

Exclusion of the vulnerable from public space in the shadow of urban transformation: the case of sex workers in Istanbul's Pera

Cansu Kislakol

Urban and Regional Planning Doctoral Program, Graduate School, Istanbul Technical University,
Istanbul, Turkey

Esin Ozkilic

Urban and Regional Planning Doctoral Program, Graduate School, Istanbul Technical University,
Istanbul, Turkey

Imge Akcakaya Waite

Urban and Regional Planning Department, School of Architecture, Istanbul Technical University,
Istanbul, Turkey

Abstract

This study examines the socio-spatial exclusion of sex workers in urban public spaces. It employs a multi-scale analysis of global frameworks and a local case study of Istanbul's Pera quarter. Building on contemporary thinkers' urban democracy and justice theories, the study reveals how urban spaces are frequently governed by majority- and authority-driven norms that marginalise vulnerable groups. Despite the global scale of the sex industry, social stigma and limited regulation perpetuate the spatial exclusion of sex workers. Using a four-step methodology ranging from international policy analysis to site-specific mapping, the study uncovers the impact of urban transformation on the displacement of sex workers in Pera. It argues for inclusive urban policies and spatial justice to ensure equitable access to public spaces for marginalised populations.

Keywords: Sex workers; Socio-spatial exclusion; Urban transformation; Public space; Istanbul

1. Introduction

Neoliberal restructuring and urban growth marginalise disadvantaged populations. This argument establishes a basis for discussions about exclusionary policies and urban justice, highlighting the challenges faced by vulnerable groups in urban areas. Along these lines, this study focuses on the exclusion of vulnerable groups from public spaces.

Before beginning the discussion, it is important to highlight the key conceptual frameworks of justice in relation to space. Henri Lefebvre (1996) argued that space is socially produced, incorporating social relations and boundaries. He also emphasised that space is both a physical entity and an area of political struggle. He considered this to be a key aspect of the concept of the 'right to the city' as a collective right. Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city supports equal participation in the production of space. Urban space is a collective asset and should not be exclusively controlled by the state or private capital. According to him, every individual, regardless of their socio-economic position, should have the right to participate in shaping their living environment.

Taking Lefebvre's definition further, David Harvey (2008) argued that the right to the city includes not only the right to access existing resources, but also the right to transform urban spaces. However, he also claimed that neoliberal urbanisation processes lead to the commodification of space, consequently causing vulnerable groups to be excluded from urban areas. This process further disadvantages vulnerable groups in terms of their well-being and socio-economic conditions. Therefore, Harvey emphasises that urban struggles should create alternative, more inclusive ways of life as an alternative to capitalist modes of production (Harvey, 2003).

Building on this, Susan Fainstein (2010) described the 'just city' approach as a set of urban planning standards that are based on democracy, diversity, and equality. Fainstein examined pragmatic planning strategies that combine Rawlsian ideas of justice with feminist perspectives. John Rawls's (1971) theory of justice has had a significant impact on urban studies. He argues that the transformation process is unfair to minorities. The relocation of

minorities comes at a significant cost. Also Rawls (1971) defended the principles of equality of opportunity and protecting the most disadvantaged groups. Although his individualistic approach to justice has been criticised for inadequately considering group identities, Rawls emphasised that institutions should be designed to protect the most vulnerable groups in order to achieve justice in society (Rawls, 2001).

Iris Marion Young's (1990) work highlights that justice is crucial for understanding the exclusion and spatial oppression experienced by marginalised groups. According to Young, injustice stems from exploitation, marginalisation, cultural imperialism and violence. Marginalised groups often experience multiple layers of socio-economic exclusion. Furthermore, economic inequalities become institutionalised as social disrespect and a lack of recognition (Honneth, 2003). This situation forces vulnerable groups to commit crimes to avoid being cleansed from urban areas, which results in their marginalisation and integration into unsafe environments. Urban transformation appears to be a solution, but it reduces the visibility of problems and creates constraints for vulnerable groups.

Subsequently, the literature argues that urban democracy and justice should encompass both distributive and recognitional aspects. This emphasizes the equitable distribution of resources and accessibility, along with social respect, cultural visibility, and participation in shaping urban life. These frameworks highlight the importance of spatial justice in understanding and reevaluating the consequences of excluding vulnerable groups from urban spaces, narratives, and visions of the future.

In contrast to discussions about the right to the city and spatial justice, Istanbul's urban policy employs neoliberal planning strategies that emphasize tourism, real estate speculation, and middle-class aesthetics. These strategies merge visibility and participation in public spaces with adherence to normative identities. As a result, vulnerable groups are excluded from urban spaces and struggle to establish a place for themselves. Against this backdrop, the study investigates the exclusion of sex workers from urban public spaces.

2. Sex work: conceptual and practical framework

Sex work exists within various sociocultural, economic, legal, moral and sexual contexts, all of which are studied by different social science disciplines. According to Dictionary.com (accessed 27 May 2025), a sex worker is someone who works in the sex industry as a prostitute, porn actress, stripper, nude model or producer of online sexual content. Another definition is 'someone who has sex to earn money and is not married' (Weitzer, 2009). The ILO also defines sex workers as individuals who exchange sexual services for money or goods.

Theory on the definition of sex work is also explored in the literature, focusing on human rights and feminist perspectives. These approaches are based on ideas about human trafficking and sex work as a profession. The definition of sex work lies between these two perspectives. Historically, it was understood as women providing sexual services to men for money; however, recent studies show that sex work is now often performed as a form of self-employment (Bernstein, 2007; Kontula, 2008).

2.1. Definition and historical overview of sex work

Although the assertion that sex work is the 'oldest profession in the world' is frequently repeated, historical records demonstrate that organised forms of prostitution existed in ancient Mesopotamia by 2400 BCE at the latest (Ringdal, 2004). Its history can be divided into four periods: 8,000–500 BCE; 530 CE to the Middle Ages; the Age of Enlightenment; and 1900 to the present day. During these periods, social and legal regulations regarding sex work varied (Ringdal, 2004).

Ancient Rome had licensing and tax regulations for sex work. However, in the Byzantine period, laws were passed that removed sex workers and brothel operators from the capital, freed slaves who had been forced into prostitution and banned sex in public baths (McGinn, 1998). During the Middle Ages, sex workers were severely punished and marginalised. In France, they were mutilated by the Roman army and labelled 'devil women' (Bullough & Bullough, 1978). Between 1350 and the 16th century, sex work in Europe became socially differentiated:

while cities such as Venice established municipal brothels, while France banned them altogether, distinguishing between elite mistresses and lower-class sex workers (Rossiaud, 1988).

In the 19th century, the Netherlands introduced prostitution regulations, but by 1910, brothels were banned as part of a moral reform movement (Van de Pol, 2011). In the early 20th century, sex work policies shifted: the U.S. imposed bans for hygiene reasons (1915), and Germany decriminalised prostitution (1927) (Roos, 2002). In the 1930s and 1940s, wartime regimes reshaped sex work: Japan established military brothels in occupied Asia (1932), while Nazi Germany re-criminalised prostitution in 1942 (Roos, 2002).

Based on the history with a high variety, today, several countries have different laws on sex work. These include banning brothels, implementing regulatory laws, legalising prostitution in specific areas, and criminalising child prostitution between the 1940s-2000s (Weitzer, 2009). Between 2000 and 2022, various countries implemented different regulations on sex work. The Netherlands and New Zealand legalised it, Germany removed its moral condemnation and introduced social insurance for sex workers. Canada criminalised the purchase of sex and Zurich imposed spatial restrictions by limiting prostitution to industrial zones (Wagenaar & Amesberger, 2013).

One considerable conclusion to derive from the analysis of this narrative is that prostitution rises during periods of social upheaval. This is followed by an uptick in epidemics and crime rates. City administrators then develop policies to address these issues, and when these prove insufficient, the cycle repeats when breaking points are reached. (Figure 1). Understanding this cycle is crucial to assessing the effectiveness of sex work policies, as well as how sex work is shaping today.

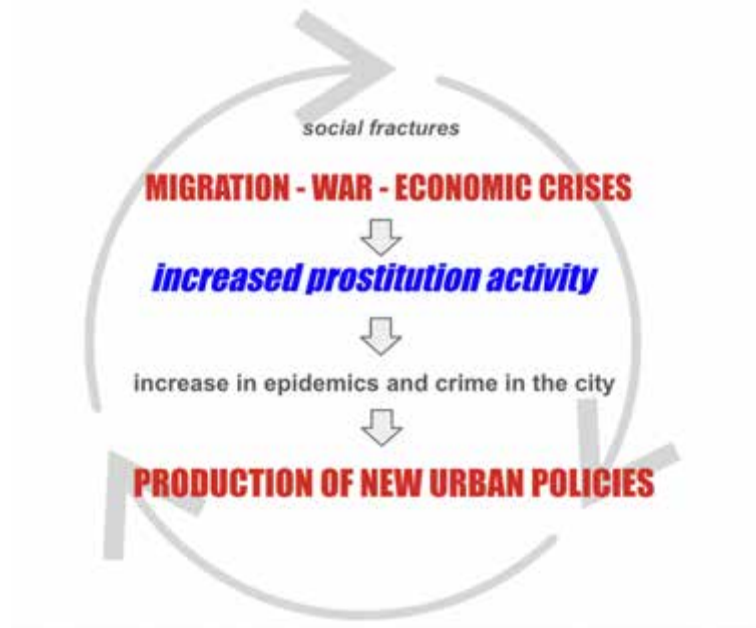


Figure 1. The cycle of sex work developing parallel to historical processes (produced by the authors)

2.2. Global forms of sex work today

As mentioned above, sex work has existed in various forms in different societies and eras. In each period, it has been examined in different socio-cultural, economic, and legal contexts. This article examines the reflection of sex work in modern society, the experiences of sex workers, and the diversity within the sector under two headings.

2.2.1. Online-based practices

The transformation of communication through technology has increasingly played a role in changing the sex industry. While one group uses technology for direct communication, another uses it to create a barrier between themselves and clients. Online-based practices can be divided into two categories: escort sex work and visual/virtual sex work.

Escort sex work

Escort sex work is commercial sexual activity done in private residences or hotel rooms, where sex workers receive money, gifts, or other material items (ILO, 2018). Unlike sex work on the street, escort work is usually independent or via agencies/digital platforms (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Sanders, 2005).

This type of work is embedded within the broader social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the city. From a rights-based perspective, discussions often focus on the need for legal protections, healthcare access, and support services to ensure the safety and autonomy of sex workers (Platt et al., 2018; Benoit et al., 2017). Feminist perspectives on escort sex work vary. Some argue that it can reflect sexual and economic autonomy (Nussbaum, 1998; Grant, 2014), while others view it as part of a system of exploitation and inequality (Barry, 1995; Dworkin, 1981). The varying views on this show the difficulties of interpreting consent and empowerment in the context of sex work.

Visual/virtual sex work

Digital technologies have transformed sex work, enabling new forms of interaction. Visual sex work, defined as the marketing of sexuality online, allows individuals, especially women, to create and distribute content independently via OnlyFans, Twitter, TikTok and other online spaces (Sakallı, 2018). These platforms offer greater autonomy, income potential, and safety, as workers typically operate from self-chosen environments and control their business strategies (Jones, 2020). Digital visibility also contributes to social acceptance of sex work (Blunt & Wolf, 2020).

In contrast, street-based sex work exposes workers to physical risks and social marginalisation. A rights-based approach is needed to ensure the safety, health and labour protections of street sex workers (Kinnell, 2008). While often viewed as exploitative, some feminist perspectives recognise it as a form of agency and economic self-determination (Jeffreys, 1997; O'Connell Davidson, 1998).

2.2.2. Area-based practices

Area-based sex work continues to be carried out using more traditional and familiar methods. In this context, these practices fall into two main categories: street-based and brothel-based sex work.

Street-based sex work (unregulated/informal)

Street sex work, which is often unregistered and unregulated, is defined as the provision of sexual services in public areas such as streets, parks and vehicles. It is particularly prevalent in regions where sex work is criminalised (Kurutkan, 2003). Moreover, street-based sex work, unlike escort services for high-end clients, is linked to lower-cost, more informal conditions and little social protection.

From a social rights perspective, ensuring the safety, health and dignity of street sex workers is paramount. Comprehensive, rights-based approaches emphasise the need for safe working environments, protection from violence and access to healthcare (Kinnell, 2008).

Brothel-based sex work (regulated/formal)

Brothel sex work is legally regulated prostitution where workers are registered and venues operate under specific standards. Such establishments contribute to urban economies through taxation and employment (Aalbers & Sabat, 2012). Despite this framework, sex workers often face social exclusion and restricted access to services and rights. They continue to be marginalised by social stigma and institutional discrimination, despite their legal status (WHO, 2015). From a feminist and human rights perspective, this form of sex work can regulate women's sexuality and reinforce social inequalities. Ensuring equal treatment and dismantling stigma are central to advancing their rights (Aalbers & Sabat, 2012).

Table 1 summarises the four main forms of sex work today: online-based (escort and visual/virtual) and area-based (street and brothel). Online escort work carries a medium risk of exploitation and violence, with low visibility and societal impact. Visual/virtual sex work generally carries a low risk and is considered ineffective. Area-based sex work, particularly street-based and brothel-based work, carries a higher risk of violence and has a more negative impact on society.

Table 1. Summary of the global forms of sex work today

	Type of space	Exploitation 3rd person	Violence risk	Visibility impact	Impact on society
Online-based practices					
Escort sex workers	independent operator, private property, hotel, etc.	medium	medium	low	between ineffective and negative
Visual/virtual sex work	digital platforms, mobile dating apps, social media, pornography, erotic performing arts, etc.	low	low	low	ineffective
Area-based practices					
Street-based sex work	street, car, park, cemeteries, etc.	medium to high	high	high	negative
Brothel-based sex work	brothel	high	high	medium	negative

2.3. Social and legal perspectives on sex work

As the above historical narrative analysis shows, approaches to sex work differ from society to society, depending on historical processes, legal norms and the cultural, moral, economic, and social structures that shape each society's laws and practices regarding sex work. It may be banned or regulated. Attitudes towards sex work have evolved due to crises, wars, changes in society, and value judgments, creating diverse, dynamic ideas of it.

2.3.1. Social perspectives

Marginalisation and exclusion from society make individuals vulnerable to exploitation through human trafficking. In this context, sex work can be considered within two basic frameworks: the human rights struggle of sex workers, and the anti-trafficking rights struggle of individuals victimised within the sex industry (Kilislioğlu, 2020) (Figure 2).

The relationship between sex work and human rights was placed on the global agenda after the UN Convention on Trafficking in Persons and Exploitation through Prostitution in 1949. The topic was discussed in the 1980s due to the impact of the rising feminist movement, HIV/AIDS, and related organisations such as the IOM and ILO (ILO, 2010). Documents including the 1979 CEDAW and the 1989 CRC, raised global awareness (United Nations, 1989). At the 1996 Vienna Conference, prostitution and trafficking were differentiated for the first time, emphasising that all forms of prostitution have the potential for exploitation.



Figure 2. Feminist movement: demonstration (Source: URL-1)

The 2015 “Memorandum of Understanding on Sex Work, Human Rights, and the Law” made three main demands: recognise sex work as a form of labour, end criminalisation, and support sex workers’ rights to self-organise (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2013). Within feminist theory, discussions on sex work are divided into two main approaches. Radical feminists see sex work as a form of sexual exploitation and advocate prohibiting prostitution (Farley, 2003). Other feminist approaches recognise sex work as legitimate work and advocate for sex workers’ rights, adopting a rights-based view (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Women's liberation protest (Source: URL-2)

2.3.2. Legal perspectives

Legal regulations and state policies are based on contrasting approaches that view sex work as either a form of sexual exploitation or a legitimate profession. The three main approaches of criminalisation, legalisation, and liberalisation can be analysed within four legislative models: prohibitive, preventive, regulatory, and decriminalisation (Figure 4).

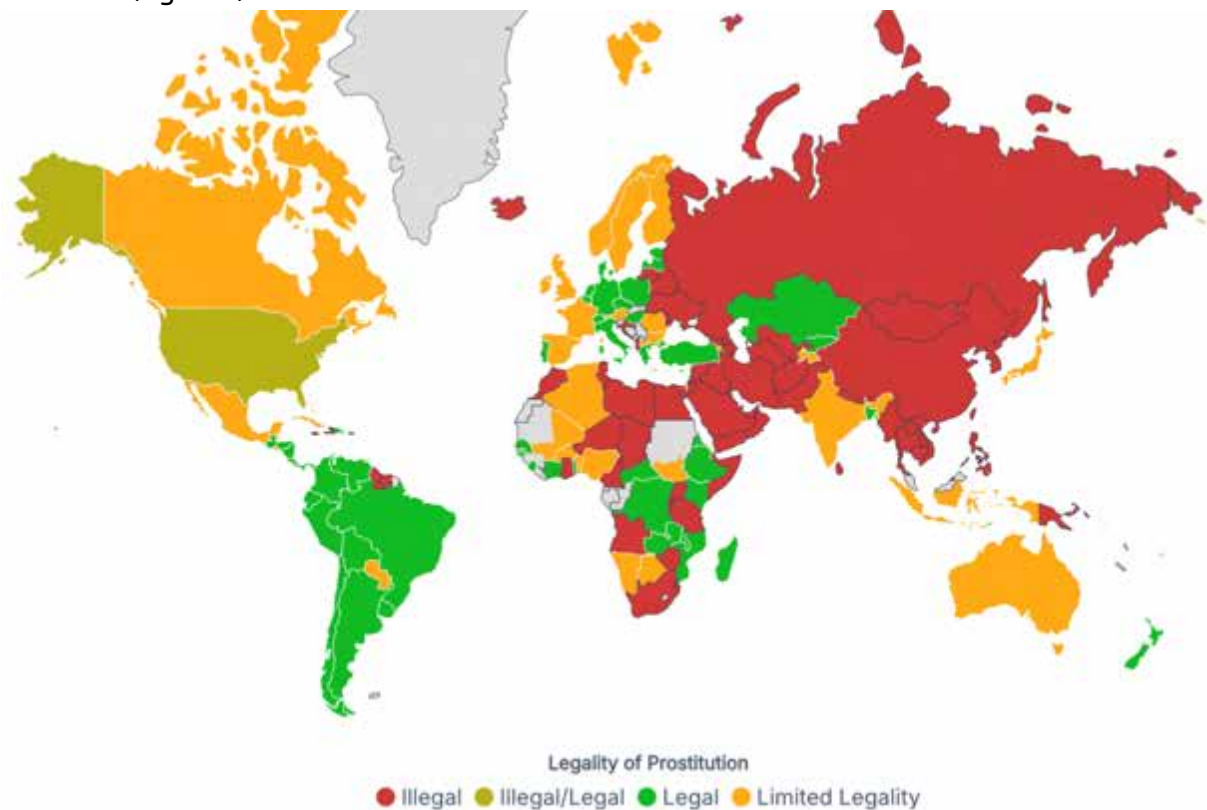


Figure 4. World prostitution policies, 2025 (Source: URL-3)

Prohibitionist model: the Swedish example

The prohibitionist model is a framework that bans all activities associated with the sex industry and penalises those involved. Its main objective is to eliminate gender inequality. Countries that apply the prohibitionist model, which appears in different parts of the world with different content within a similar framework, include the following: Iraq, Iran, Jordan, and Afghanistan in the Middle East; China, North Korea, South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Egypt, Uganda, and South Africa in Africa; and Lithuania, Albania, Croatia, and Sweden in Europe (Kilislioğlu, 2020). Here, Sweden has extensive discussion and research on the subject. Prostitution decreased due to Sweden's strict laws, but moved to hotels, restaurants, and online. This has led to unsafe working conditions and criminalisation (Dodillet & Östergren, 2011).

Abolitionist/preventive model: the Canadian example

The abolitionist model focuses on the preparation for sex work rather than the act itself, viewing it as a form of violence and exploitation. It bans advertising prostitution in public spaces, intending to reduce harm to women. Countries that implement this model include Poland, Spain, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic in Europe, as well as Canada in North America (Kilislioğlu, 2020). Canada's approach aimed to remove prostitution from public, populated areas, which resulted in a visible decline. However, this shift has led to sex work becoming more hidden and isolated, increasing the risk of exploitation and violence against sex workers. (Benoit et al., 2018)

Regulatory model: the Dutch example

The regulatory model is an approach that partially legalizes and does not penalize sex work within a framework of state-set rules (Kilislioğlu, 2020). It is currently practiced in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Hungary, the United Kingdom, Greece, Türkiye, Belgium, Senegal, and parts of Australia and the US, including Nevada. The model's main objective is to control prostitution activities to protect public health.

The Netherlands is one of the most notable practitioners of this model. Although prostitution was technically illegal from 1911 to 2000, the government did not shut down brothels, and strict policies were not effective in fighting crime and exploitation. (Kilislioğlu, 2020). The Netherlands tried to control prostitution by creating tolerance zones, but the results have been negative. In some cases, sex workers have moved outside the tolerance zones and the zones have not fulfilled their function. While consensual prostitution is not a crime in the Netherlands, forced prostitution is (Coy, 2012).

Decriminalisation model: the New Zealand example

The decriminalisation model removes all punitive laws relating to sex work and recognises it as a voluntary profession that cannot be eradicated. New Zealand is the only country to use this model. Its purpose is to reduce social exclusion of sex workers and ensure citizens' rights within human rights (Kilislioğlu, 2020). This approach marks a shift towards recognising sex work as a rights-based profession, improving perceptions of, and the quality of life for, sex workers. However, it has also led to an increase in prostitution, with brothels now limited to four people, and raised crime rates in some areas. This has contributed to serious issues such as child exploitation, particularly in vulnerable regions. (Kilislioğlu, 2020).

3. Reflections of sex work in the Turkish context

The Red Umbrella Sexual Health and Human Rights Association (in short, Red Umbrella) in Turkey defines sex work as the exchange of sexual services for money, including porn, escorting, erotic dancing and massage. In contrast, the Turkish Language Association defines prostitution more narrowly as paid sexual intercourse that violates social norms (Red Umbrella, 2019). Historically, terms related to sex work have reflected societal marginalisation. Examples include 'prostitute', 'whore', 'rent girl' and 'sex worker'. (Açıklan, 2013). In a narrow sense, sex work involves consensual paid sexual services without coercion.

Historically, sex work in Turkey has taken place on the urban periphery. Istanbul's development can be divided into four periods: 1600–1880, 1881–1950, 1951–2020, and the period since 2020. The legalisation of brothels in 1880 formalised sex work (Belli, 2022). Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, legal regulations were introduced in 1926, although efforts to ban prostitution emerged in the 1930s (Wyers, 2017). After 1950, sex work grew in migrant cities, with more brothels and sex workers as consumer culture took off in the 1980s. The 1990s saw an influx of sex workers from the former Soviet Union.

The first NGOs for sex workers were established in the 2000s, and brothels closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020. This process was triggered by that which led to significant changes in the visibility, mobility, and working conditions of sex workers.

The global approach to sex work in Turkey is marked by diversity. State policies are shaped by regulatory models that protect the rights of working women. Some civil society organisations argue for sex workers' rights and the profession's legitimacy, while others seek to reintegrate sex workers back into society.

3.1. State attitudes and legal-administrative policies

The Ottoman Empire adopted France's prostitution regulations in 1858. The Republic of Türkiye adopted them and they were maintained until 2004. In 2004 the law was amended to prohibit prostitution and bargaining but not consensual sexual services by over-21s in private. Those who encourage, mediate, provide a place for or profit from prostitution involving children or adults are penalised under the new code. Articles on human trafficking include provisions to prevent foreigners from being exploited in the sex industry (Kilislioğlu, 2020).

A 2011 report stated that after the 2004 Penal Code, the term "general woman" referred to women who were habitual sex workers, over 21, Turkish citizens, licensed, and employed in brothels (Şimşek, 2022). The Regulation on Combating Venereal Diseases, which took effect in the same year, established responsibilities, including licensing brothels, maintaining records, inspecting prostitution establishments and preventing hidden prostitution. Additionally, the regulation includes providing support to women who do not want to engage in prostitution (Kilislioğlu, 2020).

3.2. Civil society and NGO perspectives

Red Umbrella, Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association (Kaos GL) and the Sexual Education, Treatment and Research Association (CETAD) are among Turkey's non-governmental organisations working on sex work. Red Umbrella defines sex work as a unique form of labour due to its conditions and methods. It is inappropriate to compare it with other labour, not necessarily in terms of legitimacy, but because of its unique nature (Red Umbrella Fund, n.d.). Therefore, regulatory frameworks must be developed with scientific rigour, considering the experiences and needs of sex workers. Underground environments are at high risk of exploitation and abuse without this (Demirtaş, 2021).

Kaos GL recognises sex work as legitimate labour and advocates for the rights of its workers. The organisation emphasises that this profession's individuals require rights-based support and regulations. Kaos GL critiques the concept of public morality, which fuels discrimination and criminalisation of sex workers in the media (Zengin, 2014). Sex workers, who are constantly subjected to interventions as if every one of their actions is criminal and who are portrayed as perpetrators in the media, are not criminals (Yılmaz, 2021).

CETAD, working with the Turkish Ministry of Health and funded by the European Union, promotes gender equality and human rights for sex workers through a project that focuses on respecting their rights, preventing discrimination, encouraging empathy, and getting them involved in society (CETAD, 2021). The project tackles child sex work prevention, victim rehabilitation, and sexual exploitation perpetrator prosecution. These intervention areas are considered crucial.

4. Research design and methodology

By shedding light on the realities and perceptions of this vulnerable group, this study aims to address deep-seated inequalities and advocate for social and spatial justice in the historic Pera quarter of Istanbul. One of the most well-known sex work areas of Turkey and located in central Istanbul, Pera has gone through urban transformations that affected the centuries-old sex work in the area, particularly in the last two decades.

This study uses a secondary qualitative research approach. The methodology is divided into three main phases presented in the sections below. Based on theoretical, social and legal frameworks reviewed above globally and in the Turkish context, the first phase explores the spatial dimensions of sex work within the historical development of the Pera quarter. This was achieved by examining documentaries, historical maps, and archival records. The second phase focuses on analysing urban infrastructure and transformation projects in Pera, paying particular attention to the displacement of sex workers. This phase utilised documentaries, news articles, and official records relating to urban redevelopment initiatives. The final phase synthesises the findings through a layered, CAD-based mapping exercise. This exercise visualises the intersections of sex work nodes in public spaces and urban regeneration projects, as well as the resulting processes of spatial exclusion faced by sex workers.

5. The socio-spatial transformation of sex work in Türkiye: the case of Pera

Istanbul's Beyoğlu district's sex work-related approaches were complex in the late 19th century. Linked to the port in the early Ottoman Empire, the area became a trade hub. In response, the 6th District Municipality, which includes Beyoğlu, implemented pioneering urban reforms. During this period, bachelors and prostitutes were viewed as both undesirable and an essential part of urban life. Rather than banning prostitution, authorities and elites introduced regulations to mitigate its negative consequences, importing the European and French ones.

Ottoman urban reformers considered regulating prostitution as part of their modernisation efforts in adapting to global trade. Conflicts and tensions in evolving public spaces are discussed, particularly due to impoverished women and other recent immigrants. This text examines the policies of social and administrative elites aimed at limiting prostitution's mobility and visibility in urban areas. Sex workers were indispensable to Beyoğlu's urban life, so eliminating prostitution was not considered appropriate. Instead, it was deemed important to keep prostitution out of sight in public and under administrative and medical supervision in designated areas. This was considered a step in preserving society's moral and physical cleanliness. As a result, areas within the city emerged where controlled prostitution could be practised.

Pera, in Beyoğlu, is home to many elites and marginalised people. It starts at İstiklal Street and extends to its surroundings, meeting with Yüksek Kaldırım and Galata, and then Karaköy. Pera, a Greek word meaning 'the other side', has undergone various socio-cultural, economic, and physical transformations.

5.1. Spaces of sex work

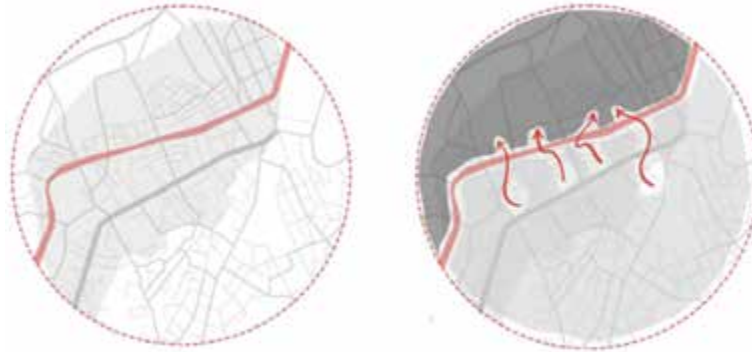
In the urban context, sex work takes place in urban spaces where it has long existed, shaped by both visibility and exclusion. These streets squeezed into the dense and layered structure of the urban fabric and stand out as contested areas where negotiations between bodily autonomy, urban governance and social norms take place.

5.1.1. Public spaces (street-based sex work)

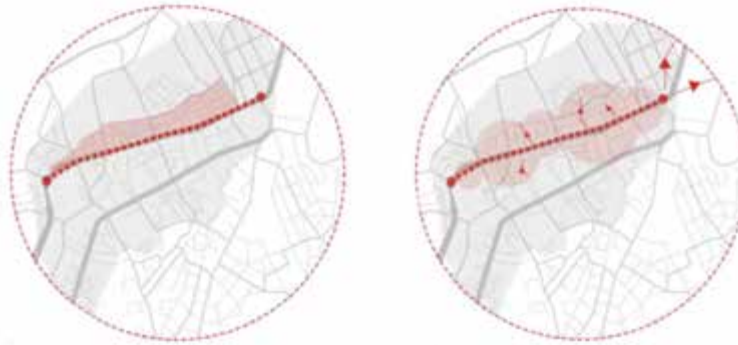
The Pera quarter is located in the tourist and historical centre of Istanbul. For this reason, it is an attractive work area for sex workers, offering high customer potential and ease of access. Additionally, Pera's historical significance and cosmopolitan, open-minded sociological structure have increased social acceptance in the area. Due to the heavy foot traffic on the streets and avenues in and around Pera, sex workers prefer to work in this area, where there is a high customer potential. These areas are densely populated with tourists and locals, who are an important source of customers for sex workers (Erder & Kaşka, 2003).

Tarlabaşı District

After Tarlabası Boulevard opened in 1986, groups displaced from gentrifying neighbourhoods in Beyoğlu, such as Cihangir, Asmalımescit, and Galata, settled there (Perouse, 2011; Zengin, 2014). Changes in the 2000s as part of the Urban Transformation and Urban Renewal Project aimed to alter the region's sociological structure, but decreased social control, creating insecurity. Some displaced transgender sex workers continue to work in certain areas of Tarlabası due to economic hardship and because they cannot find a supportive community elsewhere. Others have moved to nearby neighbourhoods, such as Elmadağ and Kurtuluş, or to Anatolian cities. The destruction of workplaces has negatively impacted active sex workers (Şentürk, 2011) (Figure 5).



1. Tarlabası Boulevard and Tarlabası were separated from Beyoğlu 2. Class evacuation

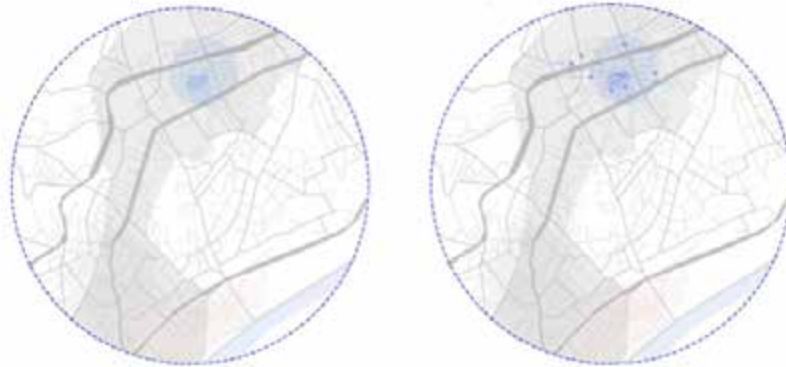


3. Tarlabası renewal project 4. Displacement study

Figure 5. Changing spatial dynamics of sex work in Tarlabası (produced by the authors)

Küçük Bayram Street

The LGBTI+ Solidarity Association defines this area and surrounding streets have been used since 1947 (Kepenek, 2024). Police raided the area often, but trans women continued to live there. Bayram Street is a memory place for the trans+ movement in Istanbul. There were intermittent raids and attempts to stop activities, but the effective transformation movement came in 2023 with an official closure decision on the grounds of 'hanging from the window.' Some houses were sealed. The 10th Istanbul Trans Week Committee says trans women living here stated that they would not leave because unity and solidarity make them feel safe. They emphasised this with the following statement: "Trans+ people did not and will not leave despite the control mechanisms that try to make trans+ existences invisible" (Kepenek, 2024) (Figure 6).



1. A developing area where trans sex workers are concentrated 2. Police have been trying to defer them constantly with raids, currently most of the houses on this street are sealed. Most of the trans sex workers here have not left their neighbourhoods.

Figure 6. Spatial diffusion of sex work from Küçük Bayram Street (produced by the authors)

5.1.2. Private spaces (brothel-based sex work)

Brothel-based sex work occurs in more controlled and institutionalised private spaces where visibility in public spaces is limited. The Abanoz and Ziba quarters, and especially Zürafa Street, have been areas where brothels are concentrated and sex work has been spatially limited for many years in Istanbul.

Abanoz and Ziba quarters

Abanoz and Ziba are among Istanbul's oldest residential areas, with a long history of trade, entertainment, and social activities. Historically, these areas were known for their brothels and street sex work (Aksoy, 1996). This made them a suitable environment for sex workers due to their visibility and security. The first brothel for foreigners living in Beyoğlu was opened in Abanoz Street in 1884. It was later moved to Zürafa Street due to social perceptions and order. Today, Abanoz Street is completely cleaned and included in commercial areas (Figure 7).

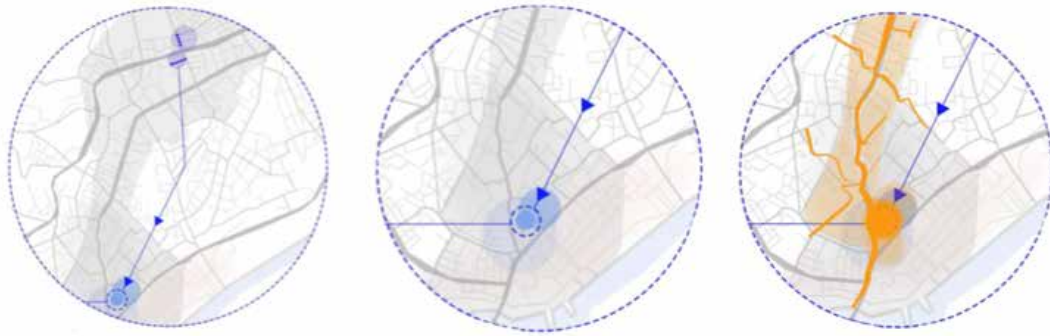


1. The first brothel area 2. Increased motivation for brothels
3. Moving the venue and female sex workers to Galata Zürafa street. Trans women continue to provide services on Ziba street

Figure 7. Transformation of Abanoz and Ziba (produced by the authors)

Zürafa Street

It is the most well-known quarter in Istanbul where the first official brothel was established. Alageyik and Yüksek Kaldırım Streets, which connect to Zürafa Street, are also part of this area. Due to its central location and ease of access, Zürafa Street has provided an ideal work area for sex workers. The buildings where the brothels are located provide both visibility and privacy, allowing customers to easily access them. The spatial structure of the area ensures that workers have a safe, economically sustainable work environment (Hubbard, 1999). The goal is to build more modern, tourist-oriented structures in the area and renovate existing structures as part of the Beyoğlu Culture Project, which is analysed in the sections below. However, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure of brothels and the spatial displacement of sex workers (Çınar, 2001) (Figure 8).



1. The first official brothel
2. Increased motivation for brothels
3. Inclusion of the place in the Beyoğlu cultural project

Figure 8. Transformation of Zürafa Street (produced by the authors)

General Evaluation

Urban areas historically identified with sex work, such as Pera, Tarlabası, Küçük Bayram Sokak, Abanoz and Zürafa, stand out as complex spaces where both visibility and exclusion intersect. In particular, the opening of Tarlabası Boulevard in 1986 and the urban renewal projects initiated afterwards transformed not only the physical but also the social structure, causing the displacement of sex workers living in the region. A similar social eviction issue occurred on Küçük Bayram Street; the trans sex work areas that had existed for many years were dispersed with the closure decisions, and this situation led to sex workers working in even more precarious conditions and in a dispersed manner. The brothels operating on Zürafa and Abanoz streets were gradually withdrawn to more isolated and suppressed areas in order to reduce public visibility. Such interventions interrupted the continuity of sex work within the city and weakened the solidarity networks of settled communities. The general map reveals how the place, rights and visibility of sex workers within the city were ignored in the planning processes (Figure 9).

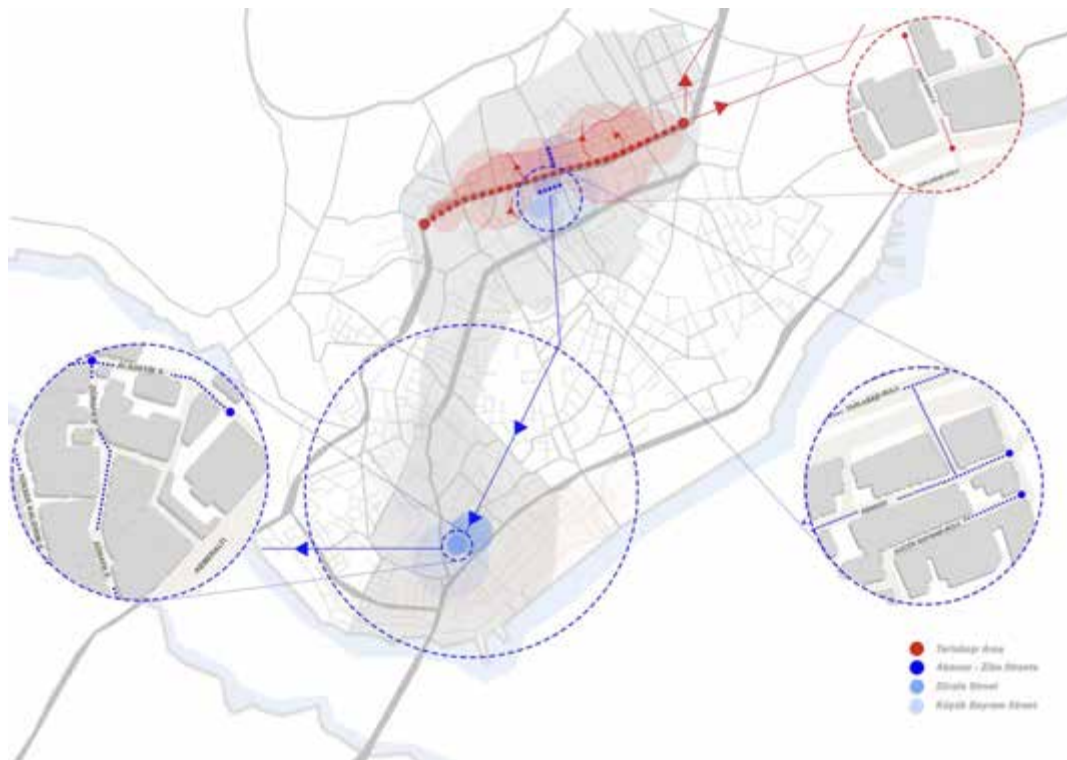


Figure 9. Displacement of sex work in Pera (produced by the authors)

5.2. Urban infrastructure and redevelopment projects affecting sex work

Tarlabaşı and Beyoğlu, located in the centre of Istanbul, are social spaces where vulnerable groups, especially sex workers, survive and build solidarity. However, successive urban interventions—including the Tarlabası Boulevard Project, the Tarlabası Renewal Project, and the Beyoğlu Cultural Road Project—have reshaped these spaces. These projects aim to transform the areas into socially homogenised urban spaces based on profiteering logic.

These projects exclude sex workers existentially, marginalise them, and displace them. Although the discourse behind these projects—security, culture, tourism, and restoration—is presented as inclusive, the projects cause the erasure of sex workers' spaces of shelter, work, and solidarity from the city centre. Thus, these projects have not only transformed spaces, but also radically limited the right to the city and public visibility of vulnerable communities.

5.2.1. The Tarlabası Boulevard Project

The Tarlabası region developed as a residential area of Pera in the 19th century. With its multicultural structure, the area hosted many groups and immigrants. However, in the 1980s, the area was defined as a 'decay zone' and targeted because its appearance was said to damage the 'image' of the city centre due to structural deterioration and socio-economic collapse (Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008). The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was established by Law No. 3030, enacted in 1984. Bedrettin Dalan then took office as Istanbul's first mayor. At that time, Dalan's goal for Istanbul was to create an image of it as a 'world metropolis.' To this end, urban transformation projects were initiated (Keyder, 1999).

One of these projects was the Tarlabası Boulevard Project, implemented in the 1980s to improve transportation and the area. However, the project has become an ideological intervention rather than merely adding a new transportation line. It interrupted the historical and social integrity and permeability between the Tarlabası neighbourhood in Beyoğlu and Pera, creating a permanent separation in the urban fabric. In short, this intervention

should be evaluated not only as physical separation but also as a spatial expression of social exclusion (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Enlargement of the Tarlabaşı Boulevard in 1986-1988 (Source: URL-4)

As a result, a new 'urban gap' emerged in the Tarlabaşı-Pera region, which continues the 19th-century urban fabric. The separation has become more apparent due to the severing of passageways and construction of a high-traffic boulevard (Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008). On an urban scale, Tarlabaşı's connection to the city centre has been cut off. The area has essentially become Pera's 'backyard,' leading to imbalances in access to social services and being ignored in planning policies (Keyder, 1999). This intervention has made low-income groups, ethnic minorities, and various marginalised communities living in Tarlabaşı even more 'invisible.' Despite being in the centre of the city, these groups have been socially pushed to the margins. Public memory has coded these neighbourhoods as 'out of order,' deepening the socio-cultural separation. Tarlabaşı Boulevard has ceased to be a tool of urban planning and has become a border where urban segregation, socio-economic exclusion, and spatial othering become concrete.

5.2.2. The Tarlabaşı Urban Renewal Project

The Tarlabaşı Urban Transformation Project is another significant example of urban intervention in the Tarlabaşı district that exacerbated social and physical segregation. Tarlabaşı is a district with a dense population of non-Muslims that has experienced demographic changes. Certain communities left the region as a result of political and social events that took place in the 1950s, and immigrants from Anatolia and other disadvantaged groups settled in their place.

In 2006, Tarlabaşı was designated a renewal area under Law No. 5366, which concerns the 'Renovation, Protection, and Revitalization of Worn-Out Historical and Cultural Immovable Assets.' Under this designation, plans were made to build luxury residences, offices, and commercial areas under the name 'Taksim360' in nine blocks of the district (Çiltaş Çatalbaş, 2022). Evacuations began in 2008, and by 2010, a large portion of the district's residents, particularly low-income and uninsured groups, had been forcibly evicted. This urban transformation has attracted high-income groups to the region, altering the economic structure and paving the way for the gentrification of the district. This situation produced a multi-layered practice of exclusion and displacement, particularly affecting long-time sex workers in Tarlabaşı. Tarlabaşı was experienced as a kind of "urban shelter" by sex workers in the region due to the solidarity networks and social relations they had established there. As the visibility of sex work has decreased, sex workers have been further criminalised, erased from the public sphere, and their advocacy for rights has weakened (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Borders of the Tarlabaşı Project (Source: URL-5)

5.2.3. The Beyoğlu Culture Route Project

The Beyoğlu Culture Route Project is a Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Türkiye initiative in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district (Kültür Yolu Festivali, 2025). It aims to create a cultural corridor from Galataport to Taksim. The structures to be restored along the route are discussed in terms of 'Beyoğlu's revival with culture' through museums, art centres, and public events. While Beyoğlu Culture Road restructures an axis covering İstiklal Avenue and the surrounding streets, it aims to remove groups that have historically existed there and often represent the 'invisible history' of the place. The public character of İstiklal Avenue, especially its nightlife, alternative culture, and gender diversity, is changing to a regulated, supervised, and 'clean' cultural area.

The area around Zürafa Street that sex workers have called home and worked in for years has been completely closed. Sex workers have lived and worked on this street for many years. However, with the project, their living spaces and social networks have been fragmented, and their economic and social security has weakened. With the increase in police presence, these areas have been taken under control with a security-oriented approach. In this context, the Culture Road Project also functions as a moral control device while reconstructing the space through culture. Sex workers are both the subject and the target of this moral regime. Thus, urban elitism and a gender regime are reproduced under the guise of 'culture'. This project is not only a cultural investment but also deeply produces spatial injustice.

5.3. A holistic spatial assessment through mapping

The spatial transformation of the streets associated with sex work in the Pera region has been shaped by large-scale urban interventions implemented in different periods, and both the physical environment and the socio-cultural structure have changed radically in this process. The mapping study visualises this transformation process and reveals how space is reproduced not only physically but also socio-politically. When the current locations of sex work areas in three different focal points (Tarlabaşı-Ziba, Zürafa and Abanoz-Küçük Bayram Streets) are examined, it is seen that these areas are shaped by strategies of oppression, eviction and exclusion. Some streets have been completely cleaned, some have continued their existence with controlled visibility, and some have become temporary shelters. As a result of all these interventions, the presence of sex workers in urban space has been systematically limited; their rights to take place in public spaces to shelter have been damaged (Figure 12).

Sex workers play an important role in the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of urban areas. However, they are seen as a problem in the public sphere and are considered one of the most fragile and disadvantaged groups in society. They are viewed as a situation that needs to be removed from city centres. The desire to 'clean up' urban centres and the prohibition and exclusion of sex work result in human rights violations, including economic hardship, lack of housing, and lack of social security for sex workers.

Consequently, efforts should be made to combat negative perceptions, ensure justice in urban transformation processes, develop and improve policy proposals, and raise awareness. This study aims to raise awareness to enable sex workers to achieve better human rights and social justice conditions and to establish a foundation for future work. The results show the gap between urban regulations and the spatial needs of sex workers in Istanbul, highlighting social equity's role in reducing systemic exclusions to encourage more inclusive practices. It thus hopes to enrich the discourse on the sustainable development of public space by advocating for the implementation of inclusive, accessible, and socially equitable spaces.

References

- Aalbers, M.A. and Sabat, M.** (2012) 'Remaking a landscape of prostitution: the Amsterdam red light district', *City*, 16(1-2), pp. 112-128.
- Açıklalın, N.** (2013) 'Being Capital in the Prostitution Market: The Case of Mersin', *Çalışma ve Toplum*, (3).
- Aksoy, A.** (1996) 'Istanbul's Choice: Openness and Globalization', in *Global Cities: Cinema, Architecture, and Urbanism in a Digital Age*. London: BFI Publishing.
- Atasoy, Z.B.** (2020) *Recovering Untold Stories: Everyday Lives of Women in Republican Istanbul, 1930-1960*. PhD thesis. New Jersey Institute of Technology and Rutgers University.
- Belli, B.** (2022) 'Prostitution and Local Actors in the Late Ottoman Empire (1876-1909)', *Beykoz Academy Journal*, 10(1), pp. 88-102.
- Benoit, C., Smith, M., Jansson, M., Healey, P. and Magnuson, D.** (2018) "'The Prostitution Problem": Claims, Evidence, and Policy Outcomes', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 47(7), pp. 1887-1906. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1276-6>
- Candan, A.B. and Kolluoğlu, B.** (2008) 'Emerging Spaces of Neoliberalism: A Gated Town and a Public Housing Project in Istanbul', *New Perspectives on Turkey*, (39), pp. 5-46.
- CETAD** (2021) *Empathy-Based Approach to Sex Work and Human Rights*. Istanbul: CETAD. Available at: <https://www.cetad.org.tr> [Accessed: 29 May 2025].
- Çinar, A.** (2001) *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey: Bodies, Places, and Time*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coy, M.** (2012) 'Prostitution as Morality Politics or Why It Is Exceedingly Difficult to Design and Sustain Effective Prostitution Policy', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 9(3), pp. 241-253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-012-0095-0>
- Cruz, K.** (2019) 'The Future of Sex Work: Labour Unfreedom & Criminality at Work'. [Online] Available at: <https://prostitution.procon.org/historical-timeline/#2400-bc-499> [Accessed: 4 April 2024].
- Çiltaş Çatalbaş, M.** (2022) *An Analysis of the Relationship Between Visible and Invisible Boundaries in Urban Space:*

A Study on Tarlabası. Master's thesis. Architectural Design Programme, Department of Architecture, Graduate School, Istanbul Technical University.

Dodillet, S. and Östergren, P. (2011) *The Swedish Sex Purchase Act: Claimed Success and Documented Effects*. Prostitution and Beyond Workshop, 3-4 March 2011, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Erder, S. and Kaşka, S. (2003) *Düzensiz Göç ve Kadın Ticareti: Türkiye örneği*. IOM.

Farley, M. (2003) *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*. New York: Routledge.

Garvey, A. (2022) 'The Digital Age: Giving Sex Work a New Meaning', *University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Undergraduate Review*, 20(Spring), pp. 1-XX.

Global Network of Sex Work Projects (2013) NSWP Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights, and the Law. [online] Available at: <https://www.nswp.org/resource/nswp-publications/nswp-consensus-statement-sex-work-human-rights-and-the-law> [Accessed 4 June 2025].

Gündüz, T. (2015) 'Sex Workers as a Professional Group and Different Forms of Morality', *Journal of Social Sciences Institute, Istanbul University*.

Harvey, D. (2008) 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review*, 53, pp. 23-40

Harvey, D. (2003). Debates and developments: The right to the city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(4), 939-941.

Hillier College of Architecture and Design (2020) *J. Robert and Barbara A. Hillier College of Architecture and Design*. Newark, NJ: NJIT.

Hubbard, P. (1999a) 'Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 6(3), pp. 297-299.

Hubbard, P. (1999b) *Sexuality and the City: Geographies of Prostitution in the Urban West*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

ILO (2010). Recommendation concerning HIV and AIDS and the World of Work (No. 200). Geneva: International Labour Organization. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/aids/WCMS_142706/lang--en/index.htm [Accessed: 4 June 2025].

Kepenek, E. (2024). *Trans people's home in Bayram Street is under threat of being sealed: "An attack on our shelters and memory spaces"*. [online] Bianet. Available at: <https://bianet.org/haber/bayram-sokakta-translarin-evi-muhurlenmek-istenyor-barinma-ve-hafiza-mekanlarimiz-saldiri-292565> [Accessed 4 Jun. 2025].

Keyder, Ç. (1999) *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local*. Istanbul: Metis.

Kilislioğlu, C. (2020) *Sex Work in Turkey: Regulations, Implementation and Effects*. Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University.

Kurutkan, M.N. (2003) *Psychosocial Rehabilitation of Sex Workers*. Master's thesis. Sakarya University, Institute of Social Sciences.

Kültür Yolu Festivali (2025) *Official Website of the Culture Route Festival*. [Online] Available at: <https://kulturyolufestivali.com> [Accessed: 1 June 2025].

- Laing, M. and Cook, I.R.** (2014) 'Governing sex work in the city', *Geography Compass*, 8(8), pp. 505–515.
- McGinn, T.A.J.** (1998) *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Neville, L. and McDonagh, E.S.** (2017) 'Gentrification and the Criminalization of Sex Work: Exploring the sanitization of sex work in Kings Cross with the use of ASBOs and CBOs'. [Unpublished].
- O'Connell Davidson, J.** (1998) *Prostitution, Power and Freedom*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Özbek, M.** (2017) *Single Poor Women in Istanbul: Prostitution, Sexuality, and Female Labor*. PhD thesis. Boğaziçi University, Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History.
- Pol, L. van de** (2011) *The Burgher and the Whore: Prostitution in Early Modern Amsterdam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, J.** (2001). *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Red Umbrella Sexual Health and Human Rights Association** (2019) *Sex Work and Discourses*. [online] Available at: <https://kirmizisemsiye.org/storage/P9lZ4hgJJ3PvZ9Pq3ScCM4KgLKgaGtJ39lcpP4X0.pdf> [Accessed 4 June 2025].
- Ringdal, N.J.** (2004) *Love for Sale: A World History of Prostitution*. New York: Grove Press.
- Roos, J.** (2002) 'Backlash against Prostitutes' Rights: Origins and Dynamics of Nazi Prostitution Policies', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11(1/2), pp. 67–94.
- Rossiaud, J.** (1988) *Medieval Prostitution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sakallı, A.** (2018) *A Study on the Representations of Sex Work: The Case of Mersin*. Master's thesis. Mersin University, Institute of Social Sciences.
- Şentürk, M.** (2011) *Urban Interventions in Istanbul*. PhD thesis. Department of Sociology, Institute of Social Sciences, Istanbul University.
- Şimşek, K.O.** (2022) *An Evaluation of Sex Workers' Health Rights: A Look into Violations*. Master's thesis. Istanbul University, Faculty of Medicine.
- Smith, M. and Mac, L.** (2018) *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights*. London: Verso.
- United Nations Population Fund** (2025) *Sex Workers: Health and Welfare Programming*. East and Southern Africa Regional Office. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org> [Accessed: 27 May 2025].
- United Nations** (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*. [online] OHCHR. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> [Accessed 4 Jun. 2025].
- Wagenaar, H. and Amesberger, H.** (2013) *The Politics of Prostitution: Women's Movements, Democratic States and the Globalisation of Sex Commerce*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weitzer, R. (ed.)** (2009) *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry*. 2nd edn. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203872802>
- Wyers, M.D.** (2017) 'Selling Sex in Istanbul, Chapter 11'. [Accessed: 3 April 2024].

Yılmaz, K. (2021) 'Examples of Sex Work Legislation in Turkey and the Understanding of Sex Work in Practice from Field Experiences', *Kaos GL*. Available at: <https://kaosgl.org/en/rainbow-forum-opinion-column/examples-of-sex-work-legislation-in-turkey-and-the-understanding-of-sex-work-in-practice-from-field-experiences> [Accessed: 29 May 2025].

Zengin, A. (2013) *Sex under Intimate Siege: Transgender Lives, Law and State Violence in Contemporary Turkey*. PhD thesis. University of Toronto.

URL-1: <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/04/25/summary-second-wave-of-feminism/>

URL-2: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/sex-work-ireland-kildare-brothel-new-york-trades-act-a8954151.html>

URL-3: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-where-prostitution-is-legal>

URL-4: <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/8078>

URL-5: <https://sehirplanlama.ibb.istanbul/tarlabasi-kentsel-donusum-projesi/>

** AI has been used for English translations and grammar checks.