Between Opportunities, Anti-Trafficking, and Techno-Solutionist Pushes: The Use of Online Ads for the Sale of Sexual Services

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ABSTRACT
Given the crucial role that, today, online advertisements play in the professional lives of sex workers, it is unsurprising that both researchers and law enforcement agencies have begun to analyze online classified ads in an attempt to identify potential patterns and indicators of human trafficking. But is it really possible to do so? This article aims to provide an overview of the online advertisement landscape and of what it means for sex workers to advertise their services online, alongside a critical review of the literature on trafficking indicators.
Finally, the article will explore how Italian anti-trafficking organizations have shifted their attention to online classified ads to carry out their outreach activities. In doing so, it will show that the idea that a phenomenon such as human trafficking can be addressed, and that victims can be identified, through the simple application of algorithms represents a clear example of techno-solutionism (MOROZOV 2013) relying on a false equivalence between sex work and human trafficking and on simplistic (and incorrect) assumptions about sex work and sex workers' lives.

Considerato il ruolo cruciale che, ad oggi, la pubblicazione di annunci online riveste nella vita professionale delle e dei sex worker, non deve sorprendere che sia ricercatori che forze dell'ordine abbiano iniziato ad analizzare questi annunci nel tentativo di individuare potenziali pattern e indicatori di tratta. Ma è realmente possibile farlo? Questo articolo si propone di fornire una panoramica del mondo degli annunci online e di cosa significhi per le e i sex worker pubblicizzare i propri servizi online, unitamente a una revisione critica della letteratura sugli indicatori di tratta.
Infine, l'articolo esplorerà come le organizzazioni anti-tratta italiane abbiano spostato la loro attenzione sugli annunci online per svolgere le proprie attività di outreach. In tal modo, si dimostrerà che l'idea che un fenomeno come la tratta possa essere affrontato, e che le vittime possano essere identificate, attraverso la semplice applicazione di algoritmi, rappresenta un chiaro esempio di tecnosoluzionismo (MOROZOV 2013) basato su una falsa equivalenza tra lavoro sessuale e tratta, e su assunti semplicistici (e incorretti) sul lavoro sessuale e sulla vita delle persone che lo esercitano.

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1. *Introduction: the use of online classified ads for the sale of sexual services*

While the use of the Internet for sex working purposes is not a new phenomenon, in recent years the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has profoundly transformed the landscape of sex work in Europe. On the one hand, the Internet has emerged as a space in which particular sexual services, such as webcamming, are being both consumed and produced (CUNNINGHAM, KENDALL 2011). On the other hand, it has also changed the processes and practices through which in-person services are negotiated. Today, in fact, sex workers have a wide array of digital tools at their disposal to advertise their services and communicate with clients.

The European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA) traced the key moments of this process in their 2023 report. First, the 1990s saw the emergence of the earliest platforms used by sex workers: static webpages such as online listings or forums (similar to Craigslist), which provided limited user interaction capabilities. Then, from the early 2000s, thanks to the introduction of new features within these websites, sex workers had the opportunity to better engage with their clients by uploading visual content and utilizing direct messaging. It is by the end of 2010, however, that online advertising became a fundamental aspect of sex work: on the one hand, around this time some countries completely banned the advertisement of sexual services in print media, and on the other hand it is during these years that we witnessed an increased accessibility to the internet. When the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of many sex workers' traditional workplaces (saunas, massage parlors, clubs, brothels), the importance of these platforms rose even more substantially (ESWA 2022).

Advertisement websites thus represent the successors of newspapers, which used to and, to a certain extent, still do contain advertisement sections where "triple A" classified ads can be found. However, over time, the world of online advertising has evolved beyond the mere transposition of the paper-based into a digital format, leading to the creation of spaces specifically dedicated to people engaging in all kinds of sex-economic exchanges: it's the case of *Adult Services Websites* (ASW). Each of these websites hosts a varying number of ads containing a combination of some of the following characteristics: at least one, oftentimes explicit, picture; the names the workers decide to advertise their services under; their declared age; their (real or advertised) nationality; a short description of the services offered; a phone number.

ASW, however, aren't only platforms on which it is possible to find advertisements related to the sale of sexual services. The diversity in the services offered by sex workers and the different strategies they adopt to advertise them, in fact, reflects in the variety of online platforms where the sex work related ads can be located. The following is an outline of the nature and scope of the different platforms used by sex workers to advertise:

- Adult Services Websites: third party websites, often stratified by gender, that allow sex workers to create personal profiles. Some of these platforms operate on a subscription-based model, while others allow free advertising. Most platforms, however, allow for the creation of a profile free of charge, but sell additional services to the workers, for example to increase their visibility (*freemium* business model);
- Classified Ads Websites: online advertising platforms allowing individuals to post user-generated ads for a variety of different goods and services. Some of them allow sex workers to advertise their services within dedicated sections, while others prohibit such postings. However, sex workers are usually able to circumvent these bans by covertly advertise their services through the use of coded language;
- Classified Ads Websites Specific to Sex Work and Sexual Encounters: website similar in structure to generic classified websites, but specialized in the advertisement of sexual services and encounters;
- Review Websites: platforms whose primary function is to collect clients' reviews of their experiences with individual sex workers;
- Client Forums: forums with specialized boards where clients can share their experiences of purchasing sexual services and request information from other clients. They can also serve as marketing platforms for sex workers, to the point that some forums integrate escort directories directly into their infrastructure;
- Aggregators: online platforms that crawl and aggregate classified ads from different sources, as opposed to relying on manually submitted listings;
- Other websites, platforms and apps: these include sex workers' personal websites, dating and hook-up platforms and apps[1], social media and, more broadly, any and all websites, apps and platforms that sex workers can utilize to increase their visibility.

These platforms have made it easier for individuals to explore the sex industry as independent workers without the traditional entry barriers, as well as for career sex workers to enjoy increased levels of autonomy and lower dependence on third-parties, better wages and a work environment that allows them to screen the clients and enforce their boundaries more effectively (PRUITT 2005; RAY 2007; CUNNINGHAM et al. 2018). And while the monetary cost to advertise online can be significant for the workers, it's usually counterbalanced by the possibility to reach a much wider audience of clients than any other method (RAY 2007).

However, advertising their services online can also present some important drawbacks for the workers, especially given the fact that they are not the platforms' end users: clients are. This results in the platforms not prioritizing the workers' wellbeing, nor their protection (ESWA 2022) which, coupled with the lack of sex workers' input in platform design, exposes them to potentially catastrophic harm[2] (HAMILTON et al. 2022). One of the main examples is the excessive collection of highly sensitive data as a precondition for accessing the platforms (such as passports, ID cards, consent forms, all the way up to biometric data), with sex workers having no control over what data is collected or how it's used. Such intrusive data collection practices have exponentially increased worldwide after the entry into force of the U.S. "anti-

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[1] Most dating and hook-up platforms and apps have policies that strictly prohibit any form of advertising on their platforms, including of sexual services. Yet, these policies don't necessarily deter sex workers form using these platforms to meet new clients but, rather, encourage the adoption of different strategies by sex workers to covertly advertise their services.

[2] By surrendering control over their data, sex workers become vulnerable to privacy breaches and data leaks (ESWA 2022). One such example is the 2017 raid of the eros.com headquarters, when the U.S. police seized ID copies of sex workers from all over the world, including those of migrant and undocumented sex workers present in the country (BROWN 2017).

trafficking" laws SESTA/FOSTA and other similar national legislation that rendered online platforms liable for their users' content (ESWA 2022). These laws have pushed many general-purpose platforms to de-platforming sex workers, while others were forced to shut down entirely, reducing the amount safe spaces available to sex workers for advertising purposes (BLUNT, WOLF 2020). At the same time, ASW reacted by tightening their data collection policies to avoid legal trouble. These developments have especially affected undocumented migrant and racialized workers, who already face heightened criminalization and stigma surrounding sex work (BROWN 2017; SIMON 2017), and have had to find alternative methods to be able to use such platforms.

1.1 *Technology-facilitated trafficking?*

Given the crucial role that platforms play in the professional lives of sex workers, it is unsurprising that the supposed link between human trafficking and ICTs is emerging as an area of particular public and policy concern (MILIVOJEVIC, SEGRAVE 2017), an interest that is also reflected by the growing body of literature on "technology-facilitated trafficking". With this term scholars refer to «the social and technical ecosystem wherein individuals use information and communication technologies to engage in human trafficking and related behaviors» (LATONERO 2011, 10).

The first comprehensive study at the European level on the impact of ICTs on trafficking has been published in 2022 by GRETA which, together with the 2017 one from the eCrime project, offers an assessment of the extent to which technology has changed the landscape of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Europe. What emerges is that, overall, the impact of ICTs is particularly concerning surrounding the recruitment and the exploitation of the workers, and that the State Parties to the Convention are increasingly preoccupied with these developments. According to these studies, ICTs are often used to facilitate the sale of sexual services provided by victims, as is the case with advertisement websites: amongst all the ads related to sex working there is the potential to find some advertising services provided by victims of trafficking.

To tackle these concerns, starting from 2010 both computer and social scientists and law enforcement agencies have begun analyzing online advertisements related to the sale of sexual services in an attempt to single out potential human trafficking patterns and indicators. Scholars have mostly used two alternative approaches in their studies. The first one involves the use of data scraping and mining to automatically collect information from websites dedicated to advertising the sale of sexual services, coupled with machine learning and natural language techniques to identify human trafficking patterns within the advertisements themselves (see, among others, ALVARI, SHAKARIAN, SNYDER 2016; BURBANO, HERNANDEZ-ALVAREZ 2017; DUBRAWSKI et al. 2015). These algorithms are trained to categorize advertisements as either "suspicious" or "non-suspicious" based on different factors, including the presence of "indicators of human trafficking". These studies usually compare their data against a so-called "ground truth", usually existing police data from former trafficking victims.

The second approach relies on the identification of "indicators of human trafficking" within the online advertisements themselves, without the establishment of a "ground truth". This approach builds on the belief that the presence of such indicators can allow for the identification of advertisements potentially linked to cases of human trafficking (IBANEZ, GAZAN 2016; IBANEZ, SUTHERS 2014; LATONERO 2011; SKIDMORE et al. 2018). An example of such studies is the one carried out by IBANEZ, GAZAN (2014), whose results indicated that 82% of Backpage's advertisements related to sex work in Hawaii contained one or more of the seven indicators of exploitation developed by the authors. However, as we will see, these approaches completely disregard the potential privacy concerns of sex workers, and tend to create a false equivalence between sex work and trafficking, an equivalence that has long been rejected both by scholars

(KEMPADOO, DOEZEMA 1998; AGUSTÍN 2003; SAUNDERS AND SODERLUND 2003; MUSTO 2016) and by sex workers' rights organizations (ICRSE[3] 2015; NSWP 2021). And, furthermore, despite claims of having enhanced accurate identification and location of trafficking victims by some police forces, by the companies developing the tools and algorithms used during these operations, and by the scholars engaging with this branch of studies, recent research by BHALERAO et al. (2022) suggests otherwise.

This paper will provide an overview of the world of online classified ads and, in particular, of what it means for sex workers to advertise their services online, both in terms of monetary costs and power dynamics with the hosting websites, together with a critical review of the literature on trafficking indicators. Finally, it will explore how Italian anti-trafficking organizations have shifted their attention to online classified ads to carry out their outreach activities. In doing so, the paper will show that the idea that a complex social phenomenon such as trafficking could be tackled, through the simple application of technology and algorithms, in fact, is a clear example of techno-solutionism[4] (ESWA 2022), relying, just like the majority of the trafficking indicators on which said algorithms are trained, on simplistic (and incorrect) assumptions about sex work and sex workers' lives.

2. *Methodology and methods*

This paper represents an excerpt of a larger research conducted in Italy between November 2022 and July 2024 that saw the conduction of 24 interviews with 31 practitioners, experts, lawyers and sex worker activists, with 6 interviews involving more than one practitioner/expert at the suggestion of the participants. Out of these interviews, 10 of them, involving a total of 12 participants, proved relevant to the topics of this paper. 9 of these were semi-structured, while one took the form of a more loosely structured conversation with the interviewee. Methodologically, the participants have initially been recruited by contacting the organizations they work or volunteer for through their institutional channels while, in a second phase, potential new interviewees have been identified through the snowball sampling method.

In addition to conducting interviews, to gain an initial understanding of the ICT-mediated markets I carried out a six-weeks long online ethnography within four advertisement platforms: one Adult Services Website, one Classified Ads Website, one Classified Ads Website Specific to Sex Work and Sexual Encounters and one Review Website. To avoid compromising sex workers' anonymity and to prevent any potentially negative impact on the sex working community at large, I have chosen not to disclose the name or address of the platforms in which the ethnography has been conducted. Thus, the four websites will be addressed as ASW1 (Adult Services Website 1), CLASS1 (Classified Ads Website 1), CLASSEX1 (Classified Ads Website Specific to Sex Work and Sexual Encounters 1), and REVIEW1 (Review Website 1). Similarly, other platforms belonging to the same category that have been brought up by interviewees are going to be referred to by using the same label and a progressive number (e.g. ASW2, ASW3, etc.).

During the ethnography, I also gained knowledge of the fact that REVIEW1 publishes statistics on the ICT-mediated markets on an occasional basis[5], which stood out as particularly

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[3]   Before adopting its current name, ESWA has operated under the name International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) between 2005 and 2021.

[4]   In his book *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, MOROZOV (2013, 5) defines techno-solutionism as the «recasting all complex social situations either as neat problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized – if only the right algorithms are in place».

[5]   It did so in January 2022 and January 2023, and, on both occasions, the data referred to the previous year. It did not publish any data in 2024.

important as there are no other estimates on the size of the ICT-mediated markets. These data, however, have not been approached acritically. First of all, I acknowledge how, in order to collect the data necessary to produce its statistics, REVIEW1 uses the same scraping software that it employs to upload sex workers' profiles on the platform without their consent, an infringement on sex workers' right to choose where and how to advertise their services. Additionally, it's impossible to evaluate the soundness of the methodology employed to produce these statistics, given that the platform makes no disclosures in this regard. Finally, the statistics do not separate cis and transgender workers and, additionally, do not include male sex workers, given that the platform is designed along gendered and heteronormative assumptions on the sex markets. At the same time, despite these intrinsic limitations, REVIEW1's data represent the only comprehensive overview of the Italian ICT-mediated markets I have been able to locate and, as such, I decided to still use them as part of the analysis. However, I would here like to express that if any other source had been available, I would have forgone the use of REVIEW1's data in light of ethical considerations connected to their use of scraping software. In order to address the methodological uncertainties surrounding REVIEW1's statistics, on the other hand, I decided to adopt a methodological triangulation. In this case, REVIEW1's data have been combined with the fieldnotes collected during the online ethnography and the reflections of practitioners that emerged during the semi-structured interviews to corroborate REVIEW1's data or to highlight instances in which the data requires clarification and/or additional context.

3. *The online advertisement landscape*

Despite the growing importance of online advertisements within the field of sex work, the spaces in which sex workers advertise their services online and the dynamics governing them have, so far, been the object of a very limited amount of inquiry. Nonetheless, it's clear that the mobility restrictions imposed by the Italian government during the Covid-19 pandemic have pushed many sex workers towards the online markets as well as pornography, with some of them shooting content from inside the reception facilities, while others continued to meet with their regular clients:

> «The pressure that some of the girls we had in reception were feeling regarding the debt was quite strong. And our impression is that they found ways to keep making money, because they were found to have equipment to shoot videos inside the reception facilities» (Practitioner from Afet Aquilone, Genoa).

> «In regard to the Covid period, some girls told us that work had stopped. Therefore, some of them didn't work, while others continued to work by making arrangements with customers. During the lockdown periods, the girls kept the phone numbers of their most loyal customers, who would go pick them up by car» (Practitioner from Il Melograno, Genoa).

During this time, many workers sought new clients by posting advertisements online, often for the first time. Online advertisements allow clients to browse different sex workers' profiles, and compare and evaluate their physical characteristics before making a choice, in a way that would not be possible in street-based prostitution (CUNNINGHAM, KENDALL 2011). At the same time, sex workers can use different strategies to attract a higher number of clients or a particular clientele, for example by crafting their profiles using specific photographs and language to entice certain clients' desires (*Ibid.*), by running multiple advertisements on different platforms, or by including different pictures and/or personal details in different ads (KOKEN et al. 2010). In doing so, sex workers often shape a work identity that matches eroticized normative expectations of particular bodies by highlighting fetishized characteristics such as race and ethnicity, amongst others (SANDERS 2005).

Although both sex workers and clients often use a combination of different platforms to advertise or search for sexual services, they still tend to have their preferred sites, with their preferences being influenced by multiple factors, including the affordances of the platforms and the presence (or absence) of membership costs. It's here important to understand how paying to publish or promote their ads, in and of itself, is not considered problematic by the workers. Rather, as an activist from SWIPE[6] explained, purchasing such services is considered to be worth it when they result in an influx of "high quality" clients, especially when these become repeat or regular ones:

«The question is whether the [websites] put you in contact with quality clients or not. Because that's the goal. The metric is not even how much you will earn in a month, but whether you get those clients. [...] For me, paying 800£ a year on an ad is worth it if it brings me that client who takes me on holiday, who buys me bags, etc. How much is too much, in my opinion, is relative. Maybe in Italy it takes you a couple of hours of work to pay off the ad, but if you get quality clients then it's worth it, because the clients then become regulars. Then, as you get forward [in your career], you'll need to pay for ads less and less, and you become independent».

However, despite their claims of neutrality as simple "ad-hosters" (SWORDS, LAING, COOK 2023) these platforms play an important role in dictating the working conditions of sex workers as well, given that «platforms not only host that content, they organize it, make it searchable, and in some cases even algorithmically select some subset of it to deliver as frontpage offerings, news feeds, subscribed channels, or personalized recommendations» (GILLESPIE 2018, 210). One such example is how, in recent years, some platforms have been encouraging workers to create freely accessible content to attract customers and improve their indexing on the platform, which, in turn, amplifies the market position of the platform (RAND, STEGEMAN 2023), creating an additional workload for the workers on top of the fees they already have to pay:

«this thing about having to pay is being exasperated. Especially, in my opinion, the annoying thing is when you have to create content yourself. For example, ASW2 has now introduced stories. It's not enough that you have to pay all the gold in the world to stay at the top [of the search results], but you also have to create content and post it. It's an endless job» (Activist from SWIPE).

Affordances, on the other hand, play an important role in shaping the kind of clientele that workers can expect to get in contact with by placing ads on different kinds of platforms. On CLASS1, for example, posters can publish ads containing both a visual and a textual element, and associate a phone number and/or an address with them. Owing to the non-sexual nature of the platform, both the pictures and text associated with each ad tend to be suggestive, yet not sexually explicit. Thanks to its free nature and lack of registration requirements for clients, as well as to the fact that the website hosts other ads that have no erotic implications, CLASS1 attracts a very diverse clientele, including men who are new to hiring sex workers, those seeking quick and inexpensive encounters, those who question the need to pay for sex, and those looking for "non-pros"[7] (RAY 2007). Ads on websites such as CLASS1 also tend to be highly transient: the ability to quickly remove the ads once a client is found makes advertising on these platforms attractive for those seeking temporary income from sex work without the commitment of long-term advertising.

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[6] According to their website (n.d.), Sex Worker Intersectional Peer Education is an «association of sex workers and allies, created to support and advocate for the rights of people who do sex work and to promote an inclusive, non-judgmental and destigmatizing culture».

[7] Non-professionals are sex workers for whom prostitution is not the primary occupation, or who advertise their services as a "hobby", a "fetish", or a "passion", thus conveying the idea that they are primarily motivated by enjoyment rather than financial gain.

Similarly, on CLASSEX1 sex workers can publish classified ads related to their services but, unlike CLASS1, the platform doesn't host other categories of advertisements. Nonetheless, the two websites are very similarly structured and, thanks to the flexibility they offer and the absence of advertising costs, attract similarly situated workers, especially non-professionals, and clients looking to hire them. Another feature shared by both websites is the possibility to purchase services to push the ads to the top of the search results. The different plans provide different perks, but regardless of their differences, they all clearly feature some labelling to the top right of the advertisement, with a cost on CLASSEX1 ranging from 3.20€ to 9.60€ per day.

Moving to a different kind of platform, Adult Service Websites like ASW1 target more of a middle-class clientele with higher levels of disposable income compared to CLASS1 and CLASSEX1, such as travelling businessmen, thanks to the smooth, standardized, catalogue-like browsing experience they provide, with a user-friendly interface that makes it easier to find independent sex workers compared to individual websites, independently of the city they are located in (RAY 2007). Advertisements on ASW1 are broken down into different categories (Escort, Trans, Gigolo, Massages) and are displayed in a way that pushes to the top all the different premium ads, while non-paying sex workers' ads are displayed at the bottom of the page in chronological order. Ads on ASW1 and other Adult Services Websites usually appear more polished than online classified ads and feature professional-quality, explicit photographs instead of images captured with webcams or consumer-grade digital cameras. The textual content of the advertisements is open to the poster's discretion and ranges from brief and vague descriptions to long and detailed information. Additionally, ASW1 allows sex workers to include a lot of physical descriptors within their advertisements, as well as a detailed list and a price range for the services they provide. ASW1 also offers a number of paid plans to sex workers who are looking to increase the visibility of their advertisement whose costs range from 5.60€ to 25.91€ per day.

Finally, the fourth category is that of review websites such as REVIEW1. Many of the sex buyers who use these websites consider themselves to be "hobbyists", or men with "the hobby" of buying sexual services. They see themselves as part of a community and share their experiences both on client forums and review websites by using a shared slang. These are men with the disposable income and the time necessary to buy sexual services on a semi-regular basis. They are also «more sexually liberal, and reported having far more partners» compared to both the general population and other men who purchase sexual services on a non-regular basis, and are generally looking for who they perceive to be independent, adult sex workers, rather than victims of sexual exploitation (MONTO, MILROD 2013, 812). Nonetheless, it is important to note that, on several occasions, I came across posts published in client forums by "hobbyists", which discussed their interactions with women displaying clear trafficking indicators. Their degree of awareness, and the level of idealizations they engaged in, in an attempt to justify their own behavior, however, is unclear.

Review platforms allow sex workers to maintain a public reputation that could encourage contact from more risk-averse clients for whom reviews serve as an indicator of whether the worker is fraudulent or dangerous (CUNNINGHAM, KENDALL 2011). Yet, customer reviews can be a double-edged sword (CUNNINGHAM et al. 2018). Reviews can, in fact, generate unrealistic expectations among clients regarding the services they will receive, irrespective of the uniqueness of each encounter, and also have the potential to breach the privacy of the workers by accidentally (or purposefully) disclosing too many details about their location, thus rendering it easily identifiable. Additionally, reviews can, at times, escalate into abuse and harassment against sex workers, especially when they are migrants and/or racialized. Finally, as illustrated by an activist from SWIPE, the threat of a negative review can escalate into a blackmailing tool by customers looking to receive a discounted fare by the worker, or services that had not been agreed upon during the negotiation:

«With the reviews it's very complicated, because we're not talking about the hairdresser's services.

> The things that are said are often very vulgar, or attack the person's physical appearance. [...] And with the reviews comes the leverage: there are customers who offer you a positive review in exchange for a discount, things like that».

Looking at REVIEW1, this appears as a highly organized platform present in four different countries, offering a catalogue-like experience with the workers' profiles and reviews divided into different categories: Escorts, Trans, Couples, Massages, Mistresses. The different profiles feature a mix of professionally shot and amateur pictures, a short description, the approximate location of the workers and the reviews left by the customers. REVIEW1 has a built-in crawler that surveys other advertisement websites and creates a profile page for each worker that the crawler is capable of identifying. It's important to note that these profiles are not arranged in chronological order from the latest created, as is the case in CLASS1, CLASSEX1[8] and, to a certain degree, ASW1. Rather, in its default display, the platform pushes paying profiles to the first page of results (without this being clearly labeled), while the non-paying profiles are algorithmically ordered. Alternatively, the platform also allows clients to arrange the profiles in a "ranking-based order", with the workers' position in the ranking still being determined by unclear "proprietary algorithms". As authors such HARDY, BARBAGALLO (2021) and JONES (2015) highlight, these ranking algorithms are designed to maximize the platforms' earnings as well as to foster competition between sex workers, to the detriment of the workers' needs. The platforms, in fact, intentionally create an illusion of oversupply that makes the workers feel replaceable and that pushes them to undercut each other's rates (VAN DOORN, VELTHUIS 2018), all while upholding heteropatriarchal structures of white supremacy and normative beauty standards (JONES 2015). REVIEW1 provides a premium plan to all sex workers with profiles on their website, whose cost ranges from 15.33€ and 30.71€ per day. On top of being featured in the first results page for the province they are located in, this plan allows them to independently manage «all the contents of [their] profile», technical support from the staff of the portal, and "tour management" and private messaging features. Interestingly, these terms imply that, without paying, the workers are limited in the changes they can make to their profiles on the platform.

One characteristic common to all the different categories of web pages hosting sex workers' ads is that they are often registered outside of the country and under figureheads' names in order to protect the founders and/or managers from allegations of aiding and abetting of prostitution under the Merlin Law. It is thus very difficult to properly understand whether they are managed by single individuals or more or less formally structured groups. These aspects are of particular concern for sex workers: with the vast majority of websites[9] requiring the submission of a copy of their passports and/or ID documents in order to publish an ad, sex workers find themselves in the position of having to relinquish their most sensitive personal information (such as name, date of birth, nationality and place of residency) without knowing who they are effectively making these disclosures to, and how and where their data will be stored:

> «The problem with these websites is that we don't know who's behind them. For example, who is behind ASW2, the biggest one in Italy for the high-end [portion of the market], is completely unknown. Rumor has it that it's the Russians, but it's based in Switzerland. And there's absolutely no way to negotiate with them. It's a big problem. We saw it especially during the lockdown in the way they imposed their conditions. Initially they had set up the possibility of camming, but they then forced us to be paid through a specific platform, and I ended up not requesting the money [I had earned] because of the number of documents they required me to submit. [...] Behind CLASSEX1

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[8] With the exception of premium profiles which are clearly labeled as such and whose numbers per page are, nonetheless, limited.
[9] The only exception known as of the time of writing is CLASSEX1.

there is a company founded in Cyprus. [...] The problem with these sites is always the documents. [...] It's a big risk» (Activist from SWIPE).

Privacy is considered essential in the protection of sex workers from criminalization, victimization, and stigmatization both at the individual and institutional levels: it allows workers to manage multiple identities, separating their work life from their private one and setting boundaries with the clients, which, overall, play a crucial role in guarding their safety (ESWA 2022). However, having to disclose personal information allows the hosting platforms and, potentially, law enforcement, as well as any other parties that could (legally or illegally) access such information, to link advertisements to specific individuals. A risk that potential clients, on the other hand, don't need to undertake, as they are not even required to create an account to be able to view sex workers' profiles. As we will see in the next paragraph, this can have severe repercussions on the lives of sex workers.

3.1 *Power dynamics between sex workers and websites*

Despite the internet's overall positive impact on sex workers' lives, especially in terms of control over their working conditions, there are also some drawbacks that are important to underline revolving around the inherent power disparities between the workers themselves and the platforms that host their ads. The risk of being targeted by law enforcement for aiding and abetting prostitution, in fact, has fostered an environment in which few platforms control big portions of the ICT-mediated markets. This results in a loss of negotiating power for sex workers, who have no alternatives than to pay the rate established by these platforms, which at times can be "outrageous":

«it's not a problem to pay if they provide us with a service. The problem is paying and then not having customer service, for example. [...] Especially considering that there are no alternatives. There are only a few sites and that's it, so we have very little negotiating power. And we often pay outrageous prices [to publish our ads]. For example, on ASW2 [...] the first ad you put up costs 518€. And that means that a bunch of people can't afford it. REVIEW1 has also become as expensive as ASW2, as far as I know, even though they're pretty crap, both in terms of marketing and of presentation. The other side of the coin is that, for example, in a country like the UK where there are no big websites that work, you have to be everywhere, so either you pay for a lot of ads, or you work your ass off for indexing on Google and on social media. So, paradoxically, paying for only one ad is much more convenient. [...] The problem is when the prices are absurd like on ASW2» (Activist from SWIPE).

Additionally, it's not uncommon for advertisement websites to steal sex workers' photos and information to create profiles on their platforms under the workers' names in a way that BARWULOR et al. (2021) describe as *parasitic*. Some platforms engage in this practice to expand their clientele and coerce workers into utilizing their services, while others exploit workers' photos to deceive potential clients, all while jeopardizing the workers' privacy and their right to choose which platforms they wish to advertise on. In Italy this issue has been brought to light especially in relation to REVIEW1, which carved its market position through aggressive marketing and the use of a scraping software to automatically upload workers' profiles found on other websites onto the platform. The following is a testimony a sex worker published on her personal webpage about her experience with REVIEW1:

«Since the moment REVIEW1 went online, it immediately started working with arrogance and more arrogance. Its existence is based upon the wild and indiscriminate extraction of phone numbers from the web, and their connection to a false pseudo-profile under which anyone (even the admins) could write all sorts of reviews, including the most petty and untrue ones. From that moment on,

REVIEW1 started engaging in the phenomenon of paid positive reviews. Sex workers now receive emails, texts, messages and phone calls with offers of positive reviews on the website. Those who rightly refused found themselves flooded with negative reviews in the following weeks. REVIEW1 has always allowed and encouraged this kind of behaviors: escorts, overwhelmed by the completely gratuitous negative reviews, have registered on the platform to be able to reply to these slanders. In fact, amongst the people I know, the only ones that paid to have an official profile are only those who have been flooded with meaningless reviews written to "force" them to sign up and pay in order to defend themselves!» (Sex worker on her personal website).

Another issue connected to such practices is the difficulties that sex workers face when trying to take down these unauthorized profiles. As the activist I interviewed points out, REVIEW1 requires sex workers to submit a copy of their ID to be able to lodge their request:

«REVIEW1 is a nightmare. Their marketing is extremely aggressive, to the point that I had to block them because they kept on trying to reach me. What they do is take your data [from other platforms], create a profile under your name, let clients write reviews, and then ask you to provide a copy of your ID to remove the profile. It's absurd. [...] The fact that these websites copy the ads from elsewhere is a huge problem, and REVIEW1 did it in a predatory way» (Activist from SWIPE).

When platforms refuse to take down a profile or an ad, one of the only options available to the workers is that of a legal takedown request which, however, can be both expensive and time-consuming, and has no guarantee of success. Otherwise, the worker would need to get the Postal and Communications Police[10] involved which, however, has the major repercussion of outing the workers' involvement in the sex markets. The following exchange from the 2023 Sex Workers Speak Out! conference perfectly illustrates how the power differential between sex workers and advertisement platforms compounds with sex work stigma, leaving sex workers with very little avenue of recourse when they experience data theft at the hands of these platforms, especially when they are migrants and/or undocumented:

«Q: Good morning, my name is [redacted] from [redacted advertisement platform]. [...] First and foremost, it should come from [sex workers] to demand more respect from the websites [...]. It's also on you, because as long as you accept that these websites take your pictures from other websites, that they publish [ads in your name] to grow their numbers, as long as you accept the existence of forums where they write how you do it, how you take it, how many roses you request, how many women you take, and all that... I think it's unacceptable. You should be the first ones to check if the website is hosted in Italy, if the website treats you with respect or makes the changes [to the ads] that you request, or if you can make these changes autonomously because it gives you the autonomy to change your phone number, your city, or anything else. As long as you stay with these websites that sprout from one day to the next [...], that ask you 75€ for four months, that upload anyone's pictures to promote themselves – which means that the final customer will also meet a completely different person... I think it's absolutely unfair. [...]
A: The problem is multi-layered. One of the problems is that if there is a naked picture of me on the internet, I have no control over said photo. It's something we know very well. It's one of the problems we have. Advertisement websites [...] often do this thing: they take our photos and publish them on platforms to which we have not given authorization. Why don't we do anything? For all the problems we listed above. We are not organized. It is difficult to communicate with each other or to access a lawyer. [...] I don't want to go to the cyber-police, give them my name and surname and tell them that I'm a whore! And I say "I don't want to" because I'm a white woman. If I wasn't, I would

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[10] Unit of the Italian State Police of Italy whose functions include, among others, the investigation of cybercrime.

say that I can't! These websites have more power than we do. When we talk about workplace relationships, we need to think of them in terms of power».

Finally, it's important to remember that advertisement platforms have specific terms of use which, however, might be enforced arbitrarily. As explained by the activist I interviewed, for example, there are platforms banning sex workers from specific countries (such as Romania) altogether under the assumption that they are highly likely to be victims of trafficking. Sex workers who find themselves banned or removed from platforms experience a sudden and significant loss of clientele and the labor that went into cultivating them. The only remaining option to still be able to advertise is thus to use the services of an intermediary, which adds to the costs that workers have to undertake to advertise in the first place:

> «We have zero negotiating power with these sites, and that's a big problem. Even with ASW3, it's a big problem. And that's why the guy who manages my ads proved to be fundamental, because after a series of issues I got banned from the platform» (Activist from SWIPE).

4. *Who uses online classified ads to sell sexual services in Italy?*

As previously mentioned, the mobility restrictions imposed by the Italian government to curb the spread of Covid-19 have pushed many workers towards the ICT-mediated markets. But have all workers adopted this new strategy? Are there any differences between the different national groups? Before attempting to answer these questions it's important to understand what dynamics are at play within the ICT-mediated markets.

First of all, it's necessary to highlight that, as the sex workers interviewed by SANDERS et al. (2018) point out, a lot of the data that can be found within online ads related to the sale of sexual services should be approached as "marketing data", rather than as accurate measures of factors such as the national origin and age ranges of the workers themselves. For example, DUNN's study (2018) shows how younger sex workers (under 30 years of age) are able to charge a premium compared to their older colleagues (over 45 years old). It is thus unsurprising that sex workers might be incentivized to advertise their services (and their ages) along gendered and sexualized tropes of youthfulness to attract potential clients. Similar considerations can be drawn in regard to data concerning the nationality and race of the workers. As previously mentioned, in fact, sex workers often construct their work identity to match racialized expectations of sex roles and sexual performances (SANDERS 2005). This can be particularly true for migrant workers, who might adopt a certain nationality to distinguish themselves in a market where there is a high number of workers from their same country of origin, or to avoid hostility and prejudice towards people of their nationality (SANDERS et al. 2018). Thus, socio-demographic data contained in online advertisements cannot be interpreted as representative of the actual age and nationality of the workers posting them but, rather, as representative of their work identities as they decide to advertise them on each platform:

> «[Looking at the ads] gives us information, general indications, maybe not precise, on the nationality. Because in order to attract clients the Eastern European woman might describe herself as Russian, because that attracts [more clients] and maybe she's Belarusian, or maybe she's Ukrainian, or even Bulgarian» (Expert from NVA, Venice).

Secondly, not all sex workers work alone, and many of them might advertise both independently and as part of a working duo. Other workers don't curate their own advertising because they work for a sex working business (e.g. a massage parlor) or an agency. Others might adopt multiple work identities and own several phone numbers. All these factors, and the high mobility that

characterizes the indoor ICT-mediated markets, make it very difficult to estimate how many sex workers actually advertise their services and how many sex working business operate throughout the national territory. In the words of an expert working for the NVA:

«The movements within the indoor markets are very fast. There is a fairly consolidated mechanism where a worker stays six months in one place, fifteen days in one city, twenty in another. There are many movements, so any attempt to go and count the ads is only an attempt, certainly an important one, but not as clear as counting the numbers on the streets» (Expert from NVA, Venice).

Despite these limitations, looking at some estimates on the phenomenon, however imperfect they are, can still allow us to draw some overarching considerations on these markets and on how sex workers and sex working businesses use advertisement platforms.

According to REVIEW1 data, in 2021[II] the most advertised nationality among female sex workers has been the Brazilian one, standing at 17,25% of the total, followed by Italian at 15,47%, Colombian at 7,34%, Argentinian at 6,47% and Venezuelan at 5,66%. A full breakdown of the 20 most advertised nationalities (which represent 92,32% of the total) can be found in Fig. 1.
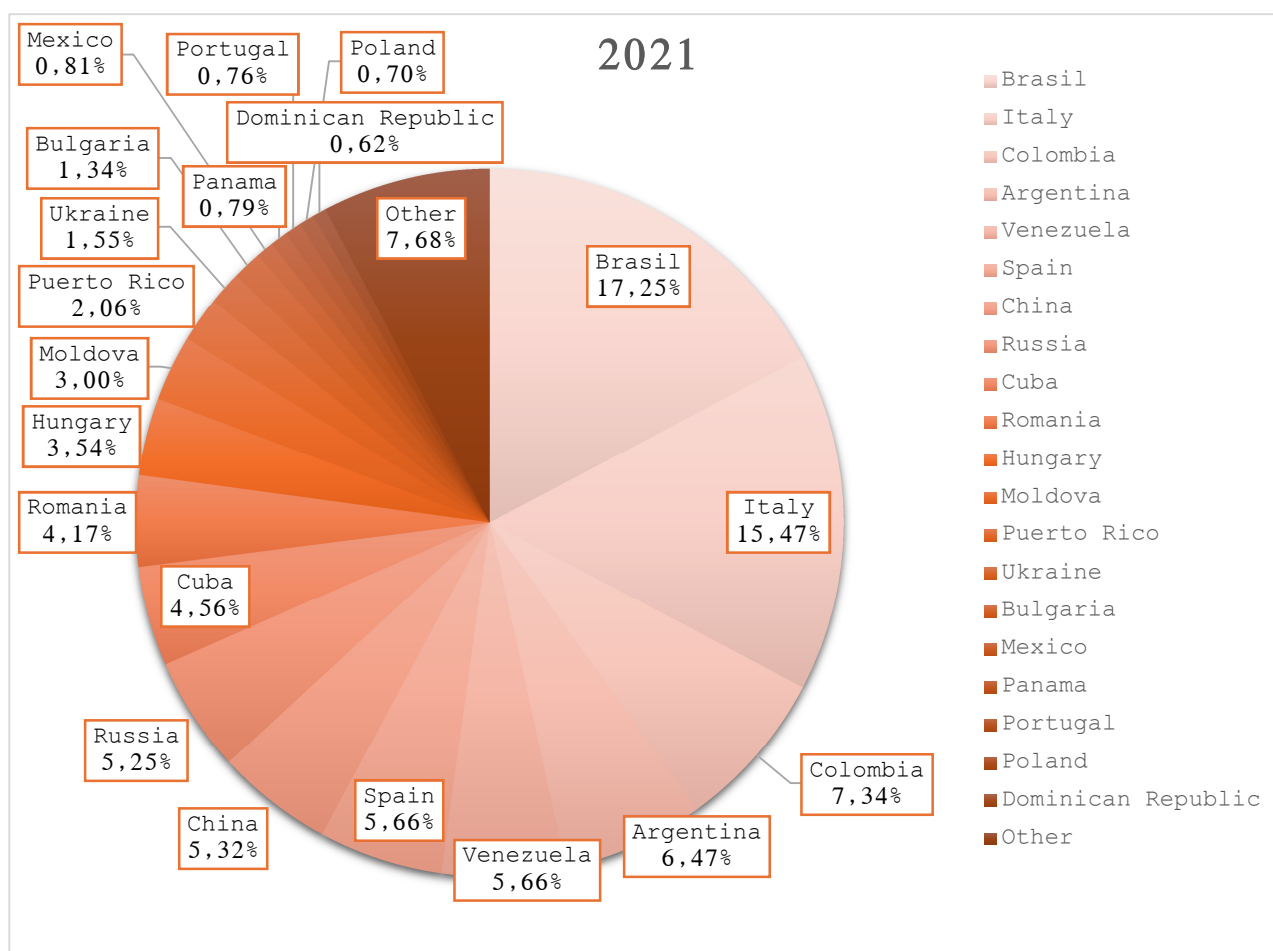

Figure 1 – 20 most advertised nationalities online among female sex workers in 2021, in % of the total, based on the statistics published by REVIEW1.

Similarly, REVIEW1's data for 2022[12] indicates that Brazilian women represented 17,45% of the total, followed by Italians at 17,40%. Further behind were Colombians at 7,03%, Argentinians at 6,21%, then Spanish and Venezuelans. The full breakdown of the 20 most commonly advertised nationalities in the year 2022 can be found in Fig. 2.
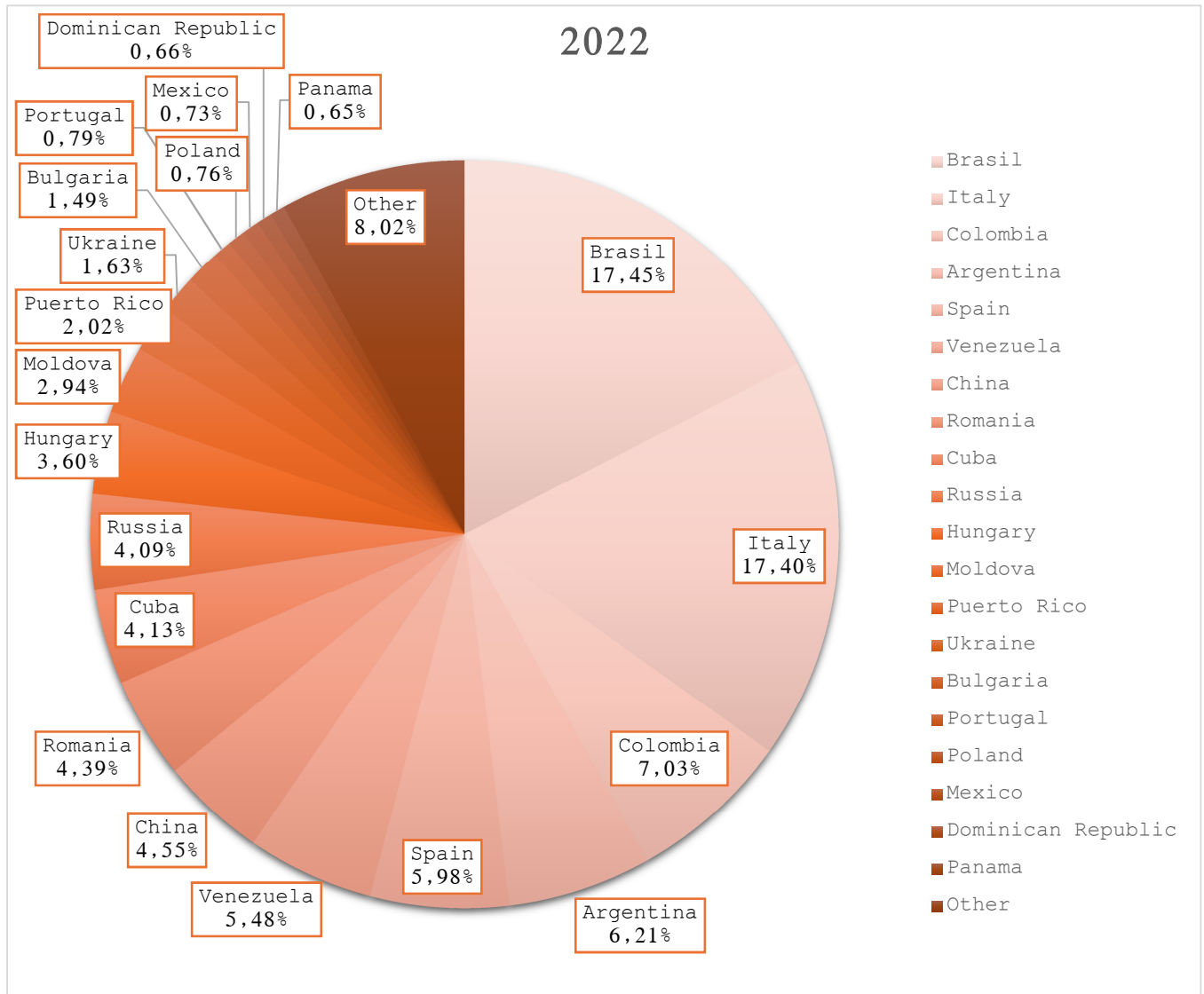

Figure 2 – 20 most advertised nationalities online among female sex workers in 2022, in % of the total, based on the statistics published by REVIEW1.

While REVIEW1 doesn't break these statistics down by gender identity of the workers, throughout the online ethnography I have been able to observe that the vast majority of trans* sex workers advertising online are either Italian or South American, with a few exceptions represented by Asian women, in particular from Thailand and the Philippines.

One important aspect that emerges from REVIEW1's data is that, despite the fact that they represented 57% and 46,7% of all migrants identified as potential victims of trafficking for the years 2021 and 2022, and around 21% to 22% of all street workers in the same years (NVA 2022,

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[12] Differently from the previous year, REVIEW1 does not reveal how many phone numbers are present within their 2022 dataset, nor what percentage of sex workers they believe the dataset covers.

2023), Nigerians don't appear amongst the top 20 national groups advertising online. This data is corroborated by practitioners working in anti-trafficking organizations who, during their outreach and monitoring activities, mostly encounter ads posted by Italian and South American cis and transgender women, and Eastern European cisgender women. Women from the African continent, on the other hand, seem to be completely absent from the main advertisement platforms. Practitioners are thus interrogating themselves on which channels the Nigerian workers still living in the country and working in the indoor markets might be using to advertise their services and attract new clients. The most accepted hypothesis is that they might be using social media, and Facebook in particular, which has been corroborated by an expert from Milan State University who has worked extensively with Nigerian sex workers and received similar information from the workers themselves in 2020:

> «Q: You don't find Nigerian women on advertisement websites either. So, there is this whole idea that maybe they have moved towards the indoor markets, but it's unclear how the anti-trafficking organizations can get in contact with them.
> A: They told me that they use Facebook a lot. However, this is not recent data because it comes from a research I conducted in 2020. I'm talking about other areas though, Castel Volturno in particular».

The reasons behind this difference are unclear, but there are some factors that might play a role in shaping it. The shift towards the ICT-mediated markets, in fact, needs to be contextualized within broader technological and structural transformations of the global economy and, especially, within the persistence of a digital divide extending to the realm of sex work (SANDERS et al. 2018). Given existing disparities in cultural capital, encompassing the resources and skills required to effectively engage with the digital economy, migrant sex workers might find themselves at a disadvantage compared to Italian ones when trying to navigate digital interfaces (*Ibid.*). Additionally, it's important to remember that the majority of advertisement platforms require sex workers to submit a copy of their ID documents, which can discourage migrants from using them, either because they are undocumented, or because they fear that their involvement in sex work might negatively impact their migration status. For these reasons, some migrant workers might forgo online advertising all together, advertise on platforms they are already familiar with, or rely on intermediaries to compensate for their lack of digital skills, as relayed by an expert working for the NVA:

> «Advertisements are very often managed by intermediaries who take care of writing the ad in correct Italian, especially when the sex workers have only recently arrived in Italy, or also if they have been here for a few years but have not reached a mastery of the language. [...] The [anti-trafficking organizations] have studied this [phenomenon] and have discovered that there are packages that sex workers can purchase, and their cost depends on the service offered. That is, as you purchase a gradually superior service you get the writing of the ad, the fine-tuning of the most alluring, most beautiful photos to attract clients, and then the frequency with which they pump up the ad within the site, because you can also decide how many times the ad can be re-posted and pushed at the top of the page. Here the cost obviously increases, up to 200/300€ a week».

Another interesting data point emerging from REVIEW1's statistics is that Chinese sex workers seem to only account for 5% of all workers advertising online. It is important to note, in this regard, that the majority of advertisements related to sale of sexual services by Chinese women are posted by sex working businesses, and especially massage parlors, rather than single sex workers themselves. These ads are usually reposted multiple times per day across different

platforms and they only rarely feature any of the workers currently employed by the business. Rather, they utilize vague, standardized language and pictures of young Asian women[13] that don't match the sociodemographic of the Chinese women working in the country[14]. This is significant because although each of these sex working businesses might have more than one phone number associated with them, these tend to remain the same over time and don't match the number of workers employed and thus, REVIEW1's methodology might end up significantly underestimating the size of the Chinese national group.

Finally, I would like to offer some reflections on male sex workers who advertise their services online. Despite the fact that REVIEW1's statistics don't include them, male sex workers are present on most platforms, although in smaller numbers than women[15]. Throughout the online ethnography I encountered many ads posted by men, and their characteristics varied considerably across platforms. For example, on CLASS1 most of these ads did not feature any photos and were seemingly posted by Italian men seeking women[16], with very few exceptions represented by South and Central Americans. Because of its very nature, CLASSEX1 contains a mix of sex working ads and ads from men looking for sexual encounters. However, both on this platform and on AWS1, the vast majority of sex working ads are posted either by Italian or South American sex workers providing services mostly to men, and a smaller number of workers from either Central America or the African continent, with this latter group being more likely to offer services to women. Interestingly, Romanian sex workers don't seem to be using advertisement platforms, despite having been one of the most visible groups in street work over the years.

5. *"Technology-facilitated trafficking" and its role in detecting trafficking through indicators*

The concept that technology can offer "innovative solutions" to combat crime has been extensively explored both in academia and in policy making. It should therefore come as no surprise that there is a growing body of literature identifying technology both as a facilitator of human trafficking and as a promising counter-trafficking tool (LATONERO 2011; JACKSON *et al.* 2018). Already two decades ago, in fact, HUGHES (2002, 4) warned that

> «when those with power introduce a new technology into a system of oppression and exploitation, it enables the powerful to intensify the harm and expand the exploitation. This characterizes what is happening as predators and pimps, who stalk, buy and exploit women and children, have moved to Internet sites and forums for advertising, documenting and engaging in sexual exploitation».

Since then, the claim that technology has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of human trafficking has been a recurring theme in both academic and policy discourse, with scholars, activists and policymakers increasingly advocating for further investigations into the role of technology, including advertisement platforms, in the facilitation of human trafficking and exploitation (MILIVOJEVIC, MOORE, SEGRAVE 2020). Yet, the evidence of a causal link between the two remains scarce (*Ibid.*). Thus, the "trafficking-technology nexus" (MUSTO, BOYD 2014) has mostly been framed as a generic increase in the "risk" for (mostly) women and children to

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[13]   It's plausible that these pictures are being downloaded from erotic platforms and re-distributed without the consent of the women depicted. As ESWA highlights, this constitutes intimate image-based abuse (AYDINALP, STEVENSON 2024).

[14]   Usually older women over 35 (BRISTOT 2018).

[15]   Male sex workers also seem less likely to pay for additional services on advertisement platforms than women.

[16]   The content of these ads was rather vague, and it remains unclear whether these men were trying to sell sexual services or simply looking for sexual encounters.

fall victims of exploitation: social media have therefore become crucial platforms for the recruitment of new victims (BARNEY 2018), mobile technologies such as smartphones key tools used by traffickers to bypass geographical distances in their exertion of control (LATONERO 2011), and advertisement platforms «the most significant enabler of sexual exploitation» (ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION 2018).

These narratives inevitably inform policy responses focusing on the need to counteract the perceived "threats" posed by a technology that is increasingly seen as a facilitator of exploitation (SHARED HOPE INTERNATIONAL 2007). And yet, technology is simultaneously depicted also as a tool to detect potential cases of trafficking and exploitation: a range of technological solutions such as «data mining, web crawling, computational linguistics, and mapping» have all been proposed as potential methods via which to identify trafficking online (LATONERO 2011, 9), based on the idea that «online transactions leave behind traces of user activity, providing a rare window into criminal behavior, techniques and patterns» (LATONERO 2011, iv). Scholars and law enforcement agencies have thus begun to scrutinize information posted on ASW profiles and on ads related to the sale of sexual services in the search for potential indicators that could be employed to identify and even predict human trafficking and aid law enforcement in their hunt for human traffickers.

Such indicators range from potential inconsistency of sex workers' data across different profiles/platforms (e.g. different names or different ages) (IBANEZ, SUTHERS 2014; L'HOIRY, MORETTI, ANTONOPOULOS 2021) to frequent movements between different locations reflected by the use of keywords such as "new in town" (IBANEZ, SUTHERS 2014; GIOMMONI, IKWU 2021). Similarly, the apparent restricted movement of the workers (*Ibid.*), which reflects in the advertisement of their services as "in call only", and the use of language suggestive of third parties' control (IBANEZ, SUTHERS 2014; GIOMMONI, IKWU 2021; ALVARI, SHAKARIAN, SNYDER 2017; L'HOIRY, MORETTI, ANTONOPOULOS 2021) such as the use of third-person or first-person plural pronouns have both been identified as potential trafficking indicators. Other indicators include the recurrence of specific phone numbers linked to multiple sex workers (LATONERO 2012; IBANEZ, GAZAN 2016; HULTGREN et al. 2016; GIOMMONI, IKWU 2021; IBANEZ, SUTHERS 2014), especially across different geographic regions, the use of specific keywords and emojis, such as those referencing the ethnicity or national origin of the workers (IBANEZ, SUTHERS 2014; IBANEZ, GAZAN 2016; ALVARI, SHAKARIAN, SNYDER 2016; 2017; HULTGREN et al. 2018; L'HOIRY, MORETTI, ANTONOPOULOS 2021) or their young age (ALVARI, SHAKARIAN, SNYDER 2017; GIOMMONI, IKWU 2021; IBANEZ, GAZAN 2016, among others), the presence of references to SPAs and massage parlors (IBANEZ, GAZAN 2016; ALVARI, SHAKARIAN, SNYDER 2016; 2017) or to "unconventional"[17]/unprotected sex, such as unprotected oral sex, "cum in mouth", swallowing, unprotected vaginal sex, "barebacking", receiving fisting and receiving BDSM (see, among others, L'HOIRY, MORETTI, ANTONOPOULOS 2021; HULTGREN et al. 2018), the presence of typographical and grammatical errors within the ads (L'HOIRY, MORETTI, ANTONOPOULOS 2021), and many more.

The ability to process large volumes of data is highly appealing to organizations, including law enforcement agencies, which seek to leverage intelligence for decision-making (SMITH 2018). In this regard, the idea of scraping big amounts of data and rely on the presence of indicators to detect cases of human trafficking «can give an undue illusion of objectivity and reliability» (DE VRIES, COCKBAIN 2024, 145). This is particularly problematic, especially given

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[17] I would like to point out the use of the term "unconventional" by many authors (including HULTGREN et al. 2018), which reflects a distinction between "good sex" and all other erotic behaviors, «which are understood to be the work of the devil, dangerous, psychopathological, infantile, or politically reprehensible" (RUBIN 1987, 152), as well as the erotic stigma towards sexual practices that place lower in the «hierarchies of sexual value", such as those that involve «fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles» (RUBIN 1987, 156).

that trafficking indicators are «neither neutral nor unskewed» (*Ibid.*) and that their theorization and/or categorization has involved very little input from sex workers collectives. However, this is not surprising, given the long history of sex workers' exclusion from sex work research (BERG 2021), which has effectively led to the production of pathologizing, essentialized narratives about sex workers' lives (MAC, SMITH 2018).

As KJELLGREN (2022) argues, in fact, despite their use of sophisticated methods capable of uncovering interesting patterns, studies involving trafficking indicators oftentimes base their assumptions on questionable data and fallacious reasonings. Indeed, the interpretation of data is always inevitably shaped by the conceptual framework of the analyst (KITCHIN 2014) and, in this instance, by a lack of knowledge about sex trafficking and sex work, leading to questionable interpretations (KJELLGREN 2022). This results in indicators that often lack empirical support, exhibit biases that disproportionately target or overlook certain groups, that tend to conflate "behaviors that constitute trafficking" and "marketing devices" utilized by independent sex workers (DE VRIES, COCKBAIN 2024; KJELLGREN 2022) and, overall, display a scarce understanding of the multitude of working conditions under which sex workers are and can be employed.

By focusing solely on identifying patterns within decontextualized online data and by attributing inherent meaning to them, scholars perpetuate the belief that technological solutions can address fundamentally social problems (KJELLGREN 2022), and these techno-solutionist approaches progressively blur the boundaries between criminalized and non-criminalized behavior, even in the absence of concrete evidence of illegality (MENDEL, SHARAPOV 2024). In doing so, they push for enhanced state surveillance and policing of all sex workers, which disproportionally affect migrants (MAI 2018), through the collection of big data from advertisement websites. The technological solutions to be implemented are also left to the design of corporate entities, rather than government actors, reflecting a classic neoliberal approach to managing socioeconomic challenges: despite neoliberal capitalism being a strong contributing factor to the inequalities that can lead to trafficking, it is also presented as a potential solution to it (MUSTO, THAKOR, GERASIMOV 2020). In the U.S. and the UK, for example, several law enforcement agencies have begun employing software tools such as Traffic Jam to analyze publicly accessible online content, including advertisements related to sex work to identify potential instances of human trafficking (L'HOIRY, MORETTI, ANTONOPOULOS 2021). MARINUS ANALYTICS (n.d.), the developers of Traffic Jam, claim that:

> «[the] digital landscape is a critical battleground in the fight against human trafficking. Every day, thousands of online ads for sexual services conceal victims of trafficking. Our innovative solutions enable professionals and related companies to identify criminal networks and take action swiftly. We provide the tools and insights needed to combat human trafficking in the sex industry, allowing you to focus on taking decisive action. [...] In the digital era, trafficking has been significantly influenced by modern enablers, including global marketing sites (including social media), digital banking, apps aiding, and vulnerabilities in our nation's visa system. These tools provide traffickers with broad access to tools to facilitate criminal enterprises from exploiting the vulnerable. This anonymity allows traffickers to operate more easily, drawing less attention while maximizing their profits. The digital environment has thus become a crucial battleground in the fight against human trafficking, requiring heightened safety defenses, innovative solutions, and vigilant monitoring».

They describe their product as a collection of tools designed to expedite investigations and rescue vulnerable individuals by efficiently transforming large volumes of data into actionable insights through the use of facial recognition and data scraping capabilities, an approach that completely ignores the right to privacy of sex workers.

Suggestions that technology can effectively combat human trafficking should thus be approached with caution, just like all essentializing approaches that attribute such a complex

social phenomenon to individual deviance and/or organized crime and that fail to address the underlying social factors that contribute to creating the vulnerabilities fostering the conditions for trafficking to take place (MILIVOJEVIC, MOORE, SEGRAVE 2020). Surveillance measures, even when disguised as a reliable method to "free the slaves", can and do have negative consequences for sex workers, regardless of the working conditions they are subjected to (ESWA 2022). And it's important to remember that sex workers often serve as a testing ground for new forms of state power and surveillance, before its extension to other populations (SNOW 2022).

6. *Online ads and anti-trafficking organizations' outreach activities*

Given the waning role played by the street markets and the increased relevance, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, of the indoor ICT-mediated ones, anti-trafficking organizations had to, at least partially, change their modes of operation to be able to get in contact with those workers who can't be met on the streets. Many organizations have only recently started conducting their first attempts at using advertisement platforms to communicate the services they offer to sex workers and, thus, are still in the process of establishing an outreach protocol. Nonetheless, there are some shared practices, as well as some differences, among the different organizations, which will be here illustrated.

Usually, practitioners monitor the different platforms used by sex workers to advertise their services, and try to identify the ads published since the previous monitoring session. They then proceed with outreach attempts towards workers of foreign origin, which can take the form of a phone call or a text message:

> «We tried to map the phenomenon and the online platforms. Then, to establish a first contact, we sent out messages via WhatsApp to the numbers that have it in which we introduced ourselves. We also chose to introduce ourselves as practitioners who work in an organizations that supports sex workers, saying that we provide support to obtain documents, as well as to access health and social services, and in the active search for work» (Practitioner from Medtraining, Foggia).

> «The first thing we do is map all the sites. So, every week, for a certain number of hours, we look at the platforms and we try to understand which ones are the new ads, which ones are the old ones, and then we call. Usually, we call all the new ones first and then, in turn, we spend some time calling back the women we have already contacted, depending on the answers we had received» (Practitioner from Fondazione Somaschi, Milan).

It's important here to note that the number of ads posted on a daily basis can vary considerably depending on the territory. For this reason, outreach strategies can differ between the different organizations. Many organizations, in fact, can afford to reach out to all workers located in the area, and do so systematically:

> «Keeping in mind that we have only recently approached the phenomenon, we send messages to all people without distinction, and we also made the choice not to introduce ourselves in the message as an anti-trafficking organization, in order to be able to reach out to the widest possible basin of users» (Practitioner from Medtraining, Foggia).

> «As a general rule, we pay close attention to all ads. [...] Without a doubt, all ads deserve our attention, because the ad doesn't tell you much. Quite the contrary» (Practitioner from MIT, Bologna).

> «We focused our [outreach] activities on foreign women between the ages of 18 and 45. Once we had defined this age group, we contacted all of them without any further distinctions. [...] We felt that

we ran the risk of overlooking someone, so we made sure to reach out to everyone» (Practitioner from Dedalus, Naples).

On the other hand, in some territories, and especially in big cities such as Milan and Rome, the sheer number of online ads that gets published each day requires practitioners to narrow down the scope of their outreach activities to those workers they believe might be more vulnerable to third-party pressure and to exploitation. In doing so, anti-trafficking organizations have been developing their own indicators of potential vulnerability which, however, pursue a very different objective than the securitarian, punitive and surveillance-based approach to the trafficking phenomenon adopted by law enforcement agencies. These indicators usually include the advertisement of very long working hours and of the possibility to purchase unprotected services:

«The Contact Units analyze the ads and identify which ads should be given priority for the mediator to contact, to understand in detail if behind that ad there is person in a situation of strong vulnerability, and then try to propose some things and find a connection» (Expert from NVA, Venice).

«In Lombardy I can assure you that there are hundreds of new ads each day. So, what do we do? We look at the ads. For example, when it says "available 24/7", we put that in our heads. Because if you really work 24/7, it is probable that you are more exploited [than other workers]. When it says that they are available to do it even without a condom, that too sets off an alarm bell» (Practitioner from Fondazione Somaschi, Milan).

The workers' responses to the organizations' outreach attempts tend to be very mixed. The majority of calls do not receive an answer. Other times, the person answering the phone (either the worker or some third party picking up phone calls on her behalf) rejects the contact immediately:

«Keep in mind that doing [outreach] activities [towards those who work in the indoor markets] is highly frustrating compared to the streets. Most of the calls are not answered by anyone. If they answer, they hang up, because sometimes who answers is the exploiter, so as soon as they hear a female voice they hang up. Or, even if it is the woman who answers she says "no, I can't, I'm not interested" and then hangs up. Which is highly frustrating. But, no matter what, we continue. After the phone call, regardless of how it went, we send a message [...] in which we explain who we are and what we offer» (Practitioner from Fondazione Somaschi, Milan).

When the organizations manage to establish contact with the workers, and they express interest in the services offered, however, practitioners usually meet them in a public location to establish a relationship and to avoid potential risks. In subsequent meetings, they then usually try to visit them at their place of residence:

«We sometimes manage to turn the phone call into something else. We accompany them [to the hospital] for medical checks. We can also do house visits, so we suggest the women to visit them either at their home, or in places near their home, like a bar. If we don't know the area where the apartment is, if it's a contact we've never had, we rarely say "we'll come to your house". For reasons of risk, obviously. We are social workers, not policemen. But with women we have already met... So, usually the bar is the first step, then we move, if we can, to their homes. It's not an approach that always succeeds, though» (Practitioner from Fondazione Somaschi, Milan).

Finally, I would like to share some considerations that differentiate this kind of outreach activities from those carried out for the outdoor markets. First of all, outreach campaigns relying on the use of online advertisements require substantial resources, which poses challenges for organizations with

limited staffing and financial capabilities like anti-trafficking organizations. This results in telephone-based outreach being carried out on a time basis that is not sufficient to contact all the workers posting ads online, with practitioners needing to make difficult choices in regard to which workers should be contacted and which not (at least at that moment). The unintended consequence has been that men have been almost systematically excluded from outreach activities. And, additionally, this kind of work poses additional challenges for practitioners, who are faced with a high number of often explicit pictures, which can be more taxing than that carried out with Street Units. In the words of one of the practitioners interviewed:

«One of the most tiring things about this job is that to do this research you have to go to these websites, and right there, in the bottom right, there is a picture of a big dick. In the foreground, there are these photo. [...] For practitioner there is no way not to see them, to skip them. They find themselves having a sort of emotional disgust, or emotional stress. Those who are out in a car and find a naked trans* woman in the street, or an undressed girl, are able to manage it better because they are in a team. This work, on the other hand, is done alone, and therefore there is an accumulation of stress, so much so that some colleagues ask to do it at the internal headquarters, where they are surrounded by other colleagues» (Practitioner from Magliana80, Rome).

7. *Conclusions*

The Covid-19 pandemic has had strong repercussions on the sex markets and has served as an accelerator for a number of processes that have been taking place in the Italian landscape over the last 20 years, including the shift of many sex workers towards the ICT-mediated markets. Yet, the role and impact of online advertisement on the sex markets and on the work of anti-trafficking organizations has still not been extensively investigated. This research, thus, attempts to bridge this gap.

In doing so, this paper has presented an overview of the online advertisement landscape, and of how the affordances of the different platforms shape sex workers' advertisement strategies to attract different clienteles. Additionally, despite their claims of neutrality, advertisement platforms play a crucial role in dictating the working conditions of sex workers, especially after their de-platformization following the entry into force of the SESTA/FOSTA laws in the US. The risk of being targeted by law enforcement under the Merlin Law in Italy, moreover, has produced an advertising environment in which few platforms, usually registered outside of the country, control the majority of the ICT-mediated markets, resulting in the loss of negotiating power for sex workers, who have no alternatives than to surrender their most sensitive personal information and to pay "outrageous" fees to these platforms to overcome the structural disadvantages posed by their proprietary algorithms, all while being subjected to different forms of data theft.

Today, those who use advertisement websites are mostly cis and transgender Italian and South American women, followed by Chinese sex working businesses, a relatively recent phenomenon within the Italian landscape. On the other hand, African women, and Nigerians in particular, seem to prefer advertising their services on social media, probably both because of a digital divide that leaves them at a disadvantage compared to other sex workers when trying to navigate the interfaces of advertisement platforms, and because of the requirement enforced by most platforms to submit a copy of their ID documents, which can discourage migrants from using them. At the same time, male sex workers using advertising platforms seem to be mostly Italian and South Americans providing services mostly to men, working along a small number of men from Central America and the African continent, with this latter group being more likely to offer services to women.

Advertisement platforms have also come under scrutiny in relation to the supposed existence of a «trafficking-technology nexus» (MUSTO, BOYD 2014), despite the fact that our current understanding of the role of online technologies in this regard is at best partial and fragmented (MILIVOJEVIC, SEGRAVE 2017). Yet, in spite of its supposed role in facilitating it, technology is also presented as a key tool that can help us eradicate human trafficking, based on the assumption that criminal networks leave digital trails within sex work advertising that can be leveraged as open-source intelligence. Still, «any attempt to end human trafficking with technology is perhaps more akin to tilting at windmills than a serious attempt to understand the issue and contribute to improved responses to exploitation» (KJELLGREN 2022, 161) and represents a clear case of techno-solutionism (ESWA 2022). Numerous scholars have, in fact, attempted to single out potential indicators of trafficking within sex work advertisement that could aid law enforcement in identifying human traffickers. These approaches, however, require the scraping of high volumes of data which, through the blurring of boundaries between criminalized and non-criminalized behavior, push for enhanced state surveillance and policing of all sex workers on the basis of simplistic (and incorrect) assumptions about sex work and sex workers' lives.

Finally, the paper has shown how Italian anti-trafficking organizations have shifted their attention to online classified ads to carry out their outreach activities. Street Outreach Units, in fact, are now encountering fewer workers during their outreach activities given the waning role played by the street markets, which has required anti-trafficking organizations to reimagine their outreach activities to try to get in contact with all those workers that can't be found in the streets anymore. Thus, practitioners started reaching out to sex workers who advertise their services online via phone and text messages. Outreach campaigns relying on the monitoring of online advertisements, however, require a substantial amount of resources, with many anti-trafficking organizations finding themselves in the position of having to make tough decisions on how and where to allocate their time and trying identify those workers they believe might be more vulnerable to third-party pressure through the development of their own set of indicators which, however, resulted in the almost systematic exclusion of men from outreach activities.

Overall, it's undeniable that sex work is becoming increasingly reliant on digital platforms for the negotiation phase of the sale of sexual services which are then consumed in person. And although advertisement platforms offer several advantages, including reduced entry barriers into the sex markets, increased agency, safety, and financial stability, sex workers also face the negative consequences of anti-trafficking policies designed and implemented without their input that end up overlooking the health, well-being and right to privacy and to protection of their data. At the same time, anti-trafficking organizations, which provide proximity support especially to migrant workers, are finding themselves to be ill-equipped to adapt to the mutated sex working landscape. The inflexibility of the anti-trafficking system, in which the funding tenders have largely remained the same over the years, has in fact constrained the organizations into rigid categories within which their work and activities need to be boxed, despite practitioners' understanding of the new challenges of this changed reality. It is thus necessary to involve sex workers' rights organizations in policy and lawmaking processes, and recognize and respect sex workers' knowledge and inputs on the potentially harmful consequences of anti-trafficking legislations on the sex working community at large. At the same time, it's important to address structural issues like human trafficking through the adoption of long-term strategies and holistic approaches, including through the adequate funding of an anti-trafficking system that ought to move past its programmatic instability in which the disbursement of funds is often delayed, insufficient and unreliable, leading to anti-trafficking organizations struggling to fully leverage their potential and expertise, especially at a time in which the sex markets have changed so drastically compared to the early 2000s.

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