Digital Rights of Uruguayan Sex Workers

Where are

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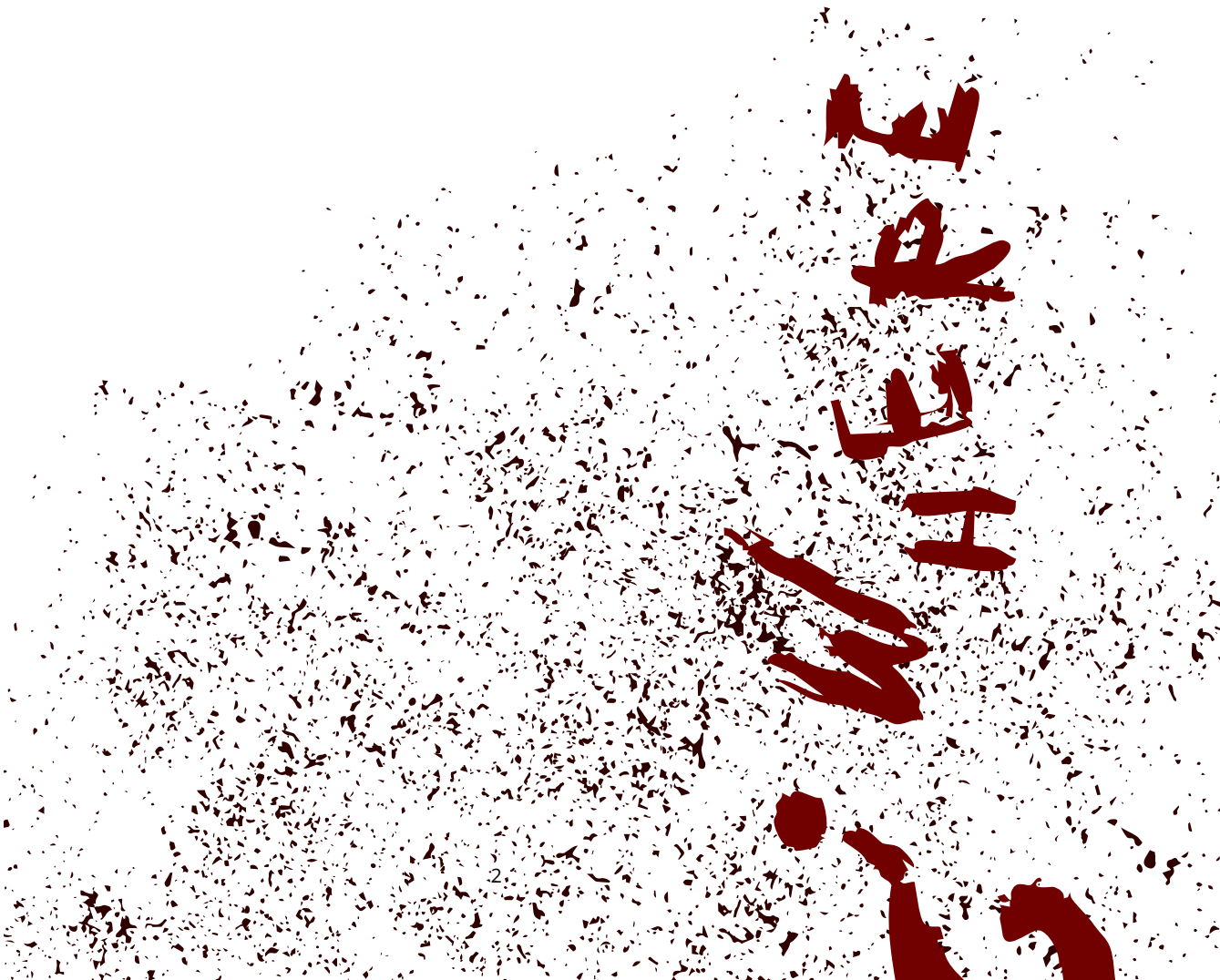
Digital rights of Uruguyan sex workers



Digital rights of Uruguyan sex workers

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FIRN is a network of researchers, activists and practitioners from Global South countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. FIRN focuses on the making of a feminist internet, seeing this as critical to bringing about transformation in gendered structures of power that exist online and offline and to capture fully the fluidity of these spaces and our experiences with them. Members of the network undertake data-driven research that provides substantial evidence to drive change in policy and law, and in the discourse around internet rights.

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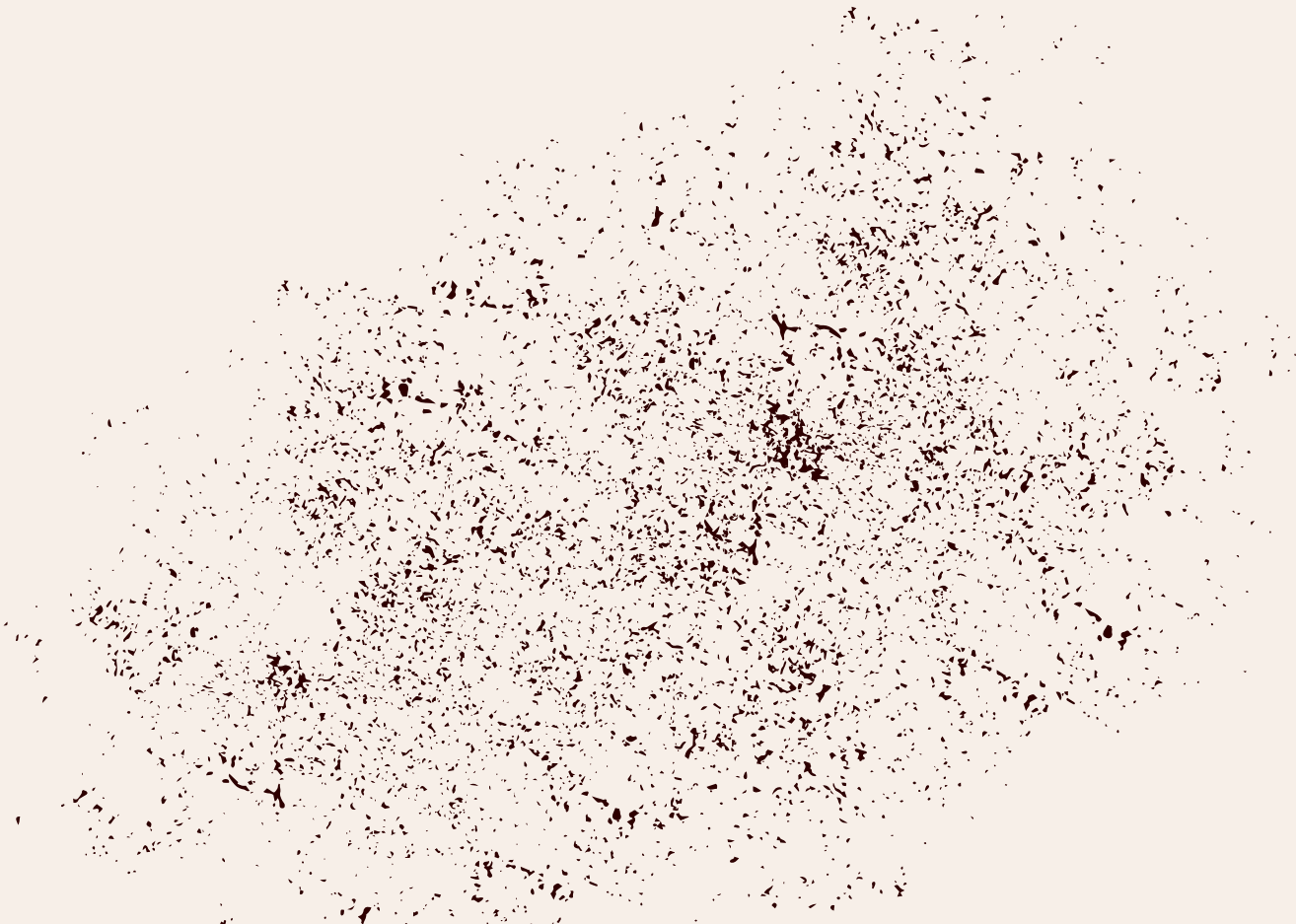
Introduction



Despite some omissions and problematic aspects, Uruguay has laws that could ensure a safe, violence-free experience for sex workers using technology. To begin with, Uruguay regulated prostitution as work in 2002, making it the only country in Latin America to have done so. Additionally, Uruguay has a personal data protection law, passed in 2008, that promotes a human rights perspective. The country also has a 2017 law on gender-based violence against women that includes a specific article on non-consensual dissemination of intimate images.

However, the government's lack of resources for implementation and enforcement, as well as sex workers' absence from decision-making spaces in state, private and civil society spheres, leave those who engage in sex work in a vulnerable situation. Among other things, they lack minimum security and privacy protections when using technology daily. This research, led by sex workers in collaboration with feminist academics, identified the challenges and opportunities they face, as well as the safety and self-care strategies they develop individually and collectively.

Having sex workers lead every stage of the research project ensured that their perspective on their problems and needs was upheld and that an atmosphere of equality and trust was established. At the same time, we tried to keep an epistemological distance to maintain a critical view of the issues and problematise the participants' assumptions. This also helped us avoid romanticising subaltern knowledge and experiences, as Donna Haraway cautions.[1] There was also a learning curve in training the interviewers (most of whom were sex workers themselves), recruiting the interviewees, conducting fieldwork and coordinating the project.

Rather than being neutral, our team takes sides and aims to influence the country's regulatory framework and national and departmental public policies from the perspective of sex workers' rights, respecting their decisions as adults. We finish our report with concrete suggestions for interventions at the state, private and civil society levels to improve their working and living conditions.

1. Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* Routledge.

Sex work in Uruguay

Passed in 2002, the Sex Work Law (No. 17,515)[2] brought advances such as recognising the provision of sexual services as legitimate work and ensuring certain labour rights, including health care and social security. Yet it maintained a social control and hygienist perspective, where society's health is deemed more important than the human rights of sex workers. Echoing practices from the late 19th century,[3] the law still requires sex workers to register with police and health authorities to be recognised.[4] Not all choose to do so, however, since registration entails time-consuming medical check-ups and offers few tangible benefits. More importantly, the law fails to adequately protect sex workers from violence, stigmatisation and discrimination. Many continue to report psychological, physical, sexual and economic violence in their work, as well as institutional abuse from police, judicial, health and, if they have children in their care, educational authorities.[5]

Sex workers are organising to amend the law, including by guaranteeing protection of their personal privacy. The registry is managed by the Ministries of the Interior and of Public Health and requires monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly health check-ups. According to testimonies gathered by the sex workers' advocacy organisation Visión Nocturna, their personal information is handled carelessly and irresponsibly. When sex workers go to the police for any matter unrelated to their profession, the officer who assists them immediately knows if they are on the database. To address this and other issues related to the current legislation, Visión Nocturna and the union O.Tra.S. (Organización de Trabajadoras Sexuales), in collaboration with lawyers and other civil society organisations, have drafted a proposal to reform the law from a human rights perspective. The proposed amendment aims to combat the stigmatisation and social exclusion that sex workers face. It recommends placing sex work under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labour and classifying registry information as "sensitive data" in accordance with the Personal Data Protection Law (No. 18,331), which under Article 18 stipulates that such data "shall only be collected and processed when there are reasons of general interest authorised by law."[6] This approach highlights the autonomy and self-determination of sex workers despite the violence, stigmatisation and discrimination they often experience at the hands of the state itself.

2. Ley sobre el trabajo sexual. (2002). https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/17515-2002
3. Trochón, Y. (2003). *Las mercenarias del amor: Prostitución y modernidad en el Uruguay (1880-1932)*. Ediciones Santillana.
4. According to 2019 data, there are 12,363 people registered in the Ministry of the Interior's national sex work registry. Guidobono, N., & Greco, H. (2020). *Diagnóstico sobre trabajo sexual en Montevideo: Lo visible y lo oculto.* Intendencia de Montevideo.
5. Ibid.
6. Ley de protección de datos personales. (2008). https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/18331-2008

Access and privacy in laws and public policies

Sex workers use technology under a favourable context, at least on paper. Uruguay boasts Latin America's highest levels of connectivity and access to telecommunications, for both broadband and mobile internet.[7] Furthermore, Uruguay belongs to the Digital Nations (D9) group of digital government leaders, alongside South Korea, Estonia, Israel, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Canada. According to the most recent Survey of Uses of Information and Communication Technologies (EUTIC), conducted by the Agency for Electronic Government and Information Society (AGESIC), 91% of households have some kind of internet connection.[8] However, the survey emphasises that access to the internet does not necessarily mean advanced use, a relevant consideration in the case of sex workers. According to the data, digital skills and the ability to navigate complex websites and tools decrease with age and lower education levels. The survey also identifies a significant trend: individuals who connect to the internet exclusively through their mobile phones have fewer digital skills than those who use a tablet or computer.[9]

Uruguay's favourable indicators for broadband and mobile internet access are the result of public policies firmly promoted over the past 20 years. One notable policy in this sense is the Ceibal Plan, which provides public school students with free tablets and computers. The initiative also includes a broadband connectivity component. According to its website, the programme currently provides 100% broadband coverage to public schools across the country.[10] Several of our interviewees reported using their children's "Ceibalitas", the tablets and computers provided by the Ceibal Plan, to connect to the internet at home.

In terms of privacy, in 2008 Uruguay enacted Law No. 18,331, as noted above, recognising the protection of personal information as a human right. The law established an oversight body to ensure that companies, individuals and the state respect the rights of individuals over their data. However, the law presents several challenges. Civil society organisations, such as Datysoc, have underscored the difficulty of implementing these protections.[11] The most problematic aspect is an article that stipulates exceptions for the processing of personal data by the armed forces, police or intelligence agencies for national defence or public security purposes.[12] Datysoc has also pointed out that the Ministry of the Interior

7. Levy, G. (2022). *¿Hay concentración en Internet en América Latina? El caso Uruguay.* OBSERVACOM. https://www.observacom.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Concentracion-en-Internet-en-America-Latina.-El-caso-Uruguay.pdf; GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index 2024. https://www.mobileconnectivityindex.com/. Accessed 17 May 2025.
8. AGESIC. (2022). *Encuesta de Uso de Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación 2022.* https://www.gub.uy/agencia-gobierno-electronico-sociedad-informacion-conocimiento/datos-y-estadisticas/estadisticas/encuesta-uso-tecnologias-informacion-comunicacion-2022
9. Ibid.
10. https://ceibal.edu.uy/institucional/memoria-2020-2024/dispositivos-y-conectividad/
11. Tuduri, A., & Jackson, M. (2022, 14 March). Luces y sombras de la gobernanza de datos en Uruguay. *Datysoc.* https://datysoc.org/2022/03/14/luces-y-sombras-de-la-gobernanza-de-datos-en-uruguay/
12. See Article 3. Ley de protección de datos personales. Op. cit.

is afforded too much discretion in this regard and is not subject to any type of control. The law needs to be amended to include protections in this sense.[13]

Last but not least, the Law on Gender-Based Violence against Women (No. 19,580), adopted in 2017,[14] contains specific provisions regarding the right to privacy in connection with intimate images. Article 92 criminalises the unauthorised dissemination of this type of images, targeting both those who circulate them and internet sites that fail to remove them after being notified. However, this law does not address the specific situation of sex workers, whose images, even if they initially consented to the publishing of intimate content, are often recirculated and marketed without their authorisation.

Different views of sex work

In Uruguayan academia, prevailing abolitionist perspectives reject the recognition of sex work as legitimate labour and often deny the autonomy and rights of those who engage in it. The trend is exemplified by Pablo Guerra's 2016 study *Prostitution in Uruguay: Between work and sexual exploitation*. There, he considers prostitution to be "an institution inherited from human trafficking and slavery, which comes to us steeped in patriarchalism and mercantilism," and it has no place in the utopian future he envisions.[15] While dominant views tend to favour this approach, there are differences within the academic community, with some scholars adopting more nuanced or rights-based approaches.

In contrast, sex workers have developed their own theories, offering an alternative to traditional studies on their profession. In her book *El ser detrás de una vagina productiva*, Karina Núñez writes, "I invite you to put down the study materials that define prostitution and talk to a sex worker. Each of us has our own experiential theory and none of them can be found in the texts you consult."[16] The book recreates conversations with sex workers through the artistic interventions of illustrator Paola Gago and uses a colloquial tone to explain the language used by sex workers.

Núñez introduces the concept of "reductionism" as an alternative to the prevailing historical approaches to sex work, namely prohibitionism, which criminalises those who practise it, abolitionism, which criminalises those who use it, and regulationism, which regulates the activity as a job recognised by the state. Unlike positions that celebrate the commercialisation of sexual services as a form of women's empowerment, Núñez acknowledges the need to implement mechanisms that enable sex workers to leave the profession. This is especially

13. Díaz Charquero, P., & Gemetto, J. (2023). *Ciberpatrullaje: Los límites borrosos de la vigilancia policial en Uruguay*. Datysoc. https://datysoc.org/informe-ciberpatrullaje/
14. Ley de violencia hacia las mujeres basada en género. (2017). https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/19580-2017
15. Guerra, P. A. (2016). *La prostitución en Uruguay: Entre el trabajo y la explotación sexual.* Universidad de la República (Uruguay).
16. Núñez, K. (2021). *El ser detrás de una vagina productiva.* Self-published.

important to "reduce the possibility of it becoming a process of spiralling naturalisation for its successors."[17] In an interview, Núñez expands on this concept: "Reductionism generates a period of time that allows one to see and project oneself outside of sex work. It also helps break the generational cycle that perpetuates prostitution as a way out of poverty."[18]

Building on these insights, our research draws on the framework of situated epistemology,[19] which enables us to challenge the notion of a universal, masculine subject of knowledge and expose the unequal power dynamics that permeate our environments. Our realities are partial and contingent; these differences strengthen us. We relied on what we consider privileged knowledge, namely the concrete experiences and needs of sex workers. Although expertise from some academic fields is necessary to gather information in a consistent and rigorous manner, it is insufficient for generating reliable data on a historically discriminated-against and excluded group. Yet this methodological commitment exists alongside an ambivalent relationship with local academia, whose work has often been used to justify abolitionist policies. Many times the relationship between researchers and subjects has generated an unequal power dynamic in which sex workers offered their time and shared their experiences with academics who, in turn, advanced their professional careers by producing research that accentuates stigmatisation, discrimination and exclusion.

In light of these methodological challenges, it is important to situate our work within the limited literature on sex work and the internet in Uruguay. Guerra's 2016 study, for example, did not initially consider the internet as a work tool, despite the country's high connectivity at the time. After reviewing his data, he introduced the category of "call girl" (in English in the original), which he linked to the contacting of clients by phone or online and associated with higher education, greater physical attractiveness and higher income. In reality, however, sex workers across educational levels and income brackets rely on technology – especially mobile phones – in both their personal and professional lives. This widespread use highlights the research gap that the present study seeks to address.

In the field of communication, one of the few studies that examines the stigma attached to sex work is a 2017 investigation by Ramiro Duarte on the media's portrayal of a Uruguayan pornography production company.[20] There, Duarte highlights relevant aspects of the stigma perpetuated by the media when referring to the subject. Although he does not specifically discuss the internet, he points out the gap in Uruguayan regulations in terms of the production

17. Ibid.
18. Morales, A. (2023, 4 September). Ni blanco ni negro: Reduccionismo. *Sala de Redacción*. https://sdr.fic.edu.uy/ni-blanco-ni-negro-reduccionismo/
19. Haraway, D. (1991). Op. cit.
20. Duarte, R. (2017). *Medios de comunicación y pornografías en el Uruguay actual.* FLACSO.

of adult content. In response, the sex workers' organisation Visión Nocturna has successfully collaborated with the Uruguayan Press Union to ensure that local media coverage of sex work does not contribute to its stigmatisation and discrimination.

The study Diagnóstico sobre trabajo sexual en Montevideo[21] includes a survey of websites offering sexual services that feature photographs and contact information. The survey also provides data regarding gender identity. Out of a total of 146 people surveyed, 77% are cis women, 12% are trans women and 11% are men. The study notes that the images used to promote the different profiles are usually selected by the websites' moderators or by the owners of the premises where the services are provided. Intermediaries also alter the sex workers' ages and emphasise racist stereotypes, such as exoticism.[22] Taken together, these dynamics reveal how intermediaries and institutions still control key aspects of sex workers' representation, often at the expense of their autonomy and safety.

Methodology and sample

In addition to analysing existing legislation and literature, we conducted 42 in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured questionnaire, administered an online survey answered by 55 respondents and interviewed seven experts. The sex workers who participated in the interviews were remunerated for their time and knowledge. While necessary, this compensation highlighted the transactional nature of their participation, as they sometimes only shared their stories because they were paid. This situation created other issues. For instance, it was difficult to obtain responses to the online survey because no incentives were offered. Toward the end, we added a raffle as an economic incentive, but the response rate remained low (half of what we had anticipated).

For the in-depth interviews, we prioritised a diverse sample that reflected a variety of experiences. Due to the global and regional persecution of transgender individuals, we sought to include a high representation of dissident gender identities. We also aimed to capture as much geographic diversity as possible. Uruguay is a centralised country and the dominant perspective is that of its capital, Montevideo. Focusing on the rest of the country posed particular challenges, as reduced access to technology and generational and class issues often mean that internet usage for sex work is limited to WhatsApp. To take into account the perspectives of people who use platforms and pages to work, we changed our strategy and incorporated more people from Montevideo, including both interviewees and interviewers. The information obtained from the online

21. Guidobono, N., & Greco, H. (2020). Op. cit.
22. Ibid.

survey aligned with the qualitative data from the in-depth interviews, helping us gain a more complete picture of the online sex work landscape in Uruguay. That said, the data analysis presented below relies mainly on the interviews.
Of the 42 interviews conducted with sex workers or former sex workers, 20 were with cisgender women, 18 with transgender women, three with cisgender men and one with a non-binary person. In terms of ages, 12 interviewees were between 20 and 29 years old, 15 between 30 and 39, 11 between 40 and 49, three between 50 and 59 and one was in the 60 to 69 age group. Twenty-one interviewees identified as white, 10 as Black, six as mixed race, one as Indigenous and four as other. Fourteen lived in Montevideo, 10 in the metropolitan area and 18 in the rest of the country. Twelve participants had completed primary education, 19 started but did not complete secondary education, seven completed secondary education and four were pursuing tertiary or university studies.

Throughout the research, we identified two types of internet use for sex work. The first group uses WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. The second group relies mostly on posting on classified ad pages to find work. This group tends to be younger and with a higher level of education, literacy and technological skills. The websites mentioned by the interviewees and survey respondents included Pasión, Skokka, Púmbate, Yirantas, SelfieEscort, Locanto, Gula, Gemidos and Sexlist. The model is similar across the sites: photos and descriptions lead to profiles of sex workers offering services. The profiles feature their phone number or a WhatsApp link. Of these sites, only Locanto requires that users create an account to communicate with sex workers. Pasión, a local website, is one of the most popular ones, used by most of the sex workers interviewed. It costs USD 100 per month for providers, with cheaper weekly options available. Several of these companies are registered in Europe, including Skokka (Spain), Yirantas (Bulgaria), Gemidos (Czech Republic) and Locanto (Germany). Most do not provide an address or jurisdiction details. Skokka is the only international website that recognises Uruguayan jurisdiction in the event of a dispute. The fact that Pasión – the only one locally owned and operated – is the most popular provides a unique opportunity for advocacy.

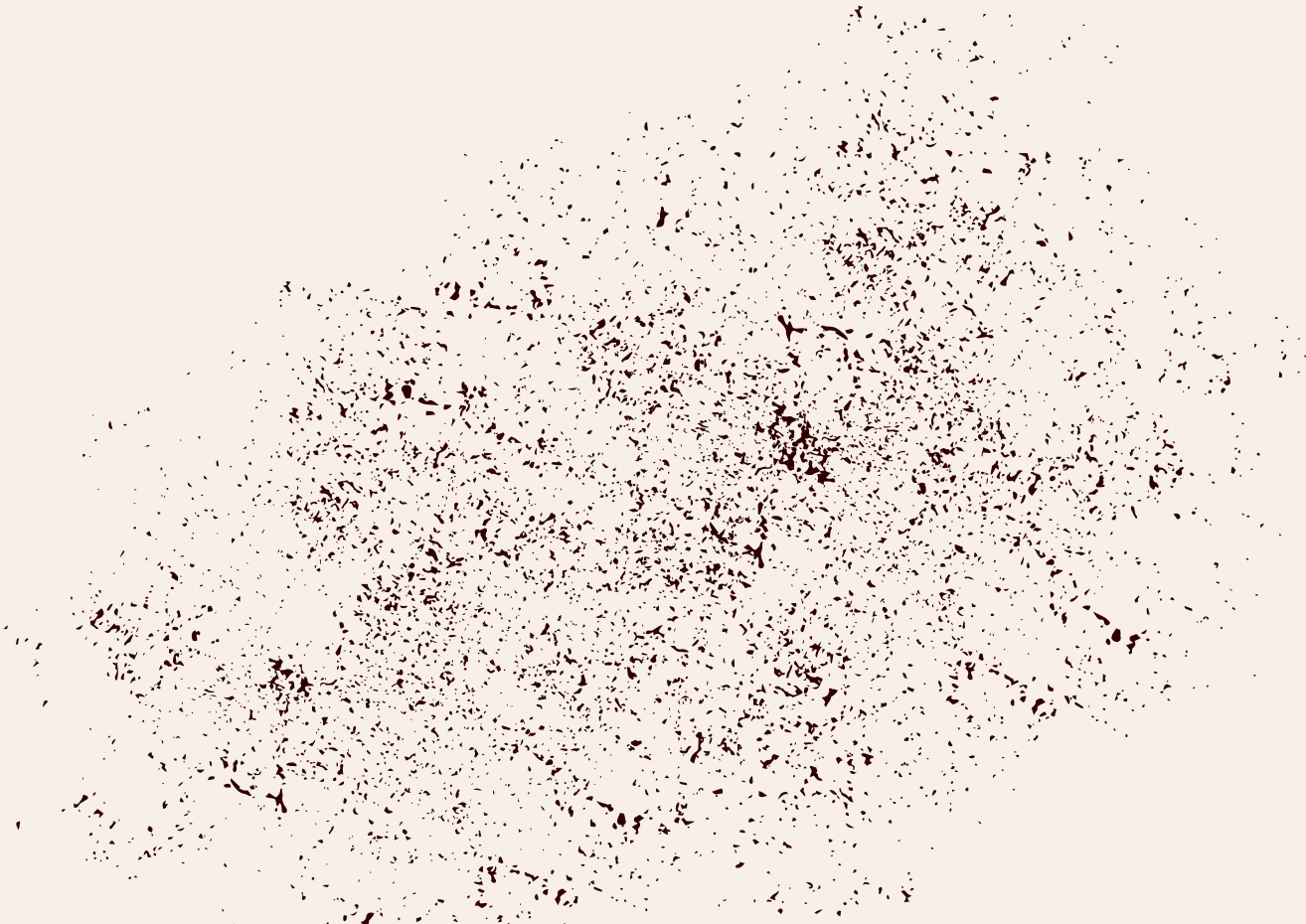
Jazmín (not her real name) is an example of the first group of sex workers. She is a 45-year-old Black transgender woman living in a city near Montevideo. She has received training as a hospital service assistant, which is the job she would like to have if she were not doing sex work. She also belongs to a transgender rights activist group. She has performed traditional dances since her teenage years and believes that her presence in those spaces, which are mostly conservative and hostile towards trans people, has paved the way for other women like her. She has been engaged in sex work since she was 13. For a long time, she worked on the streets, but now she arranges meetings via mobile phone and rents a space, which makes her feel safer. She uses WhatsApp and Facebook mostly and

has experienced digital violence, with people posting screenshots of her private conversations and intimate photos on their Facebook walls. These photos have reached people she knows. Over time, she has learned to take better care of herself and now only sends photos to people with whom she has established a relationship, even if it is only virtual. She distrusts law enforcement because decades ago she and her friends were victims of police violence while working on the streets. She witnessed officers and even doctors mocking rape victims.

Candelaria (not her real name) represents the second group we identified. She is 28 and a university student. In addition to her mobile phone, she uses the internet on a computer. She has a child and has engaged in sex work since she was 18. She publishes ads on classified pages and always saves her chats with clients in case she needs them to persuade clients to pay her. A few years ago, someone who knew her created a fake Facebook profile and sent her parents several intimate photos that she had posted on a classified ad page. She is familiar with technical aspects, such as IP addresses, that can be useful for identifying potential abusers. Her firm attitude helps her be respected. If she needs to use physical violence for self-defence, she does not shy away from it. Unlike Jazmín, she encourages other sex workers to file complaints with the police. She believes society drives people into sex work, particularly single mothers. She is currently trying to work less to concentrate on her university studies and because she believes “the stigma that surrounds sex workers will always exist.”

These testimonies evidence the diverse ways in which sex work is experienced, influenced by personal, structural and technological contexts. They also reveal that many sex workers develop self-care, empowerment and resistance strategies to deal with the stigmatisation and violence they face. The following section identifies common issues that emerge across this diversity of contexts and trajectories.

Data analysis



Sex workers identify advantages of using technology for work, including greater independence and enhanced physical safety. However, technology also perpetuates and exacerbates the violence and stigmatisation they face. In the absence of effective state protections – and working within platforms primarily driven by profit – sex workers remain exposed to multiple forms of vulnerability. Yet they continue to demonstrate resilience, developing strategies to secure their autonomy and foster solidarity networks.

Technology as an opportunity

Most sex workers use mobile phones and the internet for work and participants identified several positive aspects of operating in a digital environment. The main advantages reported by our interviewees include the safety afforded by avoiding street-based work, along with protection from harsh weather and exposure to violence (P4, P5, P6, P11, P13, P16, P20, P24, P27, P32, P37, P40).[23]

Several participants mentioned direct interaction with clients, without intermediaries such as brothels or pimps, as an advantage of using internet for work (P2, P3, P13, P25, P27, P31, P32, P40). In brothels, for instance, sex workers are required to sell and consume a certain amount of alcohol and must be constantly seducing clients (P2). Access to technology allows them to free themselves from such intermediaries and gatekeepers. As one interviewee put it, “It is my direct interaction with the client, my money, my business” (P22).

Among other benefits, sex workers reported that internet communication provides a safer space for negotiating service terms, including price and protection aspects – what sex workers are willing to do and what they are not, condom use, payments up front, etc. (P20). As one sex worker said, “I make the rules” (P8). Similarly, technology allows them to choose the potential clients they are willing to meet and those they wish to avoid. Rejecting a client on the street often exposes sex workers to physical and verbal violence. To screen clients, they research information on social media (P20, P26, P27, P29) and Google phone numbers to see if they are associated with any suspicious publications (P29). In this sense, one interviewee noted:

> On the internet, you have access to profiles beforehand. That’s different on the street, because when you meet someone, you’re already there. Sometimes, if you get into a car, you don’t know if the person is armed. This happened to me, when I met an armed person who forced me to have sex with them (P20).

23. Participants in the study are identified with a letter “P” followed by their respective number. Demographic information for each participant is provided in an annex at the end.

A trans participant said that she checks status updates:

> There are people who post transphobic statuses and then go out with trans people. You think, “I won’t go out with this person.” You never know if they want to meet you for a consensual encounter or if they’re actually planning to be violent (P8).

Several participants mentioned using messages or calls to identify potentially violent people (P9, P20, P32, P37, P38, P39). For some, just hearing a person’s voice over the phone or in an audio message triggers their intuition about situations that could be problematic (P2, P38, P39).

The internet and social media also increase the number of people sex workers can reach, both in their area and throughout the country or even abroad (P9, P20, P32, P36, P40). This enables a type of work with no physical contact that can also generate immediate income through payment by bank transfers. One male sex worker noted that, although it comes with a high exposure and he perceives it as a risky activity, he sells content because it allows him to generate more income and serves as a bridge to more clients (P40). Several maximise their efforts by selling albums of previously recorded photos and videos, which they can share repeatedly with a link, or providing only photos that are already on their pages, thus securing some control (P5, P13, P20, P37, P41). Another positive aspect reported has to do with the convenience of working from home and having flexible schedules (P1, P8, P10, P22, P33, P35, P40, P38), which also allows them to combine their work with their caregiving duties (P10).

Several interviewees mentioned the freedom the internet gives them to set their own rates. Some view this as an opportunity to attract higher-profile clients and earn more income. “You choose your audience based on what you charge. It’s not about discriminating, but [this way] you’re not going to get a street sweeper who comes in all sweaty. You’re going to get an executive, a professional or a businessman” (P34). Class dynamics become explicit when rejection of poor people and proximity to those with economic and symbolic capital are perceived as indicators of self-worth. This also translates into different promotional strategies. The same interviewee added that she works with photographers. “I don’t use photos taken by me [...] because that’s not the audience I’m targeting. There is a certain type of client that I have in mind” (P34).

Along the same lines, a participant explained, “If you want to attract certain types of clients, you have to sell a certain brand. Straight off, in the initial conversation, your voice must sell. You have to talk to clients the right way. If you want to attract important clients, you have to feel important and come off as important” (P42). This also leads her to reject certain types of people:

> If you want to attract a shitty public – pardon the expression – you won't care what photos and videos you upload. Anyone will come – any man with a low economic profile. We don't want that. We want high-end clients [...] who can afford our services [...] who pay without arguing [and] don't make a fuss about money and will come back (P42).

This type of sex-worker classism is evident in their targeting of a select clientele, relying on the projection of a strategically constructed image and brand.

Finally, the internet provides safety in physical encounters, which are often a cause for concern and anxiety. One participant, for example, reported that as a precaution he always sends the client's geographic location to a trusted person and shares photos if possible (P29). Some instead ask clients to share their location in real time to ensure that they are indeed on their way to meet them (P39, P42). It is common for clients to fail to show up after scheduling the service, wasting the sex worker's time and the money spent on transportation and, in the case of those with dependents, arranging for care (P2, P20, P27, P29, P37). At the same time, technology enables the creation of peer-to-peer care networks. There are WhatsApp groups where sex workers from the same classified page, or who work in the same apartment,[24] exchange information about clients – who is violent, who refuses to pay the asked price, who fails to show up after scheduling, which pages are safer, etc. (P34, P35, P41). These groups are also used by sex workers to report when their profile pictures are stolen (P35) and to share their real-time locations when they go out to work at someone's home (P36, P38). However, as these groups are private, transparency regarding membership is not guaranteed and access is not always easy.

CHALLENGES IN THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Image-based violence

One of the main problems sex workers identified in their use of the internet was the different forms of violence they face, especially when sharing images. Most participants said they had no control over photos they shared online (P7, P8, P18, P20, P23, P24, P26, P27, P29, P30, P32, P33, P34, P35, P36, P38, P39, P40, P42). Older participants said they preferred not to share any images (P4, P7, P18), while some younger participants said they upload suggestive, non-explicit content to have some control, knowing it will likely be circulated (P19). One interviewee who regularly works with a photographer shared that she always wonders what happens to her images after the transaction (P5). Another one added, "After you sell [the content], you don't know what the other person is going to do with it" (P32).

24. Many sex workers rent rooms in apartments owned by third parties. They are normally required to rent them for a minimum number of days/hours per month and they pay a percentage of their earnings to the managers/owners. These spaces can operate similarly to traditional brothels.

Almost all the interviewees have had images shared without their consent (P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P12, 18, P19, P20, P24, P26, P27, P29, P31, P32, P33, P34, P35, P39, P40, P42). Many see sex work as temporary and do not want to leave any evidence that they engaged in it. “This is just for now. I wouldn’t want to be rejected for a job in the future” because of it (P40).

Several sex workers specifically spoke of being afraid their images would make their way to their partners or families (especially their children) or potential employers (P7, P8, P10, P12, P21, P5, P23, P26, P28, P38, P40, P42) and many of them reported instances in which that actually happened (P3, P5, P12, P15, P21, P22, P23, P24, P32, P33, P34, P39, P42). In some cases, their intimate pictures were circulated among groups of people they knew. As a result, family members, partners or acquaintances found out about their work (P3, P5, P12, P21, P22, P23, P24, P32, P33, P34, P39). Others said that chats or images shared via direct message were made public on social networks (P6, P12). One interviewee shared the experience of having one of her videos go viral without her consent. “Everyone found out. It was a disaster. Everyone bullied me. They judged me, calling me a prostitute. But, at the same time, they also got me more clients” (P42). The ease with which clients or anyone looking for information about sex workers on websites can access their images is illustrated by a male sex worker who recounts how one of his photos was forwarded to his partner as a joke (P29). Another participant described how acquaintances or clients sent her screenshots of her classified ads, as a way of controlling and intimidating her (P38).

When this type of violence occurs, the consequences can have a profound impact on the affected sex workers. One interviewee reported that a colleague from her non-sex-work-related job shared her publications from classified ad sites with others at her workplace, disrupting and even ending many of her relationships. “I was in shock, because it was the first time that happened to me, I started to shake all over [...] There’s nothing wrong with sex work, but I know how people around me changed after they found out,” she said (P39). Finally, one participant shared that, as a result of a similar incident, she became estranged from her son, who still does not speak to her (P18).

The circulation of images without consent takes multiple forms. Many said strangers have used their images to create fake profiles on Tinder, Facebook and Instagram, as well as on classified ad sites (P34, P35, P36, P37, P38, P40). One participant spoke of a friend who had an Instagram profile created by others without her permission, with photos downloaded from classified ad sites, along with personal images of her with her children. She decided not to report such gratuitous violation because “when a child is involved it’s more painful” (P39).

Stealing images is actually a common tactic among companies. Several sites clone profiles published on more popular classified ad sites as a business strategy

(P34, P35, P37, P38, P40). When asked to take those profiles down they often fail to respond. Other sites save the images and, after a period of time, ask if they can republish them, which is a flagrant violation of personal data protection laws (P35). One sex worker reported having this experience and feeling frustrated, angered and extremely vulnerable. “It literally generates a lot of helplessness in me that makes me want to kill everyone and look for all possible ways to report it so that they delete the images used without my authorisation” (P40). The same interviewee added, “The fact that someone keeps your photos and refuses to let you delete them is in itself violence because they’re making you go against your wishes; it means you are not being heard” (P40).

Harassment and emotional abuse

Sex workers often face harassment simply for having an online presence. Their personal and professional social media profiles, in particular, expose them to such abuse. Indeed, they frequently receive insults from people they know or from strangers merely because of what they do for a living (P10, P12, P32, P33, P35). They are also attacked by clients’ partners (P7, P15) and by clients themselves, generally because of disagreements over the proposed rates (P12) or if the sex worker refuses to do certain things (P37). Finally, they are outed as a form of retaliation (P42). This type of violence is exacerbated in the case of trans people simply because of their gender identity (P5, P12, P16, P18). For example, one trans woman said that a Facebook post of a photo with her dog on the beach triggered aggressive comments, which caused her to stop posting photos of herself. Another one reported that after sharing a joke on Facebook she was insulted and threatened. She was told, “People like you should not exist” (P18). Another transgender sex worker noted that she is the target of constant cyberbullying on social media and often has to disable comments because of the violent and sexual content posted by others. She has been used to this type of unwanted attention since she was young. “Before I became a sex worker, when I was around 12 or 13, people would stop me on my way home from school to ask me how much I charged.” Nowadays, anonymous comments make her feel unsafe, as she fears being followed or watched in public. She uses her social media accounts for activism, which leaves her more exposed and vulnerable.

Another common form of harassment reported by most sex workers is the unsolicited explicit photos, videos or video calls they receive, often on their mobile phones and their personal social media accounts (P2, P7 P10, P16, P23, P29, P32, P33, P34, P35, P38, P39 P40, P41, P42). They also have to deal with receiving inappropriate messages on their phone while shopping at the supermarket or going about their everyday activities, such as “Are you naked?” “Are you wearing a thong?” and “Are you horny?” (P34), or outright insults, such as “slut” (P39). One sex worker had to silence calls on her work number because she was contacted when she was not working, often to be insulted, which triggered

panic attacks (P34). Those who have only one mobile phone for both personal use and work are constantly receiving calls or messages from clients outside work hours (P38). Another participant commented: "You open WhatsApp on the phone you use for everything – including to communicate with your family – and a totally inappropriate picture pops up." He described the experience as an invasion of his personal space (P29). A third said, "I've experienced this on Instagram, that people contact me on video calls and I answer because I think it's a friend from another country, or whatever, and it's a guy jerking off to my Instagram profile pictures" (P42). Finally, several of them report that it is common for groups of friends, often underage, to contact them and make video calls as a prank or to have fun at their expense (P4, P5, P27, P33, P34, P35, P36). In the case of trans sex workers, there is an element of "taboo and curiosity" that amplifies this dynamic (P20).

Emotional abuse can manifest as cruel comments, including body shaming. One participant recounted that after selling photos to a client, he commented on her appearance in a way that increased her insecurity. "I was very self-conscious. It made me feel bad about my body" (P32). Others mentioned receiving similar messages as a way of haggling. "You charge too much for what you have to offer," one participant (P27) was told (P9 related a similar experience). In fact, discussions about fees often end in insults and violence (P6, P12, P22). Similarly, potential health issues are used as insults, often when a second encounter or certain requests are refused. As one participant explained, "Because you are a sex worker, anyone can accuse you [...] despite the health check-ups that you constantly have, they can accuse you of having such and such plague or disease. I have received messages accusing me of that" (P40).

Sometimes dehumanising remarks take the form of jokes, making them even crueller since they are meant to be funny. A transgender sex worker reports that "when the transgender law and the reparatory pension for transgender people came out, many clients made fun of us, saying that now they didn't have to pay any more because we already get paid" (P20).[25] In addition to discriminatory comments related to her trans identity, she also receives racist remarks related to her skin colour. The stigma surrounding sex work intersects with misogyny and racism, producing a specific form of violence that digital tools and platforms fail to address.

Violent and discriminatory comments can occur in more public spaces as well. Several interviewees mentioned client forums as particularly problematic (P34, P36, P41, P42). These forums are sometimes linked to sex-work-related pages, while other times they are created independently by users. They feature

25. Uruguay's Comprehensive Law for Transgender Persons (No. 19,684), enacted in 2018, stipulates a financial compensation for transgender persons born before 1975 who have been victims of state violence. Ley integral para personas trans. (2018). https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/19684-2018

comments about sex workers and the apartments where they work, often including personal data, social media profiles, remarks about their bodies and even intimate photos. When this type of content is posted on independent platforms, there is no way to report or remove it.[26] One participant noted that many clients threaten to post negative comments as a way of pressuring sex workers into lowering their prices (P34). Indeed, these spaces perpetuate degrading and dehumanising attitudes. As one interviewee said, "No one should post opinions about anyone's body anywhere. They shouldn't be saying whether we're fat or skinny. Regardless of how we make a living, we're still human beings, and those comments hurt" (P36).

Threats and blackmail

Sharing images can make someone vulnerable to threats and blackmail. One participant feared her photos would be disseminated as a form of psychological violence. This fear often causes participants to agree to requests they are uncomfortable with or to provide more content than they agreed on. As this participant put it:

> Often, they ask for a photo in a certain position or an additional photo in a different way. And it's something you don't feel comfortable with. That counts as psychological violence. If you refuse, they're going to take your photos and share them with someone else. So you always have to try to please the client but with the fear that something else will happen (P30).

Several sex workers reported having experienced threats and blackmail after sharing images (P8, P22, P23, P24, P33, P34). According to other participants, these threats often become physical (P24, P26, P34). As their personal information is easily accessible to clients, they could indeed find themselves in a dangerous situation. "They already have your number, your page, if they saw you at the apartment they know where you work," one interviewee said (P24). "The person finds out everything about you. Nowadays, they find out everything through the internet," another added (P26). Another woman described blackmail situations, saying that she felt forced to meet with clients after they sent her photos of herself in public places, making her believe that she was being watched (P34).

This type of violence has been studied as image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and, more specifically, non-consensual distribution or threat of distribution of intimate images.[27] Testimonies from our interviews show that such abuse undermines

26. These are forums created by individuals to rate their experiences with sex workers and in which the sex workers have no say. One such forum that is currently active is https://foro.relaxuy.com/.
27. Qin, L., et al. (2023). *Toward Safer Intimate Futures: Recommendations for Tech Platforms to Reduce Image Based Sexual Abuse.* European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance. https://www.eswalliance.org/toward_safer_intimate_futures_recommendations_tech_platforms_reduce_image_based_abuse

mental health and, in some cases, physical safety. Although sharing intimate images without consent is a crime in Uruguay, the legislation does not address the unique characteristics of sex work. This is a global phenomenon and most literature on "sextortion" discusses this form of violence in contexts outside the sale of erotic services. The limited press coverage and academic attention given to cases involving sex workers suggests differences in perceived harm, implying that sex workers are not as affected by it. Yet stigmatisation and discrimination magnify the impact, straining relationships with family members, employers and colleagues. Moreover, because sex work is their livelihood, many cannot withdraw from digital platforms despite the trauma, as their income – and that of their families – depends on having a presence there. One article on sexual privacy describes the consequences of this type of violence: "Sextortion involves the near-total destruction of sexual privacy. The privacy invader eliminates victims' control over their intimate activities and spaces. Perpetrators take authority over victims' bodies."[28] Strikingly, sex workers are not mentioned once in the entire text, despite the fact that sextortion harms them in distinct ways. Research centred on the rights of sex workers identifies these practices as one of the main forms of digital violence they face.[29]

Privacy and impunity

The violence and vulnerability described above reveal how websites and platforms operate through business models that harm sex workers, while failing to take responsibility in their terms and conditions. This occurs despite national legislation that establishes the protection of personal data as a human right. Many of the sex workers we interviewed view privacy as a luxury they cannot afford, even though they are aware of the risks involved in relinquishing it. As one participant put it, "When you need to survive and also pay for your studies, support yourself and help your family, you use whatever tools are available. You don't try to determine which ones are safe" (P8). The constant pressure to generate income leads sex workers to maintain a presence across as many networks and platforms as possible, making it difficult to evaluate the risks specific to each. This issue is further exacerbated for transgender people, who have historically faced limited employment opportunities.

Even sex workers familiar with terms of use and privacy policies struggle to demand privacy when financial need takes precedence. Few of them have the digital literacy required to navigate the small print, yet nearly all have experienced the consequences of weak protections in their personal lives. Companies exploit the false dichotomy between necessity and privacy,

28. Citron, D. K. (2019). Sexual Privacy. *Yale Law Journal, 128*(7), 1870-1960. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45098020
29. Carrizo, E. V., et al. (2022). La violencia sexual en las redes sociales hacia las poblaciones claves en Bolivia. *Revista Médica*, 27(1), 21-25. https://doi.org/10.58296/rm.v27i1.28; Friend, J. (2023). Digital privacy is a sexual health necessity: a community-engaged qualitative study of virtual sex work and digital autonomy in Senegal. *Sex and Reproductive Health Matters, 31*(4), 1-17; Qin, L., et al (2023). Op. cit.

unnecessarily exposing sex workers by making their personal information publicly available. The logic of immediacy and absolute availability means there is no friction when contacting sex workers. These platforms' design sacrifices sex workers' digital rights from the outset.

Several interviewees reported that when they Google their phone number, publications associated with their work appear, sometimes including comments, photos and the address of the apartment where they work (P29, P36, P39). "The page gives all your data to the client [including your phone number], but it gives you nothing from him," one participant (P29) stated (P36 and P42 made similar comments). Another added, "They always prioritise the clients and not so much the girls... they should take care of us, [as we are] their clients" (P36). One interviewee pointed out that even paid services do not offer basic security measures, such as disabling screenshots (P5), nor do they implement mechanisms to prevent people from contacting them merely for amusement (P35, P36). The changes that companies do make often harm sex workers by default, despite the fact that sex workers are their actual paying clients and should be protected accordingly. Pasión, for example, banned any mention of video calls or sale of content after some users reported scams, a policy that several of our interviewees mentioned as significantly reducing their income (P36, P39, P41).

Websites and platforms also request photos of the sex workers' identity documents or rely on third-party identity verification services to confirm that they are not minors (P13, P27). This process is marked by a lack of transparency, as those offering services do not know how long or where their information is kept. Nonetheless, some interviewees reported that Pasión has adopted limited protection measures. For example, sex workers are refunded when the site is down and prevents them from working and users can approve client ratings and even delete comments (P42).

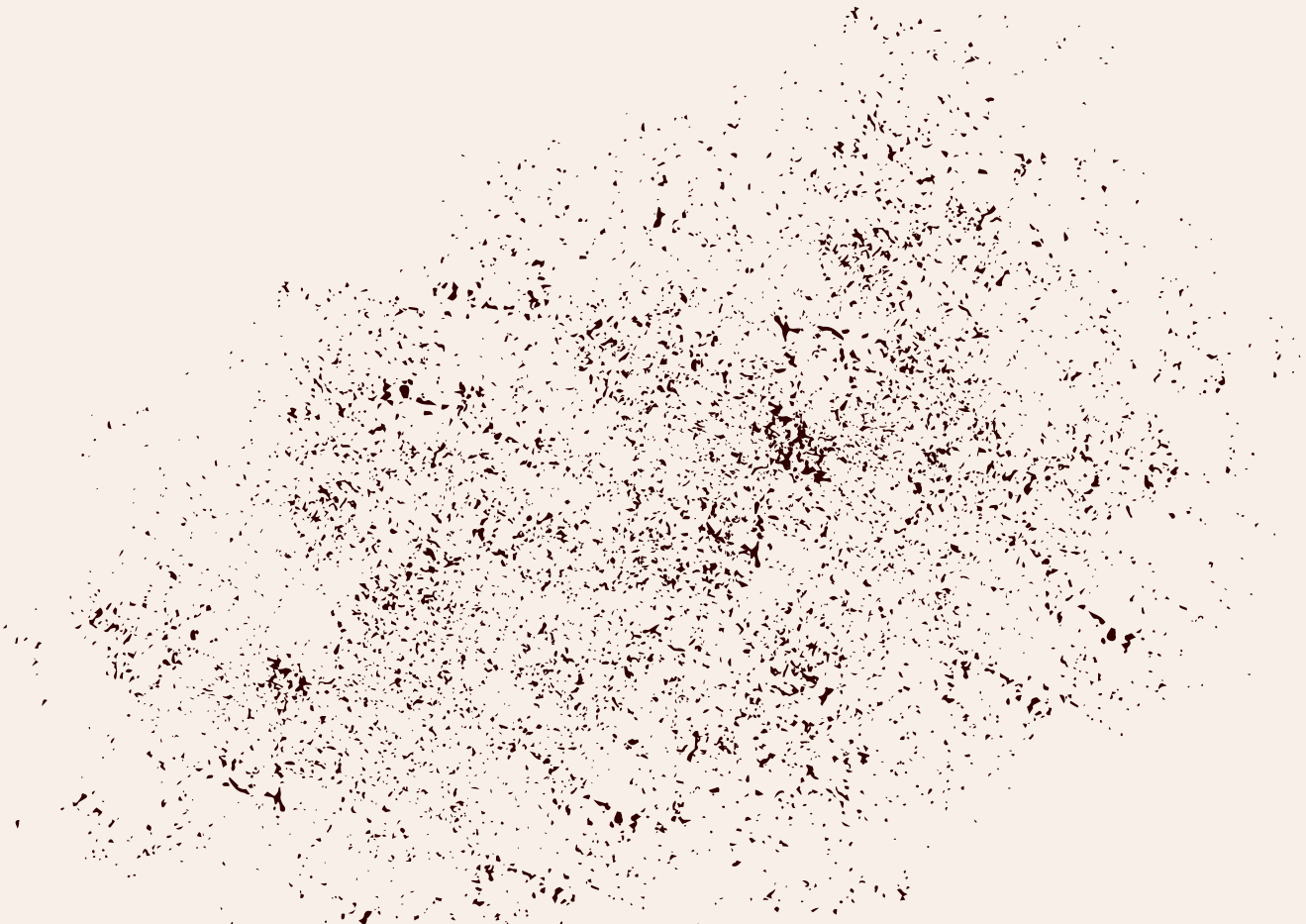
Such gestures are minimal, especially when compared to the broader tendency of platforms to evade responsibility and place the onus on sex workers to safeguard their own rights. A population as vulnerable as sex workers – whose livelihoods depend on websites and applications – should not bear the burden of ensuring even the most basic safeguards. Yet the responsibility for protecting their privacy and digital rights continues to fall on them, rather than on the platforms that profit from their content. For example, Pasión merely warns users instead of taking steps to ensure the rights of the sex workers are respected. Its terms and conditions state, "It is of great importance that only content that can be made public and does not harm the user or a third party is published."[30]

30. https://pasion-uruguay.com/condiciones

Some describe the lack of protection built into website design as a form of victim blaming, which "conveys the belief that a victim of sexual violence is at least partially responsible for (preventing) the consequences."[31] They state that, although platforms could incorporate different mechanisms to enhance the safety of sex workers, most companies choose not to. Yet there are measures that, while not infallible, can and should be integrated into the design process to improve privacy and safety. The same researchers recommend combining all existing security features and making them readily available to users (e.g. managing screenshots and content downloads), setting maximum privacy levels by default and improving the usability and transparency of digital fingerprinting.[32]

31. Qin, L., et al. (2023). Op cit.
32. "There are existing methods that aim to offer this functionality, which we broadly refer to as 'digital fingerprinting', that use characteristics of a piece of data to create a 'fingerprint' that can be used to identify it." Ibid.

The gig economy and the costs of digital sex work



In addition to suffering the forms of violence discussed above, sex workers must also contend with an economic and financial environment that poses structural disadvantages to their professional activities. Their work is somewhat similar to that of gig economy platforms such as Uber, which offer some benefits – particularly flexibility in working hours – but are ultimately precarious. This model is rooted in neoliberal narratives that emphasise entrepreneurship and individual responsibility while denying workers fundamental labour rights and protections.

This neoliberal model is reinforced by the way websites and platforms frame their role to avoid any liability. An analysis of the terms and conditions of websites commonly used by sex workers in Uruguay reveals that these platforms position themselves strictly as intermediaries. They explicitly disclaim any employment relationship and refuse liability for interactions between users. Pasión states that it "does not under any circumstances intervene directly or indirectly in the relationship between users of the site, who are completely unconnected with the site, and it is therefore exempt from liability."[33]

This type of work disproportionately affects economically vulnerable individuals. Its so-called "independent" nature shifts expenses once covered by employers onto the workers themselves.[34] A key example is the cost of internet connectivity. Although, as noted in the introduction, Uruguay enjoys relatively high national connectivity in statistical terms, many sex workers struggle to afford reliable internet access, both mobile and home-based. Some even reported having exchanged sexual services for mobile phone credit (P13, P19, P20, P22, P23, P24, P25, P27, P29, P31). As one interviewee put it, "To promote your service, you need connectivity. You have to buy pre-paid cards for your phone almost every week, which in the long run becomes another expense we have to cover with sex work" (P8). Besides connectivity, many sex workers pay to advertise on classified websites (P5, P13, P20, P22, P31, P32, P36, P38, P40, P42). Many participants considered these fees excessive, especially given that the platforms offer minimal protections, including the absence of safety mechanisms (P35) and technical issues such as frequent crashes that can leave workers temporarily without income (P36, P42).

In addition to expenses that reduce their income, sex workers also face difficulties in collecting payment for agreed services (P22, P23, P24, P30). Most participants said they prefer to be paid up front, although this does not always guarantee that they will receive the money. Several described being scammed with digitally altered payment confirmations or through bank transfers in which the funds never materialise" (P27, P34, P36, P37, P38). Gender dynamics

33. https://pasion-uruguay.com/condiciones
34. Easterbrook-Smith, G. (2022). OnlyFans as gig-economy work: a nexus of precarity and stigma. *Porn Studies, 10*(1), 1-16. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2022.2096682; Cardoso, D., & Scarcelli, C. M. (2021). The bodies of the (digitized) body: Experiences of sexual(ised) work on OnlyFans. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research, 37*(71), 98-121. https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v37i71.122642

further shape these experiences. Male sex workers explained that assumptions about their physical strength make clients less likely to withhold payment. One participant noted that accepting payment after the service can even foster a sense of trust that results in more generous tips (P40).

These individual challenges are compounded by structural forms of financial exclusion. Discrimination against sex workers by financial institutions is well documented across countries,[35] and it has tangible consequences for their economic autonomy. In addition to this, many encounter barriers to accessing the banking system itself. Participants noted that certain accounts, cards or financial applications are required to operate on digital platforms, yet these tools are not always accessible, particularly when income from sex work is undeclared (P5, P9, P34). They also underscored that platforms often charge steep commissions, in some cases exceeding 35% (P20), which further erodes their financial independence.

In this context, digital labour practices become central. Indeed, sex work is increasingly shaped by the content creation model and the relentless pursuit of engagement that define contemporary digital life, which generate new vulnerabilities. With platforms oversaturated with options, promotion and self-marketing demand significant time and effort. Participants emphasised that maintaining an active presence on social media is essential: being continuously online is necessary to avoid losing clients. While some platforms are free, they demand constant engagement: failing to post daily updates often leads to ads being penalised or downgraded (P27, P41). The pressure to continuously promote oneself blurs the boundaries between working hours, personal space and leisure,[36] with negative effects on mental health and rest (P9, P27). As one participant explained, “You have to be constantly posting, talking to people, because if you don’t respond, they get offended” (P27). In services targeted at gay men, it is common for clients to request photos or videos before arranging a meeting – something that many exploit. One sex worker stated, “Seventy people message you and only three actually follow through. It takes time. It’s exhausting. The other 67 have seen all your photos” (P29). To manage this, some develop strategies to reduce repetitive demands. One interviewee, for example, consolidated all her photos into a single link: “I always try to send a full-body photo so they don’t ask for more [so they won’t be saying] ‘Send me this, send me that.’ No. You’ve seen everything. You know what I’m offering. Bye-bye” (P5). Ultimately, the time and energy wasted engaging with people who have no intention of hiring services was identified as one of the major disadvantages of relying on digital platforms for sex work (P4, P5, P20, P29, P33, P34, P40).

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35. European Sex Workers’ Rights Alliance. (2022). *The Impact of Online Censorship and Digital Discrimination on Sex Workers.* https://www.eswalliance.org/the_impact_of_online_censorship_and_digital_discrimination_on_sex_workers; Stardust, Z. (2024). Indie Porn: Revolution, Regulation, and Resistance. Duke University Press.
36. Easterbrook-Smith, G. (2022). Op. cit.; Cardoso, D., & Scarcelli, C. M. (2021). Op. cit.

Several participants spoke of the weariness caused by endless messages or calls, describing it as a constant drain on both their income and their wellbeing. The demand for continuous engagement is closely tied to the logic of self-promotion. Under the gig economy paradigm, personal branding is key, and sex workers invest significant time and money cultivating it. Several participants described allocating part of their income to building a commercial image where "authenticity" is carefully staged and monetised through follower counts and a micro-celebrity status, as described by researchers Daniel Cardoso and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli.[37] As one interviewee explained, "Photos and videos are very important because it is your image that you're selling. [...] A promotional video with background music, etc., good lighting and good subtitles sells very well," which is why she invests in professional photographers (P42). Her investment in her image extends to all other spheres of her life: "I spend money on lingerie, doing my hair, nails and eyelashes. You have to invest in yourself. As well as eating healthy and going to the gym" (P42). In this model, technological skills and marketing expertise become essential, creating barriers for other sex workers with lower levels of education who feel intimidated by the digital world.

Gender performativity

Personal branding for sex workers often involves negotiating a delicate balance between "authenticity" and established gender stereotypes. For example, one male sex worker told us that he advertises himself with phrases such as "well-endowed", while simultaneously cultivating what he describes as a "good vibes" personality to appeal to clients. A transgender sex worker similarly reflected on the economic value of carefully crafting her image (P22). "I seek to maintain my own colourful and daring style. I think that's what attracts people," she says. For her, the emphasis on image is not only part of her self-expression but also a source of income. As she explained, "There are people who like what I sell through my image, and sometimes they make money orders or deposits for that. They pay for what they see, not just for sexual acts."

In line with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity,[38] sex work on the internet is often confined to restrictive binary categories of sex and gender. Sexologist and masculinities expert Rubén Campero[39] emphasised the role stereotypes play in the logic of immediate consumption facilitated by technology. He argued that, in the culture of entrepreneurship, sex workers are compelled to build personal brands that align with stereotypical masculine and feminine roles – precisely those that generate the greatest commercial returns.

37. Cardoso, D., & Scarcelli, C. M. (2021). Op. cit.
38. Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal, 40*(4), 519-531. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893
39. Interview with Rubén Campero, 27 December 2024.

However, interviews with participants also revealed that sex workers challenge and manipulate stereotypes in empowering ways. For instance, a non-binary participant described managing multiple virtual identities to explore different aspects of their gender identity. They adopt a masculine persona for work, while exploring more feminine aspects of their identity on their personal social media (which they do not share with clients) (P27). Similarly, a transgender sex worker discussed the potential of appropriating and redefining stereotypes and stigmas surrounding the transgender body as a form of resistance. Recalling a television performance in which cameras focused on her crotch as she danced, she explained, "I felt proud of myself, proud to be a transvestite showing my bulge and making it visible." And added, "I felt empowered, using my body as a space for struggle, which allowed me to defend myself, be aware and feel confident."

Algorithmic moderation and deplatforming

While some participants emphasised strategies of empowerment, others underscored the constraints imposed by opaque moderation systems and the constant threat of deplatforming. They described the ambiguity of the different platforms' moderation rules, which makes it difficult to use those tools for work. Such policies are largely determined by opaque algorithms,[40] a process some authors have aptly described as "algorithmic whorephobia".[41]

Many of our interviewees identified Instagram as one of the most popular social media platforms. However, unlike X, Instagram does not allow explicit content and frequently blocks accounts used by sex workers to promote themselves and expand their network of clients and contacts. This results in lost job opportunities, while recovering an account often requires significant time and effort (P5, P27). In response, sex workers develop creative strategies to circumvent censorship – for example, avoiding explicit photos and instead using coded language or keywords such as "massage", "descontracturante" (muscle loosening massage) and "relaxing" (P36).

These practices reveal a clear double standard. Many participants reported unwanted interactions on social media involving harassment and violence (P19 P20, P22, P31), yet saw little follow-up to their complaints. As one interviewee explained, "You report, report, report, report, and they almost always do nothing. [Instead] they [suspend your account] just because you post a picture of yourself wearing revealing clothing, when it should be the other way around" (P19). Participants consistently observed that platforms act far more quickly to remove

40. Rogers, L. (2024, 14 February). The platformisation of sex work: affordances, challenges, precarities. *Autonomy Institute.* https://autonomy.work/portfolio/the-platformisation-of-sex-work-affordances-challenges-precarities/
41. Luna. (2024, 12 September). The Internet Loves Sex. Why Does it Hate Sex Workers? *The Swaddle.* https://www.theswaddle.com/the-internet-loves-sex-why-does-it-hate-sex-workers; Stardust, Z. (2024). Op. cit.

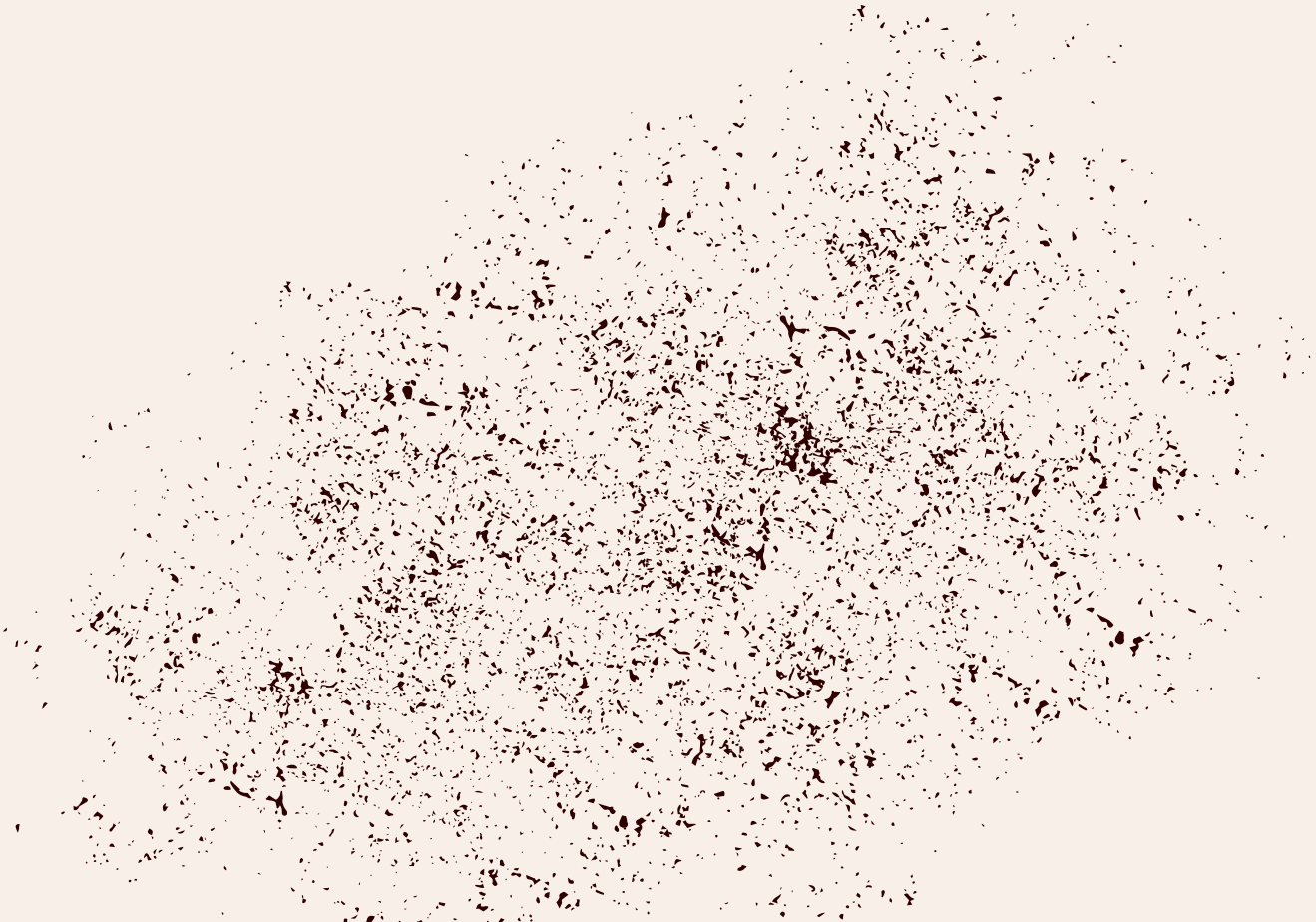
suggestive or explicit images posted by sex workers than to address the violent or threatening messages directed at them.

Besides the double standards in content removal, participants also pointed to the ways algorithms shape visibility and desirability. Content moderation policies powered by artificial intelligence are not transparent, but they clearly reproduce existing hierarchies in the organisation of information. Such hierarchies are evident, for example, in a male sex worker's observation that he is favoured by clients for being "toned, tall [and] slim" (P29), while a female interviewee explained, "most clients often prefer younger women [...] so the older ones are left behind" (P30). As mentioned earlier, algorithms replicate these discriminatory social structures by privileging certain physical characteristics over others. The algorithm favours "Barbie-like" profiles, even among transgender people who exhibit standard features such as youth, thinness and blonde hair. Indeed, technology is not neutral. Search engines and traditional and automatic moderation mechanisms reproduce the prejudices of their designers and, consequently, the structural inequalities that marginalise vulnerable communities.[42] Meanwhile, large technology companies motivated by profit, prioritise content aligned with market-tested, mainstream formulas.

Finally, another consequence of algorithmic whorephobia is its negative impact on sex workers' ability to organise. We experienced this first-hand at the beginning of the project when a Gmail account we created under the name "Image Rights and Sex Work" was abruptly suspended for allegedly violating the site's terms and conditions. No explanation was provided, and only after several days of complaints did we regain access. These obstacles function as subtle forms of digital repression, limiting sex workers' collective visibility and advocacy.

42. Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism.* NYU Press, in Stardust, Z. (2024). Op. cit.

Resistance in the absence of protection



Police reports and public shaming

Sex workers have developed strategies to mitigate harm and survive in a context marked by the absence of protection from both state agencies and the internet companies they rely on. Stigmatisation prevents many from reporting image-based violence. One participant commented, "Our image was never protected. That is the reality. We are one of the most vulnerable groups. They should support us because we have the same rights as everyone else. [...] We don't stop being people because of what we do" (P36). Experiences with police reinforce this mistrust: "If you report it, no one will do anything because it's just a photo. They'll ask, 'Why did you upload it?' And they'll say, 'It's your fault, your own fault' and not the client's" (P8). Several interviewees recalled police officers mocking them even when reporting rapes (P6, P34) or simply refusing to act (P42). This institutional hostility discourages sex workers from reporting violations to their rights. Similar experiences were described at the Ministry of the Interior offices established to assist women. One interviewee noted, "At the Police Unit for Women, instead of being protected, we are unprotected. We have no support. Because we are sex workers, we are discriminated against" (P28).[43] Despite this pervasive lack of protection, some interviewees refuse to give up hope. One participant told us, "I was raped by [a] politician twice and by a relative for many years and I never reported it, but I know that sometime in the future I'll get up the courage to do it" (P42).

Many sex workers are unaware of the laws that regulate sex work and hesitate to file complaints if they are not registered with the authorities, fearing they may be forced to do so (P34). This legal uncertainty creates opportunities for abuse. As one participant noted, clients often feel empowered when dealing with sex workers who do not hold a licence (P36). Another participant explained that she chose not to report episodes of violence, including insults, threats and rape, because of her unregistered status:

> I did not report him because he's a lawyer, and he had my ID number from the night we checked into the hotel. He told me that if I reported him, he would get me in trouble with my son, who lives with his father. And well, I didn't have the health clearance card at that time either, so I didn't do anything, I kept quiet (P42).

Others refrain from reporting violence out of fear that their children might discover the nature of their work (P39). In principle, Uruguayan law protects them in these circumstances, regardless of whether they are registered. In fact,

43. She is referring to the Specialised Police Unit for Domestic and Gender-Based Violence, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior.

they can apply for a licence on the spot, but they cannot be compelled to do so if they declare that they will not continue with the activity.[44] Yet, despite these legal protections, many crimes go unpunished because sex workers fear navigating hostile state institutions that frequently re-victimise them.

While several sex workers interviewed were not aware of the legal protections that apply to them (P35), others were familiar with these rights and often invoke them, using them as tools for negotiation and persuasion. One male sex worker mentions that, after his image was used without consent, he threatened to file a complaint with the Police Unit for Computer Crimes, stating, "You have intellectual rights over your own image." In this case, while the complaint did not materialise, he managed to have the content taken down (P40).

When faced with continuous impunity, sex workers seek justice through creative but risky strategies. When working together in an apartment, some reported having to resort to physical violence against clients who refused to pay (P36). The digital sphere also provides opportunities to partially reverse power dynamics. One interviewee recounts the security tactics she devised: "I look up phone numbers, find them on Facebook and take screenshots of their faces. [Then I send messages such as:] 'Sweetheart, this is you. If you keep bothering me, I'm going to come over and hit you'" (P13). Another interviewee said that after the police refused to file a harassment and rape report, she exposed the perpetrator on social media, "so that people would be alerted" (P42). Similarly, one participant threatened to reveal the identity of a website owner if her personal information was not removed (P34). Yet these actions – often the only effective means of confronting digital abuse – are criminalised under personal data protection and other related offences, leaving sex workers exposed to retaliation. Legal instruments that could serve to protect them are instead weaponised by clients and lawyers, placing sex workers in legally compromising situations and further victimising them for resorting to the few tools available to resist abuse

Technological and behavioural strategies

Following Qin et al.'s classification,[45] we identified two types of strategies sex workers use to protect themselves. The first are technological strategies. Many reported using WhatsApp's ephemeral messages to share photos and videos as an added layer of protection (P5, P15, P19, P20, P24, P28, P29, P35, P36, P38, P39) or deleting images after sending them (P40). Still, they are aware that clients can bypass these measures by recording content with another device (P20, P27P35, P36, P39). Others turn to platforms such as Telegram, which notifies them when someone attempts screenshots in "secret" chats (P24), or Instagram's similar

44. Ley sobre el trabajo sexual. (2002). Op. cit.
45. Qin, L., et al. (2023). Op. cit.

functionality (P19). Some sex workers also prefer live video, which they perceived as offering more control than sending images directly to a client's device.

A second strategy is the use of blocking (P4, P7, P8, P17, P19, P20, P22, P23, P24, P26, P30 P31, P36, P37, P38, P40, P41, P42). On social media and WhatsApp, blocking allows sex workers to limit who can access their information (P10, P36) or cut off contact with strangers who turn abusive or violent. Yet this measure is far from foolproof: some blocked users simply change their profile picture or phone number to continue communicating with them (P8, P24, P42). Blocking also has drawbacks. Two interviewees mentioned saving chat histories with clients – either to use as evidence in case they need to report them or defend themselves, or simply to keep a record of what was agreed upon (P27, P36, P42). This is only possible if the person remains unblocked.

In terms of behavioural strategies, many sex workers avoid showing their faces or identifying features such as tattoos (P4, P8, P17, P19, P20, P21, P23, P24, P26, P30, P33, P35, P36, P39, P40, P41), using masks or emojis instead. One mentioned that she would rather lose a client than reveal her face, underscoring that safety is a central element in these negotiations that can outweigh the need to secure a client (P36). Others choose to conceal their real names and work under pseudonyms (P41, P42).

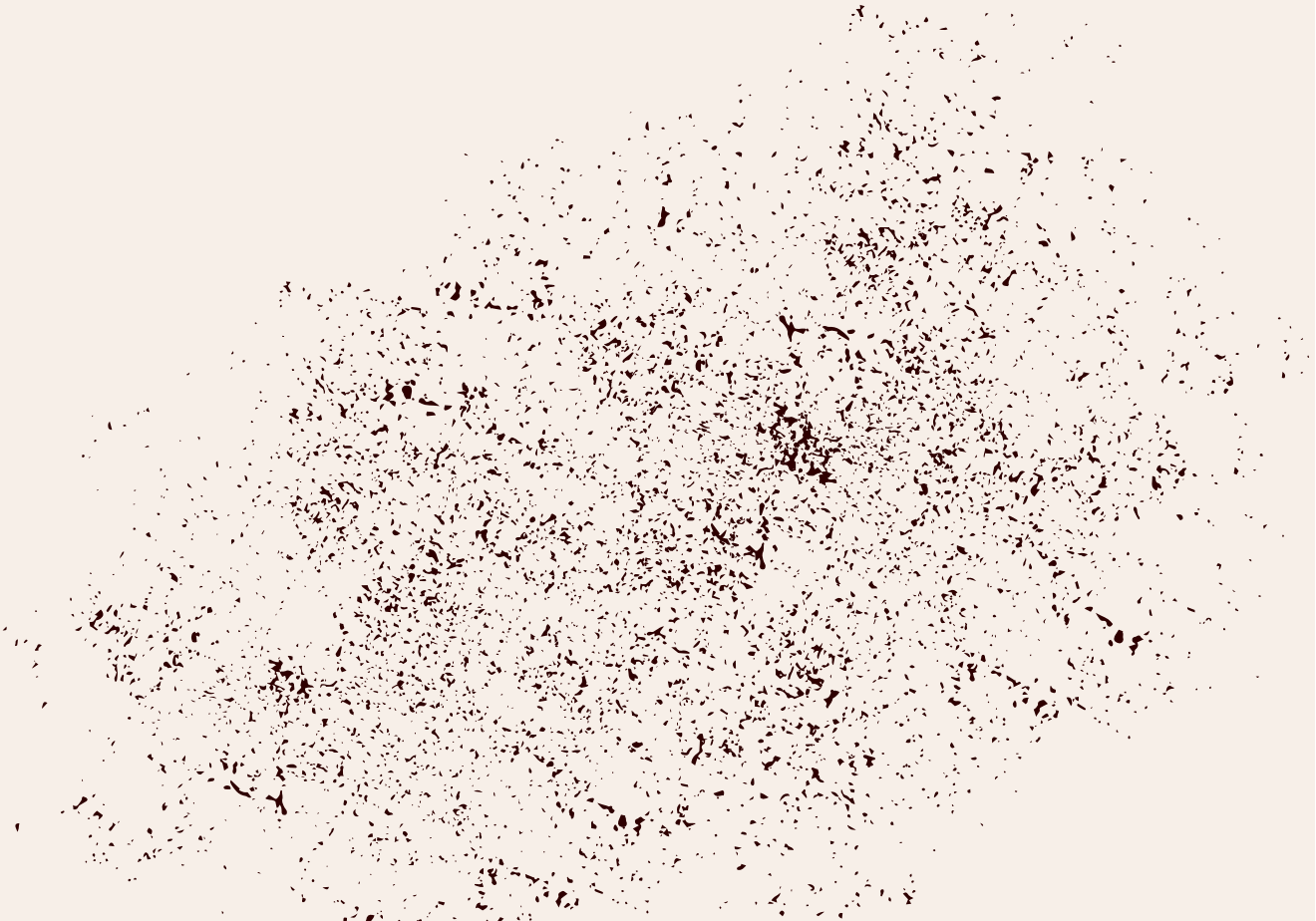
Some sex workers keep their professional and personal lives strictly separate online. They maintain different profiles, sim cards and mobile phones (P5, P9, P29, P34, P40) and block clients who attempt to connect with their personal social media accounts (P35, P42). Qin et al. describe this practice as "context separation". Other sex workers take the opposite approach, making both their personal identity and their work public. For instance, one interviewee uses her real name on social media to promote herself and schedule appointments, posting family photos on the same accounts. Since her clients and acquaintances are aware of her occupation, she even advertises on traditional media, such as the radio, where she shares her personal phone number (P13). A non-binary participant made their identity public after their photos were misused to create fake sex work profiles – a problem that disproportionately affects men and trans people (P7, P9). For them, being recognised by others provides a sense of control in a context that usually entails a loss of data security and privacy. Yet this visibility also has risks: the parasocial relationships fostered by social media sometimes leave them feeling constantly under surveillance. It is not uncommon for them to receive unsolicited street photos of them or anonymous messages reporting where and with whom they have been seen (P27). One participant even said she avoids leaving her house because of such incidents (P42).

Resistance and solidarity

All of the sex workers we interviewed – including long-time street workers – emphasised their reliance on solidarity networks to counter state neglect and repression, while creating spaces of support, companionship and joy. Expressions such as “We all take care of each other” and “We tell each other everything” were frequently repeated in the interviews, highlighting the central role of mutual aid in their daily lives.

Finally, several participants noted the existence of collective agreements aimed at maintaining fair prices and enforcing safety practices, such as condom use (P39), to prevent unfair competition. One participant also pointed to the omissions of digital platforms: while they swiftly introduce restrictions to protect clients, they fail to implement measures that would protect sex workers’ health and safety, such as banning services without condoms. However, such community strategies are difficult to implement when sex workers operate independently and rarely interact with one another in physical spaces. As one interviewee observed, the most popular profiles tend to be those of sex workers willing to do whatever clients ask. He added that profit-driven platforms are unlikely to accommodate a plurality of profiles that resist unconditional compliance with client demands. Thus, despite the perceived freedom that the internet offers sex workers, market logics ultimately determine prices through supply and demand.

Recommendations



Protecting the digital rights of sex workers, including those related to their images, requires a comprehensive, human rights-based approach that addresses both the stigma surrounding sex work and the structural oppression of sex workers. Experts consulted for this research emphasised that the state has a responsibility to protect the integrity of all individuals, regardless of occupation. They also underscored that digital rights must be recognised and protected with the same force as "analogue" rights are.

Since Uruguay began regulating sex work in the late 19th century,[46] the state has consistently prioritised the protection of society over the rights of sex workers. They were historically treated as mere vectors of physical and moral diseases, with their rights disregarded and routinely violated. More than 150 years later, health remains the primary focus of state interventions concerning sex workers. Yet it is equally essential to address other dimensions of their lives, including their digital rights. Malena Amarillo,[47] a sexual health specialist who treated sex workers at one of Montevideo's main public hospitals from 2020 to 2022, recommends that state clinics expand their remit beyond health risks and prevention to also include internet safety, violence prevention and information on legal instruments available to protect sex workers, such as personal data and gender violence laws.

Sex workers need more than periodic health check-ups; they need government oversight to ensure that the sites and platforms they depend on genuinely protect their rights, privacy and security. Currently, clients enjoy near-total anonymity, while sex workers' images and personal data are openly available. Platforms such as Pasión claim to prioritise their protection, presenting themselves as offering "a space and tools to stay independent using your mobile phone, rather than having to expose yourself on public streets or frequent places where practices that harm sex workers are common."[48] Yet this language of concern functions largely as a marketing strategy. It appeals to sex workers' well-founded fears regarding their physical safety, while offering no real guarantees for their digital security.

Against this backdrop of misleading platform rhetoric, it is important to recognise that sex workers are, in fact, the true clients of these sites: they fully finance the business model while enduring its exploitative conditions. Their knowledge and experience therefore merit serious consideration. Several interviewees suggested practical measures to improve safety and accountability. For instance, they recommended that users should not have immediate access to profiles, but instead be required to create an account before contacting sex workers. Others

46. Trochón, Y. (2003). Op. cit.
47. Personal communication with Malena Amarillo, 29 November 2024.
48. https://pasion-uruguay.com/condiciones.

suggested charging a small access fee to discourage frivolous or harassing behaviour (P35, P38, P39, P41, P42). Participants also called for clients to be subject to the same verification standards as sex workers – such as proof of age – along with stronger security features, including restrictions on downloading photos or taking screenshots (P41, P42). Finally, one participant proposed enabling direct payments through the platform, similar to Uber, to reduce the risk of scams.

Incorporating organised groups of sex workers into platform decision-making spaces could significantly improve their working conditions and strengthen the protection of their rights. Information technology legal expert Barbara Muracciole[49] highlighted the value of engaging local companies through civil society initiatives to advance such measures. In her experience, the problematic language that often appears in company policies stems less from hostility than from ignorance or limited resources, and many companies are open to including stronger protections in their terms and conditions. In Uruguay, there is a real opportunity for advocacy because the most popular website is local and operates within the country. This gives sex workers' organisations easier access to decision-making spaces than if the corporations were international, as is the case with Meta. Sex workers' organisations, working together with the state, could even promote certification systems that guarantee user privacy and the protection of personal data, issuing these certifications as a commercial incentive. Silvia Nane,[50] a national senator and former executive officer of the state telecommunications company ANTEL, also suggested that such certifications could serve to verify application architecture. While corporate receptiveness to such measures is important, sustainable change requires that civil society and the state collaborate on oversight mechanisms to ensure that companies provide at least a minimum standard of protection.

To drive change in both the corporate and state realms, Muracciole stressed the importance of sex workers' organisations having permanent legal counsel, especially in light of the ever-changing landscape of technology-related laws. While Uruguay has protective instruments such as the personal data law mentioned earlier, there is a pressing need for legal analysis of the contracts that users are required to accept to access these platforms. Muracciole pointed out that "for the state to act, it is often necessary to know what to ask of it." Many government agencies and officials lack the specialised knowledge to intervene effectively, making it crucial for sex workers to file complaints or claims with the support of legal professionals who understand the mechanisms available.

49. Personal communication with Barbara Muracciole, 19 December 2024.
50. Personal communication with Silvia Nane, 24 September 2024.

Existing legal frameworks fail to take into account the specific circumstances of sex workers, underscoring the need for legislation that explicitly recognises and protects their digital rights. Crucially, such legislation must be designed and implemented with the active participation of sex workers themselves. Gustavo Gómez, director of the Latin American Observatory of Media Regulation and Convergence, has recommended that AGESIC's Regulatory and Personal Data Control Unit serve as a platform for advocacy and the development of public policies that benefit sex workers.[51] He further emphasised the importance of training state officials, including those from the Ministry of the Interior and other agencies, to ensure they are equipped to respond effectively to complaints.

Finally, both Muracciole and Gómez recommended impact litigation as a promising strategy to raise awareness and strengthen legal protections for sex workers. This form of advocacy uses individual cases to push for broader legal reforms that affect entire groups. The Law School of the national public university (Universidad de la República) has a Strategic Litigation Clinic that could potentially take on such cases pro bono.[52] Impact litigation seeks not only to protect individual rights, but also to set precedents through exemplary case law and favourable public opinion. However, Gómez cautioned that sex workers' organisations must carefully weigh the costs of this strategy, particularly the high visibility generated by the cases, which can place a heavy burden on plaintiffs.

Implementing these measures requires time, resources and organisation. Still, immediate steps are possible. Muracciole recommended that sex workers' organisations collaborate with legal advisors to draft a short text setting out the conditions for selling intimate images. Such a text could specify the purchaser's obligation not to forward or redistribute the images or videos received, as well as clearly outline the penalties established by law in cases of noncompliance, which could include prison sentences. This brief technical text could serve two purposes simultaneously: acting as a legally binding contract and functioning as a deterrent, warning potential violators that they would be breaking the law if they disregard the conditions.

Our recommendations

Drawing on the testimonies of sex workers, consultations with experts and a review of comparable cases in other contexts, we outline the following recommendations to ensure that sex workers can fully exercise their digital rights across all aspects of their lives, including work, activism and leisure.

51. Interview with Gustavo Gómez, 5 March 2024. See Unit website at https://www.gub.uy/unidad-reguladora-control-datos-personales.
52. For more information on strategic litigation cases in Uruguay, see Abracinskas, L., Morelli, M., & Dabbadie, M. (2023). Derechos sexuales y reproductivos. *Una mirada al sistema de justicia uruguayo.* Mujer y Salud en Uruguay (MYSU). https://www.mysu.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Una-mirada-al-sistema-de-justicia-uruguayo_web.pdf

Recommendations for state actors:

- Transfer the regulation of sex work from the purview of the Ministries of Health and of the Interior to the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. This would enable more effective and less stigmatising oversight of sex work-related sites and platforms.
- Provide mandatory training for all officials who interact with sex workers, especially police and judicial officials, to ensure that such encounters are free from violence and discrimination.
- Expand comprehensive care for sex workers by integrating digital rights and digital safety education, moving beyond the current focus on health screenings for sexually transmitted diseases.
- Strengthen the role of the Regulatory and Personal Data Control Unit by creating a section dedicated specifically to sex workers' rights, developed in consultation with sex workers and backed by sufficient resources and political support.
- Promote collaborative standards by fostering partnerships between government agencies and sex workers' organisations to establish best practices and quality benchmarks for the design of sex work-related pages, platforms and applications.

Recommendations for local companies:

- Establish regular consultation mechanisms with sex workers to gather feedback on their experiences with sites and platforms and ensure that their suggestions for protecting their rights are contemplated.
- Guarantee transparency regarding how data and images are collected, managed, stored and used.
- Assume responsibility for protecting the privacy of sex workers by implementing measures long demanded by them, such as restricting direct access to telephone numbers without prior registration and incorporating technical security mechanisms to manage screenshots and downloads.

Recommendations for sex workers' organisations:

- Secure permanent legal counsel to challenge state omissions and strengthen the protection of their rights.
- Pursue strategic litigation to increase legal protection and raise public and institutional awareness of sex workers' issues.
- Organise legislative advocacy campaigns to address the specific needs of sex workers.
- Develop legal warning texts in collaboration with lawyers to use in client interactions, aimed at preventing the non-consensual distribution of images and intimate content.
- Strengthen advocacy networks, solidarity efforts and collective initiatives.

Conclusion

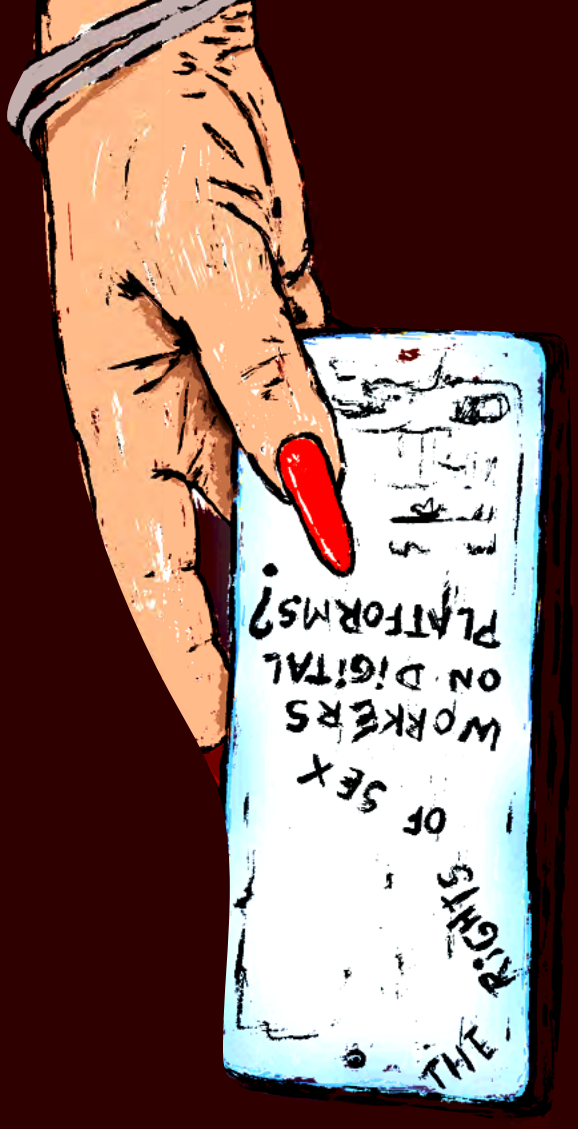
Technology has become an indispensable tool for sex workers, shaping not only their work but also many aspects of their everyday lives. Yet the benefits it provides come at a high cost: to make use of digital tools, sex workers are forced to accept exploitative conditions that expose them to multiple forms of violence. These conditions ultimately hinder the full exercise of their human rights. Uruguay already has several legal frameworks that could significantly improve sex workers' lives if backed by adequate resources and political will. However, in practice, these instruments often have counterproductive effects when applied in contexts of institutional abuse, particularly within judicial processes and the police, because they lack a genuine human rights perspective.

Sex workers experience various forms of structural oppression linked to gender identity, race, socioeconomic status, education and digital literacy. Despite its potential to empower, technology often becomes another tool of oppression that perpetuates the stigma attached to sex work. This stigma drains sex workers' energy and compels them, out of economic necessity, to accept the terms dictated by the market. Without minimum guarantees from the state, it is difficult to imagine a feminist internet for sex workers. In the meantime, the private sector continues to define the rules. Many of our interviewees, whether consciously or not, agree to sacrifice their privacy in order to work and provide for themselves and their families. Indeed, platforms privilege the rights of clients and allow them virtually unlimited access to sex workers' content and personal information, a dynamic largely ignored by the state or civil society.

Still, the research also points to spaces of resistance and transformation. Change is possible through coordinated action by the state, the private sector and organised sex workers. The testimonies gathered here show not only experiences of violence and exclusion but also stories of resilience, creativity and joy. Sex workers have developed strategies to negotiate safer conditions, protect their privacy and confront the absence of institutional safeguards. In doing so, they have also redefined their bodies as spaces of resistance. Solidarity and collective struggle emerge as powerful forces through which sex workers reclaim part of the autonomy that violence and injustice have taken from them.

	Gender	Race	Age	Location	Education
P1	Trans woman	White	37	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Primary (completed)
P2	Cis woman	White	47	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Primary (completed)
P3	Trans woman	White	36	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Primary (completed)
P4	Trans woman	Mixed-race	45	Small town	Primary (completed)
P5	Trans woman	Other	29	Small town	Tertiary/University (not completed)
P6	Trans woman	Black	45	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Secondary (completed)
P7	Trans woman	White	54	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Primary (completed)
P8	Trans woman	White	30	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P9	Cis man	Mixed-race	31	Montevideo	Secondary (completed)
P10	Cis woman	White	43	Small town	Primary (completed)
P11	Cis woman	Black	23	Small town	Primary (completed)
P12	Trans woman	Other	35	Small town	Secondary (not completed)
P13	Trans woman	White	35	Small town	Secondary (not completed)
P15	Cis woman	Mixed-race	35	Small town	Primary (completed)
P16	Trans woman	Black	49	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Secondary (completed)
P76	Trans woman	Black	49	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Secondary (completed)
P18	Trans woman	Black	53	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Secondary (completed)
P19	Trans woman	Indigenous	28	Small town	Tertiary
P20	Trans woman	Black	33	Small town	Secondary (completed)
P21	Trans woman	Mixed-race	43	Montevideo	Tertiary/University (not completed)

P22	Cis woman	White	42	Small town	Secondary (completed)
P23	Cis woman	Black	34	Small town	Primary (completed)
P24	Cis woman	White	23	Small town	Secondary (not completed)
P25	Trans woman	Mixed-race	63	Small town	Primary (completed)
P26	Cis woman	White	43	Small town	Secondary (not completed)
P26	Cis woman	White	59	Small town	Primary (completed)
P27	Non-binary	White	20	Metropolitan area of Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P28	Cis woman	White	43	Small town	Secondary (not completed)
P29	Cis man	Other	23	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P30	Cis woman	Mixed race	27	Small town	Primary (completed)
P31	Trans woman	White	35	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P32	Cis woman	Black	21	Small town	Secondary (not completed)
P33	Cis woman	White	34	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P34	Trans woman	White	27	Montevideo	Secondary (completed)
P35	Cis woman	White	21	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P36	Cis woman	White	28	Montevideo	Tertiary/University (not completed)
P37	Cis woman	Black	44	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P38	Cis woman	White	30	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P39	Cis woman	White	28	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P40	Cis man	Other	34	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P41	Cis woman	Black	34	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)
P42	Cis woman	White	30	Montevideo	Secondary (not completed)



Uruguayan sex workers' image rights

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