors who universally subscribe to the stigma and apply it to themselves in the process of internalization; many, in fact, assert their agency through finding ways to adapt and manage the stigma they are faced with and sometimes reframe or resist it" (Benoit et al., 2018).

The participants in McGarry and Ryan's (2020) study spoke of their everyday strategies to manage risk and challenge stigma, yet how these strategies are limited when the contexts within which they negotiate their lives remain criminalized. We look now to discourses of mothering and motherhood by sex workers in the UK as key strategies of resistance to social abjection and stigma.

4.2 | Mothering as a strategy for resisting stigma

We take as our focus the case of sex-working mothers' voices and activism in the UK, following on from Tyler's work on social abjection and resistance in neoliberal contexts. Again applying Bacchi's WPR approach we seek "[t]he right to question how problems are thought about rather than merely accepting the shape they are given" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 46). We turn to sex workers' own narratives as a means to problematize, disrupt, and displace traditional ways of knowing sex-working mothers.

The law defining sex work in the UK states, that "the exchange of sexual services for money is legal in the UK (apart from in Northern Ireland where it's illegal to pay for sex). But, these related activities are illegal under the Sexual Offences Act 2003: (1) soliciting (trying to get clients) on the street or other public place, including someone in a vehicle, (2) paying for the services of a sex worker who's forced or threatened into it, (3) owning or managing a brothel (any premises which are used by more than one person for sex work), (4) pimping (someone who has control over sex workers and the money they earn), (5) advertising sexual services, including putting cards in phone boxes.³"

During the last decade, narratives of sex-working mothers have gained greater attention on different media channels, blogs, press, social networks, and podcasts in the UK. Many sex worker-led alliances and social movements highlight the narratives of motherhood and put forward questions about the stigma of dual sex worker/mother identities and the realities of sex-working mothers. Such narratives also address the ineffective social policies toward sex work, which place many sex-working mothers, particularly those at the intersections of marginality, in dangerous situations (experiencing a further lack of social, legal, and medical care), and perpetuate "abjectifying" discourses, questioning the maternal abilities of women in sex work.

The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP)⁴—a UK-based network of sex workers, who have campaigned for decriminalization and sex workers' rights since 1975, pays a considerable amount of attention to the issues mothers face in the industry. In collaboration with filmmakers Merien Adib and Claire Cottrell, ECP released a short film called "Mum" in 2017 as part of a social media campaign demanding the decriminalization of sex work called "Make Mum Safer." For a duration of 2 min and 13 s, the narrative of the film circles around the story of a girl and her mother, who experience regular daughter–mother routines: daughter makes a drawing to her mother, says she loves her, the mother drives daughter to the school, then the mother is depicted working in a shop, later both mom and daughter watch the television, then daughter falls asleep in mother's arms. Then the quote appears on the screen "*Most sex workers are mothers*"—letting the viewer understand that mother is a sex worker and that is why she is played not by some actress, but the mother's figure is represented by a plastic human-sized doll—as an allegory to a sex worker woman. The film shifts to the night setting; the mother (plastic doll) is standing on the street and is being addressed by passers-by in the cars asking for her price; other quotes on the screen appear—first, "*Under current law they are criminalized and can't work together in safe places,*" then "*This means they work in isolation at greater risk of danger.*" After we see the mother (plastic doll) undressed, mutilated, and lying dead in the fields; afterward daughter is crying for her mother and holds the picture frame; another quote on the screen—"*Let's start thinking of sex workers as real people,*" then we see the content of the picture which the girl holds—and it is a picture of a mother holding the daughter. The mother is not a doll anymore but a woman. The final quote appears "*Support decriminalization.*"

Apart from a clear message advocating for the decriminalization of sex work for both the recognition and safety of sex workers, the film also draws attention to financial need since the mother is already working in the shop but also has to do sex work. The portrayal of a sex worker as a doll is also very symbolic, telling the viewers how women in sex work are perceived. The personification of the doll at the end of the film in the picture sends a powerful message that women in sex work have real faces and are real people, who have families and are loved.

ECP again draws attention to the mothers entering sex work due to their financial needs and ineffective social policies in the UK by highlighting their narratives in "Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights" in 2018. ECP states:

Many women go into prostitution because they are caring for a disabled partner or child. WinVisible points to how "Austerity policies have targeted sick and disabled people". This was an issue addressed by a mother [of a disabled child] in the ECP network <...> [who claims that she] "worked on street corners as a prostitute" to "pay for the basics that most people take for granted – keeping warm, having decent food, replacing essential furniture". She broke down in tears as she described how £100 a week was going to be taken from her daughter's benefits.

In the article published on ECP website in 2019 by Niki Addams, spokeswoman and activist of EPC called "I News: We are single mothers and sex workers—this is what we want the Government to know about Universal Credit," the author elaborates further on women, particularly mothers, being pushed to prostitution by poverty and shares a narrative of one of the mothers:

My daughter has learning disabilities and needs a lot of extra care and attention. I was crying to my friend and she told me about one of the mums at the school who looked like she had a bit more money than the rest of us. I got friendly with her and she got me a couple of shifts in a local massage parlour. I was very reluctant but so stressed I couldn't think straight. The money has been a life-saver. I'm not splashing it about, but I can pay the rent and keep the heating on.

(2019)

However, the author continues in her article that due to criminalization, sex workers have no safety guarantees:

Research by the ECP comparing sex work with other jobs traditionally done by women found endemic low pay, exploitative working conditions and workplace injury, discrimination and abuse across the board. The biggest difference was that sex workers earned more per hour than women working in the other jobs, and that criminalization undermined their ability to work safely and deterred them from reporting violence or exploitation.

Furthermore, ECP addresses the issue of children's separation from sex-working mothers. Organizing campaigns and pickets called "Support Not Separation (SNS)," stating how women in sex work are judged and labeled, sometimes resulting in separation from their children. ECP claims:

Most sex workers are mothers working hard to support families, yet are punished for this, labeled "unfit mothers" and live in fear of their children being taken from them by biased family courts.

Over the past year, we've seen a drastic increase in the number of women contacting us with child custody issues where sex work is being used against them by ex-partners, other family members or social workers and the courts. Women of color and migrant women are judged particularly harshly by social workers, lawyers, judges & the courts.

Apart from ECP's extensive attention to mothering sex workers, news agency channels, such as BBC, also raised the issue that many women in sex work in the UK are "also mothers." For example, an article authored by Thorn (2016) called "The mother secretly working as sex workers" shares stories of two sex-working mothers, Sherri and Jenny. The author states that both of her informants entered the industry of sex work due to poverty and the need to take care of their children. Thorn raises the questions of safety, criminal records, which prevent people from leaving the industry, and the dual identities of being mothers in a "bad job." Both of the women do not tell their children about their work. Thorn finishes the article with a quote from Sherri, who hopes that "*laws and attitudes will change,*" referring to the decriminalization of sex work.

There are also podcasts by sex workers themselves, who share their experiences in mothering while working in the industry. For example, adult film actress and former escort Rebecca More from the UK, during the interview she gave for the Holly Randall "Unfiltered" podcast series in 2022, says:

I was a single parent <...> it worked perfectly: you can have a career in escorting, during the day, you can have "nine-to-five" and make great money and spend more time with your kids, so it was a no-brainer for me." [Later on, after entering the industry] I had a great support network and money helped that: my kids went to private school and you know, they had <...> great people <...> to look after them in the week.

Rebecca More clearly indicates why sex work was her choice: more time to spend with kids and earn an above-average salary that would help her raise children in better conditions. Yet she continues that she was not eager to tell her children about her occupation due to the stigma surrounding it:

I didn't want my kids to know, <...>. It is something you have to protect them from, you know, adult world is the adult world, and you save that for the adult world, like you know, kids don't need to know that, they don't need to experience that at school [her son got ridiculed at school once his peers found out about his mother's occupation], so I had a cover story <...> so I had to juggle these lies, I never went to school to pick them up and stuff, I've always paid someone to be um at home <...> I always had to have two places to keep all my work stuff and things like that, so raising kids as a single parent, as a sex worker is not easy. It wasn't easy in my experience. But I almost had to fight harder and make more money because of that. <...> so you get thick skin to the people in the outside world judging you, you know, I have a lot going on here, so I don't give a fuck what you think, I am going to handle this myself, and I want to protect my kids more than anyone, you know.

4.3 | Linking sex-working mothers to critical theory

The most important part of the feminist standpoint project, as argued by Janack (1997) is the demystification of the link between epistemic privilege and epistemic authority. While acknowledging the connection between social marginalization and epistemic privilege, a key task for critical feminist analysis is to explore how epistemic authority is conferred through social and political practices and institutions. Tyler's (2013) work alerts us to how processes of social abjection operationalize to shape experiences of marginalized groups, and how the "abject" seek to disrupt and resist such processes in neoliberal democracies. An interesting insight as part of processes of social abjection is Muted Group Theory (MGT). Kramarae (2005) draws attention to the use of MGT over the decades to understand how marginalized groups are denied a voice and have little power to exercise their right to speak; and when they do, dominant groups belittle and stifle the words of those outside of the privileged circle.

"MGT" initially developed by Edwin Ardener and Shirley Ardener in 1975, suggests that marginalized groups are muted in societies due to the use of language and are unable to express themselves because of inequity. Privileged groups are creating the language of social norms and its vocabulary. Therefore marginalized groups have to reshape their models of communication and use the dominant language in order to express themselves. Still, they can not do it clearly due to the "translation process" (Ardener, 2005; West & Turner, 2018). Scholars West and Turner further expand the theory by defining the processes and methods used in muting a marginalized group, such as control, harassment, ridicule, and social ritual (West & Turner, 2018). This theoretical communication science framework is widely used in gender studies, especially in studies exploring women's subordination to patriarchy as well as for analyzing the depictions and misinterpretations of non-normative mothering (see Ruggerio, 2012).

4.4 | Unmuting sex-working mothers through strategies of resistance?

The connections between feminist standpoint and MGT are explored by writers such as Wood (2005), who emphasizes how both theories converge as political theories around the acknowledgment of the hierarchical ordering of society which shapes relations of power; their focus on the experiences of subordinated groups in society. In terms of divergences, Wood (2005) highlights less the differences and more the particular attention paid by each theory—for MGT the emphasis is on language, whilst for feminist standpoint theory it is knowledge. Yet as Kramarae (2005) argues in terms of the relevance of contemporary relevance, MGT knowledge remains language-based. She points to the complexities of silence and silencing in MGT and particularly to the importance of the work of hooks, b., who calls out the power of the self-determined voice pushed to the margins. How then the margins become a site of possibility for resistance. For sex-working mothers, this begs the question as to how their silencing by dominant abolitionism and their exclusion from circles of privilege can be transformed to enable resistance from the margins, revolting against their subjectification (Tyler, 2013) and the limited understandings of their multiple, complex identities. Their voices and narratives are that counter, hearing and seeing the lives of sex-working mothers becomes defiance, and, given proper recognition in policy circles, where radical possibilities may occur.

Sex workers are also a marginalized and muted group, ridiculed, harassed, and controlled by the social politics of the state, abolitionist approaches, and stereotyped by “regular citizens.” And we know that the experience of such marginalization is not uniformly experienced by sex workers but shaped through the intersections of power, which shape and mitigate stigma for different sex workers in different ways. As argued by Mellor and Benoit (2023, p. 3), “In practice, an intersectional perspective understands that an individual's lived and living experiences are produced by multiple social positions (e.g., age, race, immigrant status, gender, class, ability, sexuality, etc.) and cannot be effectively understood by examining these social factors separately.” In Tyler's (2013) terms, sex workers are subjectified in socially abject ways, and through the practice of intersectional analyses we can further confront and understand how such abjection is differentially experienced by different sex workers. Mai et al. (2022) illuminate the notion of sexual humanitarianism, a form of abjection, as racialized border politics and neoliberal notions of vulnerability associated with sexual behavior are couched in humanitarian support and control of sex-working migrants. Looking at the realities of sex workers through the lens of MGT could deepen an understanding of their ways of resisting the stigma surrounding sex workers.

The language used by sex workers and activists campaigning for decriminalization that highlights the professional aspects of sex work (e.g., that it is like any other job or that this occupation can be empowering) is difficult for the dominant group to understand and accept due to the amorality which surrounds sex work. While the binary polarization between *Madonna* and *Whore* categories of womanhood persists and women's virtue will be determined by her relation to sex (Bareket, 2018; Young, 1993), sex-working women's job activities will always be classified under deviant behavior. Therefore, the idea of legitimizing such deviant actions as having many sexual partners, getting money for sex, or in general, stepping out of the norms of femininity will be unaccepted by the dominant group and the social norms drawn by it. Therefore this “language” by sex workers is uncomfortable to society and rejected by the dominant group, so different strategies are needed. Meanwhile, the abolitionist agenda of reducing all the industries of sex work to human trafficking is understandable to society and is done in the dominant language: for example, using the narratives of sold young girls and provocative pictures, which calls for stopping human trafficking, invites society to feel pity for the victims and take action to stop “the slavery” (Sardina, “Marketing mass hysteria”; Hobbes “Human trafficking awareness campaigns”; Eckersall, “Secret victims of slavery”).

The narratives of motherhood among sex workers, as explored above, can provide an accepted and understandable language to society, which then, accordingly, can trouble the social abjection of sex work inherent in neoliberal policymaking. Narratives of sex-working mothers and activists for sex workers' rights found in the media often circle around four main aspects: (1) the issues of finances as a means for good parenting, (2) being a mother in

a “bad” profession and not being seen as “real people” (3) challenges they face due to regulative or abolitionist policies established by the laws of the states in the context of prostitution, and finally (4) separation from their children by the policies of the state (Adib, “Mum”; ECP, “Submission”; ECP, “Support not separation”; ECP, “News: we are single mothers”; Thorn, “The mothers secretly working”; Randall, “Rebecca Moore: sex worker”).

Many women in the sex work industry are mothers, and their needs for finances to raise their children are clear and justified. While separation from their children—breaking the bond between mother and child—is hostile and can be treated as amoral judgment. For many sex-working mothers, their narratives on entering sex work due to financial needs show existing gender inequality and raise issues around social policies, structures, and impossibilities of being a good parent in such dysfunctional social surroundings. Women, while discussing their dual mother/sex worker identities, emphasize that their children do not know about their jobs (Thorn, “The mothers secretly working”; Randall, “Rebecca Moore: sex worker”). These two worlds are being kept separate, thus satisfying the need for the moral language of the dominant group. Finally, the safety of the sex-working mother is central to all these narratives, which brings the primary goal of sex workers’ activism—decriminalization (Adib, “Mum,” ECP “Submission”; ECP, “News: we are single mothers”; Thorn, “The mothers secretly working”; Randall, “Rebecca Moore: sex worker”). Women would not be pushed to work on the streets and could work in groups in flats, which is far safer; they would also have access to much-needed social, medical, legal care and protection.

The tendency as Wood (2005) argues, is that subordinate positions, particularly women’s subordination, become romanticized and she joins key standpoint theorists such as Donna Haraway and Patricia Hill Collins in resisting the notion of subordinated positions as producing superior and more privileged knowledge, as this could, in fact, reinforce and perpetuate the continued subordination of such social groups. So while we can recognize the misrepresentation of women’s voices and particularly sex-working women’s voices, we can also acknowledge that “othering” mothering at the margins, even by celebrating such marginal voices as voices of resistance, is yet a continuation of the very practices of epistemological subordination we seek to challenge. Instead, we need to commit to and advance knowledge production on sex workers’ lives, which disrupts and displaces the stigmatization of essentialism and which uncovers the spectrum and intersections of sex worker diversity. As Haraway (1988, p. 580) eloquently states, “We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life.”

5 | CONCLUSION

This article presented a critical review of discourses surrounding sex work and mothering. Problematizing ideas around sex work, motherhood, and subjectivities and the effects of stigmatizing processes is important as both a tool and process. For Tyler (2013) the subjectification of “social abjection” is a call to action. To advance knowledge production on sex work it becomes a means to introduce a “revolting concept” for sex workers themselves to call out and resist the symbolic and material forms of violence and stigma described (Tyler, 2013). While this paper also challenged ideas around deserving and un-deserving subjects of shame and stigmatization, sex-working mothers’ narratives on their realities and the difficulties they face hold much potential in transcending the challenges of presenting sex as work as an understandable language to society. Moreover, while mothering is neither a more legitimate way of being a sex worker in society, recognition of the myriad subjectivities of sex worker lives, including parenting and family life, becomes a strategy itself to challenge the stigmatizing practices which reduce all knowledge on sex-working women to their sex work. It not only serves as an important challenge to stigmatizing practices around subjectivities in sex work but also as an effective tool to make an impact in the discussions about the decriminalization of sex work. As Merien Adib and Claire Cottrell suggest in their short film, “Let’s start thinking of sex workers as real people.” Indeed, acknowledging motherhood as a living reality for many sex workers is a necessary step in the politics of movement (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010) to begin unfixing meanings on sex worker

subjectivities and, from such liminal spaces create new ways of knowing and responding to both sex workers and mothers in research, policy, and practice.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

ENDNOTES

¹ A WPR approach considers the following questions: (1) what is the "problem" (e.g., of prostitution) represented to be in a specific policy? (2) What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the "problem"? (3) How has this representation of the "problem" come about? (4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be thought about differently? (5) What effects are produced by this representation of the "problem"? Consider three kinds of interconnected effects: discursive effects; subjectification effects; lived effects. (6) How/where has this representation of the "problem" been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

² Patterson (1982) argues that a person who is socially dead is without power, natality, or honor.

³ <https://www.cityoflondon.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/sw/sex-worker-safety/>.

⁴ More information on activities of ECP see <https://prostitutescollective.net/>.

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