

Many students and graduates from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin have produced remarkable research in the field of Gender Studies as part of their final theses, coursework or student projects. In the Bulletin-Texte, the ZtG publishes a selection of their work in the form of academic articles.

Like previous issues, this 49th edition was created in collaboration with lecturers and students. It brings together exceptional English-language articles by graduates of the MA programmes Global Studies and Modern South and Southeast Asian Studies to provide readers with insights into a vast array of themes: from Balinese family systems and mother–daughter relationships, to trafficking, pleasure activism, and the electronic dance music scene in Buenos Aires.

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Global Perspectives from the Field of Gender Studies



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INTRODUCTION

This English-language edition of *Bulletin-Texte* once again publishes research insights from students and graduates based on exceptional MA theses in the field of Global Studies and South and Southeast Asian Studies, all focusing on gender in their analysis. These articles were all supervised and recommended by Prof. Dr. Andrea Fleschenberg dos Ramos Pinéu at the Institute for Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

In “**Techno Tales**”, Matthias London examines how non-conforming queer identities negotiate Argentina’s cis-heteropatriarchal/neoliberal power matrices within Buenos Aires’ electronic dance music (EDM) cultures. Employing Muñoz’s Disidentification theory and five months of ethnography, the thesis finds that three segmented EDM fields serve as vital sites of emergence for disidentification while (unintentionally) reproducing racial, class, and gender inequities. In doing so, this work hopes to contribute to Latin American queer scholarship and to offer practical insights for global EDM scenes.

Kristina Bör’s article “**Sexual Privilege and Pleasure Activism: A Qualitative Exploration of Female Sexuality**” looks at how socialization and the concept of sexual privilege inhibit women’s entitlement to sexual pleasure and at the ways in which this could be addressed. The discussion is based on findings from semi-structured interviews with six women from six different countries. The surrounding themes address the hierarchization of sex(uality), the accessibility of pleasure and the practice of pleasure activism as a form of embodied resistance. Focusing on the ideas of fostering internal knowledge and personal agency, the qualitative study concludes that one step to gain equal access to pleasure is the need to let go of external expectations and redefine what sex(uality) entails.

In the essay “**Gender Roles and Realities within the Balinese Family System: A Study of Women’s Perceptions**”, Aurora Festl examines gender inequalities in Bali and the role of women within a patrilineal society. Based on interviews and conversations with Balinese women conducted over a period of two years, she analyses how different actors individually define, negotiate and claim their roles. From an intersectional perspective, she examines the scope of action available to these women in the space between personal desires and social, religious and caste-specific expectations.

Maya Ibrahim’s thesis “**On How to Love our Mothers**” engages in a sociological exploration aimed at understanding the need to recognize the specific ways in which systems of domination are maintained. She explores how the patriarchy is embedded in mother–daughter relationships through the reinforcement of gender roles, expectations, and power dynamics that persist through intergenerational cycles. Using the conceptual frameworks of the patriarchal bargain and love as a political act, Ibrahim examines how power relations between mothers and daughters are defined and sustained. Attention is paid to how globalisation processes have led to changing family dynamics in which patriarchal norms are reconfigured.

“**Tackling the Complexities of Trafficking in Human Beings in Germany: A Critical Analysis of the Challenges in Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation**” examines an underestimated and complex issue. Adopting a multi-perspective approach, Nina Stephansky analyses the perceptions, dynamics and underlying mechanisms of trafficking in women, highlighting the key challenges in prevention, prosecution and protection of trafficked women. Particular attention is given to gaps in research and data collection, as well as to the limitations of law enforcement agencies and specialised counselling centres for trafficked persons. Concluding with strategies to address these challenges in preventing and combating trafficking, the paper advocates for a human-rights-based, interdisciplinary and participatory approach that strengthens cooperation between governmental and civil society stakeholders, while placing trafficked women’s voices at the centre.

TECHNO TALES: DISIDENTIFICATION NARRATIVES IN BUENOS AIRES' ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURES

Matthias London

Porteños^{1,2} party. Hard. Whether in rundown skateparks in Mexico, after-party garages in Barcelona, or deserts in South Africa, I always met at least one Argentine going wild.³ Back in Berlin, I met Tauro, who owns Espacio Ro in Buenos Aires, and he invited me to experience the city's vibrant electronic dance music (EDM) culture, akin to Berlin. Intrigued, I soon followed.

Buenos Aires' alternative EDM unfolds amid Argentina's colonial legacy, migratory waves, economic crises, and political activism. The city's progressivism on women's and LGBTQ+⁴ rights provides a crucible for non-conforming identities, cultural resistance, and queer community building. Yet disidentification studies on queer EDM remain scarce, especially in Latin America. Most focus on the US or Europe, bypassing Argentine contexts. My ethnographic approach addresses these gaps, examining how EDM can contest hegemonic narratives and facilitate identity negotiation.

Central to this investigation is the overarching research question: *How do EDM cultures and identities mutually co-construct each other within the socio-cultural landscape of Buenos Aires?* Sub-questions guide the analysis:

1. What are Argentina's prevailing identity narratives shaping queer experiences?
2. How do EDM sites of emergence enable disidentification performances?

3. In what ways do alternative EDM cultures disidentify with the city's cis-heteropatriarchal and racially capitalist framework?
4. How might these spaces (inadvertently) perpetuate existing oppressions?

Thus, I explore and describe Buenos Aires' EDM segments, showing how even 'Eurocentric' EDM can challenge colonial cis-heteronormativity. The theoretical framework builds on José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) concept of disidentification, where minoritized groups rework dominant culture to promote subaltern identity performance. This approach suits the city's intersectional context, analyzing resistance, negotiation, but also reproduction in Argentina's nocturnal scenes.

In my research, I employed a qualitative ethnographic method, conducting five months of immersive fieldwork with participant observation and narrative interviews to capture non-conforming identities, from organizers to attendees. I operationalized disidentification theory through thematic analysis of narrative interviews, spotlighting counter-hegemonic stories. Grounded in decolonial ethics, my research aimed to ensure respectful representation, consent, anonymity, and to acknowledge the participants' active role within it.

My findings show how Buenos Aires' EDM incubates non-conforming identities, disidentifying with dominant power narratives and carving out spaces of resistance and belonging. I outline three key segments – alternative institutionalized EDM, alternative nomadic EDM, and private after-/house-parties – examining their spatial characteristics for queer expression. Then I present narratives from my interviewees Brow, Viper, and Tauro, revealing these spaces as sanctuaries for marginalized identities, forming decolonial practice and queer Latin community. Yet they also reproduce certain hierarchies, including issues of harm reduction, racial and gender biases, and ableism.

Overall, I blend ethnographic depth, narrative richness, decolonial ethics, and thematic analysis to illuminate how Buenos Aires' alternative EDM cultures balance empowerment and exclusion. By investigating disidentification in a non-Western context, I aim to contribute to global scholarship on queer cultures and offer strategies for more inclusive and empowering spaces in worldwide EDM scenes.

Disidentification Unpacked: The Dance of Difference in Theory

“I think that techno is mainly a genre that provides spaces to change paradigms and break down barriers.” Haku (2023: 28)

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz (1999: 8) sees disidentification as a subaltern strategy of resistance, where performative acts within “sites of emergence” recycle and reimagine dominant norms. His broadest definition provides an adequate starting point:

“Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the *survival strategies* the *minority subject* practices in order to *negotiate* a phobic *majoritarian public sphere* that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 1999: 4, emphasis added).

To use an explanatory metaphor, it's like queer DJs remixing a mainstream song that represents the dominant music industry. Rather than rejecting it or copying it, they rework its very beats using the same production technology, crafting a new sound. And that remix then circulates in queer clubs and raves – or sites of emergence – where marginalized identities transform what once didn't speak to them into collective expression.

Muñoz describes disidentification as a subaltern strategy for those marginalized by national social structures favoring hegemonic socio-cultural norms, particularly in a US context of colonial cis-heteronormativity and white supremacy (Muñoz 1999: xii). He uses performance as a site where non-conforming identities strategize disruptions by negotiating and reversing meanings. When Muñoz speaks about negotiation, he explains that disidentification “neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1999: 11–12) rather than fully opposing it.

One of the most compelling aspects of Muñoz's theory is its ability to not only decode hegemonic oppression but also to employ multiple

tactics to dismantle it (Driskill 2010: 75). Muñoz (1999) underscores how interlocking markers like race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability contribute to social exclusion. His theory provides a spatio-temporal interpretive framework showing how EDM cultures in Buenos Aires both facilitate non-conforming identities and (unintentionally) maintain certain oppressive dynamics. Although Muñoz's disidentification theory has been pivotal, it has not been left without expansions, including queer of color critique (Ferguson 2004; Johnson 2001), queer diasporic critique (Gopinath 2005b, 2005a), crip theory (McRuer 2006; Schalk 2013), and the two-spirit critique (Driskill 2010). These carry valuable implications for EDM in Buenos Aires.

However, it appears that disidentification largely remained within a US frame. Thus, one contribution of my thesis is applying it to Buenos Aires, offering insights into how disidentifications unfold in 'post'-colonial contexts. Another is shifting the focus of disidentification cultural production to cultural consumption. Muñoz (1999: 189) focuses on visual cultures, while others apply it to cinema, music, or literature, but I extend it to everyday experiences. By analyzing both consumption and production, I link theoretical concepts with the material realities of queer life in Buenos Aires' alternative EDM.

Methodological Grooves: Crafting the Study's Soundtrack

Previously, I have established that applying disidentification theory requires identifying the local intersecting oppressions that manufacture normative hegemonic identities at the time of the study. To operationalize Muñoz's (1999) disidentification theory for Buenos Aires' EDM scenes, I undertook five months of ethnographic fieldwork (January–June 2023), combining participant observation to explore the EDM field and narrative interviewing for the descriptive part of my research question.

Babbie (2013: 355) advocates participant observation for intangible processes like subcultures. I explored every EDM space I could access, engaging with alternative queer segments as a 'host' and audio-visual producer at 'Espacio Ro,' and as a bartender or cashier at nomadic events.

Like narrative social researchers who hold that a human is “essentially a story-telling animal” (MacIntyre 2011: 216), I conducted eight in-depth narrative interviews (Czarniawska 2005, 2009; Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000) to capture how people make sense of their lives (McAdams 1995: 207). My Spanish fluency aided sensitive data analysis, and I retained original terms with explanatory footnotes. Although my sample does not cover all social positions, I tried to diversify it across intersecting identity markers like gender, class, ethnicity, etc. (cf. Fig. 1). This was crucial to see how identity facets shape disidentification.

I relied on thematic analysis of narrative data (Riessman 2008), adapting Braun & Clarke (2013), Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006), Jovchelovitch & Bauer (2000), and Nowell et al. (2017) into a five-step-analysis: transcription, indexical categorization, narrative coding, code interpretation, and comparative analysis. Narratively conceptualizing disidentification means that queers in Buenos Aires' scenes articulate



Sketching my interlocutors:
 1x lower, 7 x middle class
 1x non-binary, 2x cis-female, 5 x cis-male
 2x lesbian, 2 x queer, 3 x gay, 1 x het
 1 x Brown, 7 x White

Figure 1: Table of Interlocutors.
 Images taken and edited by the author.

counter-narratives, weaving their marginalized voices through and against existing power narratives to craft transformative stories and actively imagine queer worlds.

Conforming to standard ethics protocols, interlocutors signed informed consent forms, received risk details, and could withdraw anytime. Feminist researchers underscore reflecting on the researcher's social situatedness (Ackerly & True 2010; Nader 2011). Being White⁵ and cis-male granted privileges, while being queer, from Berlin, and an EDM “insider” (Bennett 2002: 459) promoted trust. Yet researching identities as a European White cis-male in a historically colonized context involves situational ethics (Flick 2014), so I employed decolonial suggestions (Castillo et al. 2023; Chilisa 2012; Hammett et al. 2015) that emphasize accountable responsibility, respectful representation, and full disclosure. I built rapport through shared experiences and moments of vulnerability (cf. Taylor 2011) and employed conversational interviews in informal settings, like walking in a park, or reciprocally offered skill-sharing in photography and graphic design. I prioritized socialist, intersectional, and indigenous feminist literature, open-access reports, and LGBTQ+ perspectives from blogs and magazines that are often undervalued by conventional academic frameworks.

Still, unconscious biases and power dynamics remain. Even though participant observation and narrative methods are fitting Muñoz's (1999) theory for identity construction, my scope is incomprehensive. At the same time, it enables a reliable analysis of narrative disidentifications. Far from neutrality, my cultural interpretations and thematic analysis stem from personal experience, aligning with decolonial views on knowledge as subjective, vital for contextualizing disidentifications in Buenos Aires' alternative EDM cultures.

Power Plays and Queer Waves in Buenos Aires⁶

Relocating the debate from the US to Buenos Aires requires identifying the hegemonic intersecting oppressions in Argentina. These structures define who is marginalized, and it is these marginalized ‘identities-in-difference’ that take shape through disidentification in the city's EDM scenes.⁷

My participant observation, narrative interview data and decolonial intersectional literature from Argentina suggest that in present-day Buenos Aires, colonial narratives of racial hierarchy, the heterosexual binary, and male authority persist, centering the affluent White cis-heterosexual male as hegemonic. Queer, non-conforming, native, Afro-Argentinian, and female identities – often present in EDM – face class struggles, patriarchy, homophobia, and racial discrimination, disidentifying with intersectional power.

The impact of colonial economic narratives emerges in those lacking class privilege, like Brow (2023: 5) from Quilmes, who couldn't pay a train fare and was attacked by strangers over perceived gender identity: "Because if they had caught us, they would have fucked us up badly", underscoring how class intersects gender oppression in queerphobic public spheres (Bianco et al. 2022). Argentina's racialized class system stems from Spanish colonialism and neoliberalism and presents European cultural traits as superior (Mignolo 2020; Quijano 2000; Santos 2016). Indigenous people were displaced, their numbers reduced by violence and disease. Since the 1876 immigration act, over 95% of the population descends from European immigrants (Abad et al. 2021; INDEC 2010a, 2010b; Novick 2010), leaving native or Afro-descendants and newcomers marginalized (Gandarilla Salgado et al. 2021; Sharma 2015). Still, not all White Argentinians are privileged, yet white Argentina remains the norm.

Furthermore, the Argentine narrative of gender is marked by cis-heteropatriarchal norms. Tauro (2023: 16) summarized: "There is a presumption that the gender assigned at birth corresponds to the genitivity of the person and [...] that all people are heterosexual." Lipi (2023: 7) encountered rigid Argentine gender roles after cutting her hair short: "Short hair is a boy." Decolonial feminist scholars argue binary gender norms are a colonial imposition (Curiel 2022; Giraldo 2016) and Indigenous or Afro-descendent women and gender-non-conforming people are especially affected by discrimination (CEDAW 2016; Curiel 2022; Hermida 2021).

Amid progressive feminist and LGBTQ+ laws (MPDCABA 2023), there is a lack of enforcement (HRW 2009; Pierce et al. 2021). Additionally,

hate crimes rise: 129 cases in 2022 (FALGBT 2023), 68 travesticides in 2021 (Marina 2021), over 2500 femicides since 2015 (La Casa del Encuentro 2023). Women face a 36% economic gap (CLADEM 2021; Statista 2023), and trans people are only 9% formally employed (Mocha Celis & CELS 2022). Harassment and violence persist, as one of my interlocuters, Hedone, recalled being groped in her school uniform. Such patriarchal oppression, including pathologizing gender-nonconformity, perpetuates cis-heteronormativity. The dominant hegemonic culture is far from safe for subjugated orientations, and cis-heteropatriarchal macro narratives provoke human rights violations in 21st-century Buenos Aires.

Queer Crescendos: EDM Sites of Emergence

"Because that's what they are: They're configurations", Sigfrida (2023: 13) said about EDM parties, "A party is a canvas and who's playing, what music is playing, where it happens, it's all variables that end up spitting out a new environment." Therefore, my focus here is to explore the concrete 'configurations' of Buenos Aires' EDM sites of emergence and assess their potential for enabling disidentificatory performance. My ethnographic exploration of the field suggests that Buenos Aires' EDM cultures in 2023 can be segmented into four interrelated cultures: commercially-driven institutional EDM cultures,⁸ identity-driven institutional EDM cultures, alternative nomadic EDM cultures, and private house- & after-party cultures.

This fourfold segmentation challenges the oversimplified underground-mainstream dichotomy, each showing degrees of emergence while also reproducing hegemonic structures.

Espacio Ro as Identity-Driven Institutionalized EDM: The Beat of Queer Identity

"I dropped at Ro because a Thursday at 03:00 a.m. and you are high and you want to keep going: 'Well, I'm going to Espacio Ro.'" Brow (2023: 17)

Passing Espacio Ro's doors felt like coming home. Music slashed through Palermo's air – hard techno at 160+ BPM.⁹ Ro's aesthetic

blends raw industrial elements in a small space – entry/bar, dancefloor, outdoor garden. My field notes mention exposed brick walls, red light, graffiti-laced bathrooms, yet a curated vibe.

I worked at Ro alongside a visibly queer or trans staff, so those entering pass a queer-coded door, cashier, and bar, all indicating that queers set the rules. Thus, diversifying personnel is crucial for queer sites of emergence in institutional EDM.

Making sure that the people are aware of the rules of conduct is essential for the creation and maintenance of sites of emergence. However, the concept of 'safe space' is certainly debatable, as Tauro (2023: 21) stated:

“I think there are no safe places. The world is a hostile place, especially if you're a minority, especially if you're queer. [...] But I think the important thing is that the organizers here know what the dangers are and try to take care of the people.”

Nonetheless, Ro tries to spatially manifest that, noted Lipi (2023: 33): “It's a really queer space. [...] Ro has made an effort to make it a safer place¹⁰ for all identities and you can tell.” There's a sign with the following norms all over the venue: No sexism, no lesbophobia, no homophobia, no racism, no transphobia.

Some more of Sigfrida's 'configurations' mentioned earlier in this chapter are (1) the small size and spatial aesthetics, (2) the musical narrative, and (3) its community ethos. First, Hedone (2023: 28) praised Ro's smaller scale, letting non-conforming identities perform more freely.

Second, Ro articulates an avant-garde musical narrative through local DJs, loosely guided by European styles yet allowing Latin-infused beats. While Eurocentric¹¹ cues might reflect colonial cultural supremacy, Ro reworks them with a queer focus tied to Berlin techno and early US disco. This approach exemplifies Muñoz's (1999) working both within and against dominant ideology, using Eurocentric music to disrupt cis-heteronormative narratives.

Third is Ro's perceived sense of home and belonging for non-conforming identities. Many feel “at home” (Lipi 2023: 23) and “free” (Tauro 2023: 26), echoing early disco/house histories in the US that sheltered queers of color (Garcia 2018; Salkind 2019a).¹²

On the other side, Ro's legal status as a registered cultural space (Gobierno de Buenos Aires 2023) means it must fulfill formal requirements, incurring overheads in gentrified Palermo and occasionally attracting mainstream visitors. Some nights see crowds of cis-het White males in attendance, leaving Tauro alienated in his own club. Yet, through local DJs and diversity in the line-up, Ro moves towards decolonizing the dancefloor by combining Eurocentric sonic templates with Latin electronic artistry. It remains a strong example of identity-driven institutional EDM conducive to disidentificatory performances for marginalized identities and has significantly contributed to the development of a distinct 'scene' committed to queer world-building.

Nomadic Echoes: Alternative Nomadic EDM Cultures

“When it comes to the people, the interactions, the environment, and the music, I feel like the underground locations – the underground scene is the absolute best.” Lipi (2023: 25)

The 2023 nomadic alternative EDM landscape in Buenos Aires is vast. I went to the Gangbang, Neomarik, Tauro Nena, 999, and the Cura, while the Faggot, Astro Rave, Kaos Rave, and others slipped off my radar. The concrete characteristics of nomadic EDM as sites of emergence are: (1) flexible locations and schedules relatively free from legal frameworks, (2) curation by collectives who emphasize community, (3) admission based on social/cultural ties rather than market logics, and (4) strong DIY and queer-centric codes ensuring acceptance.

Nomadic alternative EDM cultures are more fluid than institutional EDM, typically organized by small, tight-knit collectives. These groups prioritize DIY production, decentralization, and shared ownership, fostering community-driven spaces. Alternative nomadic EDM cultures adopt the organizational logics of capitalist institutions, such as branding, promotion, and financial management, but rework them through equitarian, queer-centric interventions to work on and against dominant order.

Alternative nomadic collectives operate intentionally in legal and market grey zones, choosing venues and event frequency with flexibility. They host gatherings in both formal clubs like Ro and informal spaces such as a park in the case of the Neomarik rave. This adaptability helps them navigate the liminal space between legality and formality – relatively free from rigid institutional constraints and high operational fixed costs – aligning more closely with their values and community needs.

A defining trait of nomadic EDM sites in Buenos Aires is their reliance on social and cultural capital over economic means for access. Lipi described how meeting organizers and regulars expanded their network, integrating them into the scene. Word-of-mouth, select social media, and private groups shape entry, ensuring that participants understand the scene's dynamics, like queer codes of conduct. Unlike open-access venues like Ro, these collectives cultivate tightly-knit, intentional communities that foster cohesive queer disidentification narratives.

I joined a Cura rave in a repurposed Peronist train station. Lipi (2023: 26-30) recalled “The last Cura was insane!”, with energetic people, “no harassment, all respect,” and synergy “like a starship”. This intangible energy stems from carefully curated crowds, sound, lighting, and queer performances, underscoring the success of nomadic alternative EDM collectives in crafting free and interconnected experiences for identities-in-difference.

Nomadic EDM sites in Buenos Aires vary widely, from the sexually explicit male gay Gangbang to the queerer Neomarik and Cura. Their lack of institutional formality allows them to maintain a strong identity narrative, relatively free from economic commodification pressures that trouble Espacio Ro. As a result, the spatial characteristics of these sites of emergence foster a higher degree of enabling disidentificatory performances.

*After The After-Party: Queer Frequencies in Private Spheres*¹³

“Everyone wanted to go to after-parties. [...] And that was under. I noticed the symbolic difference, how the difference felt. It was much cooler – well, much more under.” Tauro (2023: 7)

Potentially countless after-parties are a common continuation of dance nights in Buenos Aires, adapting to legal closing-time restrictions. These afters vary from commercial events in clubs to casual gatherings in private kitchens with music from a phone speaker, leading to fully-fledged after-party cultures.¹⁴

Private after-parties are often characterized by smaller, more intimate settings, typically organized spontaneously outside the formal for-profit EDM scene. This grants the attendees greater curatorial control over the space, including guest selection, music, activities, and behavioral norms. Exclusivity can foster a sense of community and safety among attendees – enabling vulnerability and mutual care – making it another crucial characteristic of after-party sites of emergence. Sigfrida's (2023: 15) narration of one of his most memorable nights illustrates this, where he described how the after party was tinted in “his vibe”:

“I put on a vintage jacket. I had this shirt and the leather pants and pink crocs and I was the homeowner. [...] Tauro says that this after-party got *my* vibe because it was at my place. And we were all how *I am*: Super childish and playful, we were having a great time. [...] I did a magic show. [...] And I was like, ‘I made you come over, now dance with me!’ and we all started dancing.”

Sigfrida set the tone for disidentification and free expression at his after-party. His gender-bending attire, inclusive engagement, energetic dancing and magic show disidentified with traditional EDM, where the atmosphere is usually curated by DJs or promoters. At private after-parties, however, participants set the tone, reconfiguring hierarchies and power dynamics that persist even in alternative EDM venues.

Moreover, private afters are social nodes of connection that foster community and enable collaborations that may facilitate the planning and implementation of strategies for further queering the EDM world. “And at that after party, besides having a great time and having fun,” Sigfrida's (2023: 15-16) story continues,

“I arranged a whole bunch of musical meetings that developed through the following week. So, that party had repercussions on my

music career [...] And plus, I escalated the social ladder because everybody was at my place having a great time, and I was validated by the most important people there. So, I was like, 'Bitch, I'm queen.'"

In conclusion, Buenos Aires' private after-parties are key sites for disidentification, offering autonomous, non-commercial, participatory spaces where alternative social orders take shape. Sigfrida transformed his after into a launchpad for professional and social growth within the EDM scene, exemplifying this process. More than just hedonistic retreats, these gatherings foster disidentificatory strategies that help queers navigate, challenge, and reshape dominant cultural narratives.

Dissonant Identities: Narrating Queer Disidentifications

The following narratives are the heart of this article, examining how alternative EDM spaces in Buenos Aires enable disidentifications – resisting heterosexual norms, economic hierarchies, and Eurocentric cultural dominance. Building on the spatial analysis and the structural intersectional backbone, I outline counter-hegemonic narratives from my data, emerging new modes of queer belonging and world-making.

Finding the Vibe: Narrating Alternative EDM as a Place of Belonging

"I am always in that constant search – that has to do with my history of exclusion as a child – the constant search for that place of belonging where I can feel comfortable." Brow (2023: 2)

Brow's quote encapsulates what I consider the strongest disidentification narrative of alternative EDM segments in Buenos Aires: EDM disidentifies with cis-heteronormative spatial politics by providing socially excluded queers a place of belonging to perform their counter-hegemonic identities. My interlocutors described themselves 'freaks' or 'weirdos,' signifying their alienation in the majoritarian public sphere: "We're the leftovers [...] the weird ones", said Sigfrida (2023: 42), and "underground people [are] freaks", said Lipi (2023: 25). Brow's life-course illustrates this search for belonging and finding solace in queer nocturnal worlds.

Raised in a precarious neighborhood in Quilmes, Brow was marked as an outsider from an early age: "As a child, I was always very feminine [and] poor. So, in that neighborhood: I was clearly excluded, right?" This non-acceptance made the search for places of belonging the leitmotif of Brow's life, in which music has played a guiding role ever since. By age 14, Brow (2023: 4) found comfort in a *tribu*¹⁵ of alternative subcultures meeting in Quilmes' main square: "We were this group, all those excluded from their neighborhoods. [...] And for me, this group was interesting, because just like me, they were the weirdos." At 18, Brow's (2023: 8) latent search led him to Buenos Aires' alternative nightlife, such as the '100% queer' Dengue Dance events:

"A brothel from the 70s; a leftover from another epoch. And some crazy people rented it out on Thursdays [and] those parties were lit. The walls of the dancefloor were all mirrored, reflecting the lights. Suddenly you had a 60-year-old man dressed in a bow tie and a vest serving you in a seedy club, super high. I was like, 'What? I cannot believe this.'"

Realizing his personal search was collective, Brow (2023: 9) discovered ephemeral events with minimal entry costs, "not for money, but for the rave." People from all over the city attended, guided by a shared code of conduct. Brow (2023: 22) found inclusivity in EDM's diversity: "You can go to an electronic party and have any kind of people. [...] It's more plural, more diverse and hopefully that will not be lost."

By disidentifying with cis-heteronormative spatial politics that marginalize non-conforming identities, alternative EDM in Buenos Aires becomes a refuge, a site of belonging and solidarity. Brow's story exemplifies how queer nightlife fosters acceptance and celebration of difference, aligning with queer utopias that emphasize a more inclusive society where historically marginalized identities are central. Despite commodification creeping into some spaces, Brow's narrative underscores the promise of EDM cultures to challenge exclusion, allowing 'freaks' and 'weirdos' to see themselves not as outsiders but vital parts of a thriving, plural EDM scene.

Reducing the Heterosexual Volume and Raising Turreo

“But then, when I was 15 or 16 years old and I came out as gay, it turned completely around, and it became super cool.”
Tauro (2023: 12)

By center-staging queer identities, alternative EDM in Buenos Aires disidentifies with heterosexual dominance. Hedone (2023: 33) called it a “*putocracy*”,¹⁶ with cis-gay males as socio-cultural heroes. Instead of outright rejecting patriarchal culture, they recontextualize male privilege within a queer framework, exemplifying Muñoz’s (1999) world-building where different sexual orientations become central.

These sites even encourage straight audiences to disidentify with cis-heteropatriarchal norms. During an after-party at 888 in La Plata, someone admitted, ‘I listened to techno for the first time at Ro, dropped my first pill there, and kissed my first boy.’ Similar to my own unlearning of heteronormativity in Berlin’s queer techno scene – where consent and fluid gender expression were normalized and I could let myself be carried on the shoulder of a bull¹⁷ into Berghain’s darkroom – Buenos Aires’ alternative EDM encourages privileged identities to recognize their “invisible knapsack” (McIntosh 1989) and (especially cis-het) men are invited to unlearn ingrained power dynamics.

Returning from a provincial after-party, Tauro explained we were passing by a *villa*,¹⁸ introducing me to ‘*turro/turra*.’ Initially derogatory, these identities root in lower socio-economic cultures, often upholding macho patriarchy. Yet *turro* has evolved to symbolize rich cultural expressions emerging from *villas*, including a distinct style, language, and musical aesthetics like cumbia villera, turreo, or recaté,¹⁹ reflecting cultural resilience.

In alternative EDM, *turrx* becomes a hybrid identity that challenges class and gender norms. First, its gender-neutral form signals non-binary acceptance. Second, it disidentifies with class-based meritocracy by acknowledging unequal access to opportunity and relativizing achievement against a person’s lack of social privilege. Third, it subverts *turro* masculinity, adopting female pronouns and rejecting alpha male dominance. This hybrid *turrx* stands as a counter-hegemonic marker

at the intersection of queer and working-class identities, resisting dominant cultural narratives.

Decolonizing the Dancefloor: A Rhythmic Resistance

Although the leading genres in EDM cultures in Buenos Aires are European, the alternative segment does not fully reject or assimilate colonial narratives of European cultural superiority. Instead, it engages with and reworks the meaning of these genres to create queer sites where disidentifications can emerge.

Beyond that, certain branches center a distinctly Latin identity. Viper recalled first entering Buenos Aires’ scene and feeling a lack of regional rhythms, so she joined AGVA Records, releasing Latin-infused electronic music.²⁰

“We wanted to reclaim the dancefloor,” Viper (2023: 7) explained one of the main objectives, “We wanted it to not be so... colonized. [...] So that it’s not all techno.” She wanted an ideological shift that acknowledged and valued Latin and Caribbean rhythms: “So many people here adore techno but say ‘Oh no, guaracha sucks ass,’ – guaracha is sick! And it can be super fine. [...] And well, then we started having these parties where we mixed [...] guaracha and ethnic tribal, and dembow and baile funk, etc.”

A good example of that is the ‘Death of Techno’ story at Espacio Ro that Viper (2023: 11-12) told me, where she truly felt that her efforts of decolonizing electronic music were taking hold.

“We were there at Ro – after hours – it’s Milagro’s birthday, and well, everyone was there. Limo was playing some micro house, everybody was sitting there, tired, and I was tired too. Imagine, obviously, I was going to be tired; we were at 2 p.m. the next day! And at some point, Tauro comes and tells me like, ‘Well, you have to play now, you have to play!’ I was like, ‘What? I’m really tired.’ And he’s like, ‘But look, I see that you’re crashing – we’re all tired already. So, we need something to get us up! [...]’

And I went to play. I got in the booth, I started playing like guaracha and dembow, and people went totally crazy. I mean, people went absolutely crazy, but like nuts! I mean, they were jumping and screaming. And standing on top of the benches and stuff. Wow! And Tauro: 'This is the death of techno!' screaming like that, 'Techno is dead!' [...]

And well, that's when I felt it. I felt that what I was doing was really changing something. [...] And after that Ro made me their resident. So, for me, in my life and my work in decolonizing dancefloors, that story marks something very important."

This movement within alternative EDM to incorporate Latin rhythms exemplifies disidentification in action, refusing to simply replicate global Western EDM. Viper's story shows how local, Latin-infused beats can revitalize a weary dancefloor, forging spaces where historically marginalized identities take center stage. It disrupts colonial narratives homogenizing EDM under Western styles, proving that reclaiming dancefloors is not about mere sonic variety – it's about rewriting cultural power. The shift from micro house to guaracha was not just stylistic; it was political, invigorating the scene with distinct Latin sounds and offering a powerful statement on how music and dance can challenge dominant norms, create inclusive spheres, and imagine queer worlds reflective of a more diverse community.

Capitalism's Beat and Queer Disruptions

I argued earlier that Espacio Ro, registered as an independent cultural hub, is hailed by the market to co-opt cultural expressions for survival. Yet this is exactly why Ro is a strong disidentification case, prioritizing collective queer self-expression over profit. "I mean, if I wanted to make money, I would be trading or whatever," Tauro (2023: 26-27) explained, "I want to create the scene in such a way that I want to inhabit it. [...] For the family. [...] So, basically, it's a place for me and my ones."

Though operating as a for-profit venue, Ro remains zero-sum for Tauro, who relies on other events like the Gangbang to cover the costs. Ro thrives by emphasizing community values, reworking capitalist logic into communitarian queer economies. Alternative EDM cultures in Buenos Aires similarly resist neoliberal norms by fostering collaboration over competition. Nobody in my sample ever paid entry at Ro. Lipi

(2023: 23) recalled Tauro's Crobar phase: "I always had a free guest list." At 'Borderline,' guests got free garlands with drugs hidden in them, reinforcing inclusivity over financial gain (Tauro 2023: 5). Turning social into economic capital fosters community, challenging the neoliberal idea that social interactions revolve around economic self-interest.

Furthermore, Tauro (2023: 8) credits his success to collective support rather than individual achievement. Reflecting on an early after-party at a palatial venue, he noted:

"And there were super cool people, who now are my group of friends. People who were super triumphant in everything they did. Like: the best designers, the best artists. [...] They are there and want to become your friends."

Fast forward to today, years later: "I feel that I do nothing special. [...] I'm surrounded by the best people. And that makes everything super easy. [...] That is why I think we succeed in this."

By attributing mutual collaborative support, Tauro's life story shifts the focus towards community-building and collective experiences, directly counter-narrating neoliberal capitalism's promotion of individual achievement and competition. In his own words: 'I do not compete; I share. She who does not compete never loses. That is, she always wins.'²¹

Therefore, alternative EDM in Buenos Aires resists market-driven values, decentralizes institutional power hierarchies, and fosters queer support and solidarity networks. These practices not only challenge the dominant economic and social paradigms but also create alternative models that are more inclusive, equitable, and representative of diverse communities – all of which are instances of queer utopias.

Syncopated Struggles: The Complex Dance of Progress

I argued that Buenos Aires' alternative identity-driven EDM convincingly disidentifies from cis-heteronormative, neoliberal narratives. Yet it also perpetuates racial and gender hierarchies, neglecting harm reduction and ableism issues. Alternative EDM cultures that mirror societal

structures must also confront these challenges to embody their inclusive ideals. Below, I explore best practices from global queer EDM that offer pathways toward greater equity.

Dominance of the Booth: Male Voices in Queer Spaces

“In this [queer EDM] world being straight is like... It's not the highest position. In fact, if you're a gay White male, this is what it is: untouchable. And that is a harsh reality.” Hedone (2023: 35)

While alternative EDM disidentifies with cis-heterosexual affluent dominance by foregrounding the experiences of cis-gay males, it also subsumes other LGBTQ+ people under the cis-gay male narratives, reproducing patriarchal gender hierarchies. Hedone (2023: 33) originally critiqued this as ‘putocracy,’ where male narratives overshadow lesbian, bisexual, trans, and non-binary voices: “It is very dominated by *putos*. Yes. [...] When we women say that it's a ‘putocracy’ they get offended. But it is like that, seriously.” ‘Homonormativity,’ as seen in queer EDM hubs worldwide (Klaassen 2019), privileges assimilated gay identities over broader queer diversity (Duggan 2002; Mowlabocus 2021; Stolman 2017).

The Gangbang exemplifies this – while it challenges heteronormativity, its hyper-masculine space marginalizes non-cis-male identities.²² Lipi (2023: 37) remarked how difficult it can be for other identities to be comfortable in a space that caters to cis-gay men only. And Viper recounted male condescension: unsolicited technical advice, dismissive attitudes, and even interference in her mixing at Ro. “I was there, in my safe place, yet a White guy tried to stand me up at my own party.” (Viper 2023: 63). Only my female-identifying interlocutors shared these experiences, illustrating how patriarchal structures persist even within alternative EDM cultures.

That does not mean that homonormativity is uncritically accepted, though. Global initiatives like femme bass mafia (Kakaire 2023), Trans Trenderz (Malaika 2020), and Refuge Worldwide (Ubaldi 2022) support marginalized voices through education, representation, and skill-sharing. London's Solidarity Tapes (Cobby 2023) and Berlin's Decon/Recon (James 2017) promote collectives that obscure individual

authorship to promote inclusivity. Initiatives like this show how Buenos Aires' homonormative EDM scenes could empower marginalized talent, giving them the tools to navigate and reshape their environments.

Shadows on the Dancefloor: Confronting Racial Invisibility

Discourse on homonormativity critically engages with race within the intersecting matrix of domination. For example, Escalante (2022) details how homonormativity marginalizes gay men of color on Grindr. Weheliye (2022) and Garcia (2014, 2018) examine the whitening of EDM history and madison moore (2022) questions the erasure of non-masculine and queer voices from the nascent era of Detroit techno. Such discourse in the US includes grassroots activism, multimedia, and partying, emphasizing the importance of recognizing overlooked narratives in EDM and centering these perspectives.

However, in Argentina, it appears as if the ‘of color’ suffix central to Muñoz's (1999) disidentification is largely absent. While racism is less visible in queer EDM than in broader society, this does not justify sidelining non-White voices. Although the country is predominantly White, it has a rich mix of ethnic identities, including indigenous and migrant communities. Events centering on queer and trans-BIPOC identities may be necessary, not to exclude White masculine identities, but as a reminder of the ethical responsibility of structurally unequal societies to change themselves, including the active participation of those in relative positions of intersectional power. Expecting marginalized groups to spearhead change places an undue burden on them – especially in a Latin American country with a history of colonial violence and indigenous cultural erasure. Thus, one major challenge in Buenos Aires' alternative EDM cultures is balancing its strong disidentification with cis-heteronormative neoliberal capitalism while ensuring non-White identities are not sidelined.

Moreover, Buenos Aires' alternative scene could learn from global initiatives actively tackling racial exclusion. For instance, Room4Resistance in Berlin emphasizes targeted outreach: “Hyper-vigilance is a survival strategy for queer people. [...] You often have to make an effort to make it very clear and to directly invite the groups that you want to come” (Stolman 2017). Goldsnap in London ensures women of color are

behind the decks to attract women of color onto the dancefloor (SIREN 2016). Swaggers Like Us in San Francisco celebrates BIPOC cultural heritage through soundscapes, focusing on house, techno, hip hop, RnB, and Baltimore/Jersey club. Additionally, racial justice needs to be represented in staffing decisions, like security, bouncers, bar, dancers, lighting, producers, etc. (Stolman 2017). Financial accessibility and fair remuneration is especially important in queer and trans-BIPOC spaces, says London's Batty Mama collective (SIREN 2016). For example, Papi Juice in New York uses variable pricing and diverse promotional imagery to promote accessibility (SIREN 2016) (cf. Fig. 2). Kumi James aka BAE BAE (2022) from the LA Hood Collective argues that spaces must explicitly communicate their commitment to non-White identities as opposed to merely ticking the 'no racism' mark on the almost obligatory anti-discrimination list. Adopting these strategies could help Buenos Aires' alternative EDM scene move from passive inclusion to more actively enabling disidentificatory spaces where queer and trans-BIPOC identities take center stage.

Daylight Dynamics: Fostering Inclusivity Beyond

Other global best practices include multi-disciplinary artistic activities, daytime events, vivid community engagement, cross-institutional collaborations, providing education, disability access, and mental health interventions (Most Wanted: Music 2023; Ray et al. 2023; Safe Gigs 2023; Safe The Dance 2023). For instance, Papi Juice in New York pairs EDM with panels, workshops, and performances (Drew 2020). *Revuelta Queer House* in Mexico City blurs day/night as a bar with DJ sets and an infused art gallery (Fibela 2023). *Revier Südost* in Berlin hosts open decks, workshops, and screenings, broadening queer possibilities. Such expansions redefine nightlife by incorporating varied experiences and community-building strategies that attract broader audiences.

Daytime events, like *Swaggers Like Us* in San Francisco or deep house brunches in L.A. (DYLA 2023), challenge queer nightlife norms, offering more inclusive, sometimes sober spaces (Crack 2022). Their timing is more accessible for various demographics, such as older community members, and the programming can include family-friendly aspects. Buenos Aires' EDM scenes could benefit from similar events, bridging generational gaps and reimagining what queer partying can look like.



Figure 2: *Papi Juice* Flyer. Note the representation of queer-of-color affection and the inclusive line-up featuring queer-of-color artists as well as variable pricing. Source: www.papijuice.com/photos-posters

In this context, structured community dialogue is crucial. London's Batty Mama and Toronto's *Intersessions* use social media for collective feedback (Klein 2018; SIREN 2016). Berlin's *Room 4 Resistance* collaborates with LGBTQ+ and racial justice groups to keep spaces inclusive (Stolman 2017). The Berlin Club Commission shaped policy for clubs (Airen 2022). Similar alliances, like *Mesa de la Noche* in Madrid, secure EDM cultures' visibility without losing subversive spirit. Buenos Aires' EDM scene could follow suit, promoting active participation from diverse entities rather than relying on passive inclusion.

Accessibility and disability justice remain overlooked (Berne 2016). Ro's toilet for disabled folks might be used for actual wheelchair access instead of an exclusive drug retreat. Toronto's *Crip Rave*, London's *Fabric*, and San Francisco's *Stud* implement ramps, quiet rooms, inclusive line-ups, and staff training (Beery 2022; Provenzano 2014). Promoting disability visibility disidentifies with normative nightlife structures historically designed for able-bodied individuals.

Lastly, mental health and drug abuse are devastatingly underestimated. Sustainable disidentifications require robust harm reduction, like Boom Festival's Kosmicare or Shambhala's Sanctuary – psych care and awareness teams that challenge mainstream escapism with mindfulness and shared responsibility. Tauro (2023: 13) feels stigmatized as “a burned-out drug addict.” While I am well aware that substances can be integral to queer nightlife, encouraging responsible substance use, non-judgmental approaches, and mental health advocacy fosters queer survival strategies as vital as any utopian performance in alternative EDM cultures.

Remixing Reality: Envisioning Decolonial Queer EDM Worlds

In this article, I explored Buenos Aires' alternative EDM cultures, their entanglement with Argentina's intersectional power structures, and how people in these scenes narratively disidentify with the majoritarian hegemony to celebrate non-conforming identities. Muñoz's (1999) disidentification describes how minoritized groups transform dominant narratives from within, rather than fully embracing or rejecting them. Prior research largely focuses on cultural production (Driskill 2010; Ferguson 2004; Gopinath 2005b; Schalk 2013). With ethnographic fieldwork, I aimed to extend it to everyday experiences and consumption, revealing the capacity of queer EDM to reconfigure societal norms.

Relocating disidentification theory to Argentine queer EDM underlined how colonial, cis-heteronormative, patriarchal, and neoliberal narratives shape and are contested by identities-in-difference. Spaces like Espacio Ro, which adopts European-inspired beats, rework these elements for performative emergence – a disidentification with cis-heteronormative colonial legacies. Through decentering, I hope to have enriched global discourse on queer resistance, illustrating how communities in Buenos Aires negotiate and reshape dominant narratives.

From my interviews, Brow's story shows EDM offering a sanctuary for the marginalized, disidentifying with exclusion by situating minorities into a context of belonging. Viper's guaracha moment disidentified with European cultural supremacy, cherishing queer Latin identities. Tauro's collaborative ethos and the fluid structures of nomadic collectives oppose

neoliberal individualism. Such narratives reveal the achievements of Buenos Aires' queer EDM scenes in forging inclusive, plural utopias.

Buenos Aires' EDM segments – commercially-driven institutional EDM cultures, alternative institutional venues, nomadic collectives, private after-parties – center queer space-making over economics. A fourfold split refines the underground-mainstream EDM dichotomy and instead highlights degrees of both resistance and oppression in each of the segments – a direction that future scholarship must take for more nuanced analyses to examine seemingly progressive spaces like alternative EDM (cf. Adeyemi et al. 2021).

In that spirit, I argued that these scenes grapple with homonormativity, racial invisibility, and the neglect of intersecting identities like age or disability. I suggested that amplifying diverse voices, integrating marginalized cultural expressions, and enhancing safety and accessibility can push these spaces toward more inclusivity. Encouraging community engagement, cross-institutional collaborations, and investment in education and skill-sharing can further support this shift. Daytime and multi-disciplinary activities can diversify queer cultural expression and participation. This shows the dynamic potential of Buenos Aires' alternative queer EDM scenes to create a more considerate community that reflects the multifaceted identities and needs of its members.

Comparative transnational research like that of Bhardwaj (2022) is needed. In the wake of global migration, Gopinath's (2005b, 2005a) queer diaspora framework offers a promising lens for analyzing cross-cultural queer resistances in EDM. Future work could delve deeper into race and ethnicity, as Adeyemi et al. (2021) propose, or adopt longitudinal approaches to capture how these scenes evolve.

Ultimately, I hope to have portrayed Buenos Aires's queer EDM as pivotal for cultural resistance and queer world-building. Despite the need for more critical inclusion of diverse gender, racial, and class identities, I celebrate their resilience. These spaces effectively undermine Argentine intersectional oppressions and construct queer utopias – homes for those seeking belonging in a world that too often renders them outsiders, a fact I experienced firsthand. And that is why I know I will return

Endnotes

1 The term 'porteñx' refers specifically to individuals from Buenos Aires City, encapsulating both a geographical origin and a distinct urban cultural identity associated with Argentina's capital. It may include but often excludes residents of the Buenos Aires Province, highlighting the unique cultural and social nuances of the city's inhabitants.

2 Aligning with practices within Argentine queer and trans communities advocating for linguistic inclusivity (cf. FALGBT 2023), I use "x" in written gendered Spanish words (e.g., 'porteñx'). When spoken, these terms are pronounced with an 'e' sound (e.g., 'porteñes'). This approach reflects my conscious effort to respect and represent diverse gender identities within the text.

3 A central aspect of this thesis is music and many of my interlocuters are music producers. So, I add songs in the footnotes as a multi-sensual element to the reading experience. First: Tavro – En Mi Mejor Momento. Self-released (2023). Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuFgx-vvwo>

4 The '+' in 'LGBTQ+' signifies inclusivity, representing the broad array of sexual orientations and gender identities not specifically covered by the initial letters (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning). This addition underscores the commitment to recognizing and including all identities, beyond those explicitly mentioned, emphasizing the diversity and fluidity of human sexuality and gender.

5 Situating the debate around race in the context of Buenos Aires requires distinguishing White [capital 'W'] as a racial category from whiteness ['w'] as an ideological position. In this paper, I understand the racial category of White Argentinians as those with European heritage. I consider whiteness as the ideology of racial superiority/inferiority embedded in colonialism.

6 El Milagro – Lonely Dmbs. Released on AGVA (2022). Source: <https://agvarcrds.bandcamp.com/album/lonely-dmbs>

7 Acknowledging its distinctiveness from but entanglement with the national context, I focus on Buenos Aires' urban context rather than Argentina as a whole.

8 After exploring this segment in depth, I concluded that commercially-driven EDM in Buenos Aires conforms to global commercial EDM principles, reinforcing cis-heterosexual White male power narratives (cf. female:pressure 2022; Mejia 2015; Park 2017; Smith et al. 2021; Stassen 2021; technomaterialism 2022). Since it only indirectly enables disidentifications through its interconnectedness with more curated nocturnal spheres, my focus in this article is on alternative EDM cultures in Buenos Aires.

9 ABEM – The Flying Cat. Released on SINDEXT (2021). Source: <https://sindextrax.bandcamp.com/track/abem-the-flying-cat>

10 As opposed to safe space, safer spaces [the comparative form of the adjective "safe"] understand safety as something to thrive for actively and consciously, where, however, the possibility of harassment or discrimination cannot be ruled out; 100% safety can only be approximated. For a discussion of the terms see Safe The Dance (2023).

11 While acknowledging the cultural origins of techno and house music within communities of color in the United States, EDM scenes in Buenos Aires have predominantly adopted European-inspired EDM genres. This adoption favors more rave-oriented music and harder sounds characteristic of European electronic music evolution, including genres such as hard trance, gabber, schranz, Eurodance, and hard techno. These styles reflect the European reinterpretation of techno and house, emphasizing more aggressive tempos, minimalistic approaches, and darker, more industrial textures, diverging from the soulful, groove-oriented, and futuristic origins of their American counterparts.

12 Fingers Inc – Can You Feel It. Released on Jack Trax (1988). Source: <https://www.discogs.com/release/20132-Fingers-Inc-Can-You-Feel-It>

13 Sigfrida & Ta7o – Um Bota o Outro Tira. Self-released (2023). Source: <https://sigfrida.bandcamp.com/track/um-bota-o-outro-tira>

14 While commercially-driven afters share traits of wider commercial EDM, I focus on the more private house- and after-party segment. Felipe's (2022) book "A universal history of the after," chronicles similar trends in Brazilian alternative EDM, drawing significant parallels to Buenos Aires.

15 In this context, the term 'tribu' is employed not in its traditional anthropological sense, but rather as a metaphorical expression used by Brow to describe a subcultures or social group where he found a sense of belonging. This usage reflects a broader, non-ethnographic application of the term, denoting a community of individuals with shared interests, values, or lifestyles, rather than a group defined by ancestral or cultural lineage.

16 'Puto' was originally used as a slur against gay men, roughly translating to 'faggot.' However, within queer milieus, the term has been reclaimed as an expression of identity and defiance against homophobia.

17 Bull in gay slang refers to a man who is extremely muscular, regardless of age or hair type (Lexicon Library LGBT, 2022).

18 In the context of Argentina, 'villa' refers to neighborhoods typically situated on the outskirts of major cities and often characterized by precarious living conditions and limited access to public services. They resemble the perhaps more widely known settlements of 'favelas' in Brazil.

19 La Joaqui ft. El Noba & Alan Gomez – Butakera. Released on GOAT Records (2022). Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBwOrwd4WDo>

20 Rattlesnakke – Las Kuli x La Korneta TKP Flip. Self-released (2021). Source: <https://rattlesnakke.bandcamp.com/track/las-kuli-x-la-korneta-tkb-flip>

21 Translated from Spanish: 'No compito; comparto. La que no compite, nunca pierde. Ósea, siempre gana.'

22 To qualify: The Gangbang's identity is a hard techno sex party clearly made for gay males, so there is no hidden agenda of tokenizing queer narratives to promote gay maleness.

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SEXUAL PRIVILEGE AND PLEASURE ACTIVISM: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

Kristina Bör

“Sex is always political.” (Gayle Rubin 2011, 138)

Sex and sexuality are highly influenced and guided by social environments and socialization processes. Despite opposing essentialist arguments, they remain a highly political and deeply divided experience for people of different backgrounds and positions in society (Fahs and McClelland 2016; Thorpe 2020). Due to the perceived universality of sex/uality and women’s position in the reproductive process, many societies have strong opinions on managing specifically female sexuality. This leaves women with contradictory messages around their own bodies and experiences and has long fostered the idea that sex for women has but one purpose: procreation. This narrative has been strongly fought against by generations of women wanting to rise above their externally assigned position as reproductive vessels (Angel 2021; Rubin 2011). This thought was (and remains) so revolutionary that the idea of considering pleasure itself a type of resistance has emerged (Brown 2019). After all, how better to revolt against a capitalist, patriarchal system than to put yourself and your personal joy first. Still, in the same way gender roles in wider society persist despite heaps of attempted equality measures, they are imitated in sexual encounters. This is both because of external pressure but also due to internalized messaging and self-regulation tactics (Fahs and Swank 2015: 151; Foucault 1978: 14).

This paper discusses how socialization and the concept of sexual privilege inhibits women’s entitlement to sexual pleasure and the ways in which this could be addressed. The discussion is based on interviews with six women from different countries about their experiences of sex and sexual pleasure. While I don’t have the space to go into cultural nuances in depth, it was striking how similar many of the experiences discussed were, despite their, in parts significantly, different cultural backgrounds.

The underlying theoretical framework is the conceptualization of critical sexuality studies based on Breanne Fahs and Sarah McClelland (2016), who include and connect several academic and activist approaches like feminism, critical race theory, history, psychology, and many more. The authors emphasize three strands as the most prevalent: conceptual analysis, inclusion of marginalized bodies, and constant critique of heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege (Fahs and McClelland 2016), forming a foundation for sex research that aims to be inclusive as opposed to the often-limiting research from the past. Sex research has seen a shift from sex-negativity and essentialism towards sex-positivity and social constructionism (see e.g. Irvine 2014, Nagoski 2021). Yet, there are still many communities excluded from this focus, especially marginalized groups based on race, socio-economic status and/or disability. In this respect, the efforts towards a more sex-positive framework in sexuality research also become a matter of humanization and social justice for marginalized people who have long been excluded from narratives of desirability and overall well-being (Hargons, Mosley, and Stevens-Watkins 2017).

Remaining conscious of the complexities of gender identity (2009: 10) and aiming for an inclusive approach, especially in a subject matter where this historically has been neglected, in this paper I am using the terms ‘female/woman’ both in reference to socialized identities as well as bodily concepts (e.g. vulvas, clitoral orgasms, the menstrual cycle). I recognize that these physiological features and experiences do not apply universally or uniformly to all people who identify as women. This includes but is not limited to trans- and non-binary individuals. Many of the concepts I discuss can apply to people of various gender identities and bodily circumstances, but I decided to use the term

‘women’ in acknowledgment of the structural sexual marginalization and continued disregard. It is important to foster the understanding that categories are not fixed or predetermined, but always a product of their environment (Butler 2009: 222). This applies both to the concepts of gender and sexuality. The idea that sex/uality is socially constructed is important when looking at female sexuality as it manages to explain the variation of experiences, especially in contrast to what is perceived as “normal” and “healthy”. It also allows the possibility for change in cases that are harmful to a person, as everything that is constructed carries the potential of deconstruction.

Methodology

The forthcoming findings were part of research for a master’s thesis. Participants were found using accidental sampling (Walliman 2011: 96). The primary criteria for participation were “having been socialized as girls/women”¹ and being willing to share their experience with sex and pleasure in an interview. I found three people through a call on my social media, the other three were found through chance encounters in casual interactions. I opted for semi-structured interviews and created an interview guide with open-ended questions, which I amended somewhat during the process. This made sure that my questions were directly tied to my research objectives, analytical framework and interpretations (Galletta 2013: 47; 72). The questions dealt with the perceived influence of institutions, the participants’ personal relationship to their bodies and the influence of positive sexuality attitudes and sexual experiences on their overall well-being.

The interviews were conducted by me in July, August and September 2023, half of them online (via Zoom) and the other half in person. I conducted five of the interviews in English and one in German (I3). The participants were provided with an overview of the research project and signed informed consent forms. Interviews were audio recorded and accompanied by an interview protocol, including demographics, the atmosphere of the setting and reactions to questions as well as thematic strands that were apparent to me. All procedures were in line with the ethics guidelines of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The interviews lasted between 55 and 150 minutes.

After transcribing I proceeded with selective coding. Since I had conducted semi-structured interviews, many bases for codes were already established. At the same time, I was also able to gather new categories that I previously had not considered or that were more strongly emphasized by participants. I then organized the codes and looked for commonalities, differences, and connections between different codes. This process ended up being more inductive than I had anticipated, as through connecting the different thematic highlights I was able to focus on the underlying societal structures and their reproduction during sex, which I will go into in depth moving forward.

The participants’ age ranged from 25 to 44, with each of them growing up in different places around the world while originating from six different countries from four continents. Four out of six have lived in different countries throughout their lives and five women have a master’s degree or above, with all of them having graduated high school in their respective countries. Five participants identified as queer, bisexual, pan-sexual and/or lesbian and have had sexual encounters with men, women and sometimes non-binary persons. One gave no clear indicator to her sexual identity. Half of the participants were in an open relationship, further moving away from the usual heteronormative model, with the remaining three dating or being at the beginning of a monogamous relationship. One person identified as genderqueer, although they were raised (and in public places still present) as female.

Processes of Socialization and Sexual Scripts

Sexual scripts were first developed as a concept by William Simon and John H. Gagnon in 1977 to describe the “socially created and socially learned patterns of desire and conduct that govern people’s sexual lives, in addition to (or instead of) biological or psychological imperatives” (Carpenter 2015: 72). The concept focuses on the behaviors learned and socially sanctioned in different social groups. In their most basic sense, sexual scripts are used to describe how sex – the act – takes place and what steps are included in the practice. Sexual scripts do not serve as a universalizing approach about human sexuality but are rather a “conceptual apparatus” that can help studying behavioral patterns in relation to social change (Simon and Gagnon 2003: 496).

Social scripts, and in this case sexual ones, are part of the norms and attitudes we are taught by agents of socialization, such as media, religion, education, family and governments (Wiederman 2015: 8). The consequentially produced sexual ideologies can be both paradoxical and highly influential (Rubin 2011: 165) and often idealize sexual encounters and partners that are supported by these major institutions (e.g. heterosexual monogamy). Additionally, the appropriateness of each script further depends on factors such as social identity and socio-cultural environment. Men and women are usually encouraged to follow different sexual trajectories as “sexual scripts [are] explicitly interwoven with gender scripts” (Wiederman 2015: 11; see also Carpenter 2015: 66). For example, “women are socially constructed to want to please others, to prioritize others’ emotional needs, and to engage in emotion work” (Fahs and McClelland 2016: 399), both in- and outside of sexual relations.

Connectedly, there are scripts for sexual behavior itself, such as men being active and women being passive and the hyperfocus on penetration as the main act of sex. As such, cultural (heterosexual) scripts reproduce gender roles and expectations (ibid. 405ff; Reid, Elliott, and Webber 2011: 546; Sanchez, Fetterolf, and Rudman 2012). Even further, gendered racial sexual scripts stereotype different communities, for example, “Black women [as] being hypersexual and promiscuous” (Thorpe, Peterson, et al. 2022: 1403). Sexual scripts are important as they provide the background to what women are resisting in the first place and how a sexuality that is resisting mainstream scripts could – and does – look like. Therefore, I use sexual scripts to describe the way women are socialized to behave during and leading up to sex. I link this to heteronormative values and externally applied gender roles, which deeply impact women’s access to pleasure, since sexual scripts include socially constructed norms and values that are internalized.

The foundation of socialization processes lays in the way topics and phenomena are talked about and explained to us. Language and discourse are important to study in order to analyze how we (do not) talk about female sexuality and what we (do not) say, as they reveal who carries privilege and who does not. Discourse symbolizes a system of thought that is never in a vacuum and always influenced by power relationships and rhetoric of power, including classism, racism, sexism, and more. In

that sense, everything related to sex can be understood through the lens of social and cultural processes (Foucault 1978). Conversely, the absence of discourse, or silence, is as significant as discourse itself (Lyons and Lyons 2006: 156). This notion relates deeply to female sexuality, and sex/uality in general, as it remains a taboo in most societies.

Michel Foucault (1978) pushed the idea that alongside the establishment of church and state the *discourse around sex* became more significant than *the act itself* and he viewed sexuality as an “especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (103). Foucault illuminates the public discourse around sex and focuses on the power dynamics within. He identifies the centers that produce and control the discourses on sex and, in turn, benefit from them. This institutional control is then internalized, which leads to people controlling themselves out of fear of being punished for their missteps if discovered (ibid. 14ff). Accordingly, it has been argued that women are socialized in a way that puts an unequally heavy burden on their sexuality (Rubin 2011) and thus they learn to self-regulate their desires so as to not be socially sanctioned once they’re “falling out of the norm”. This “self-surveillance” has been further studied to negatively influence the way women experience sex (see e.g. Fahs and Swank 2015: 151).

(Hetero-)Sexual Privilege and the Hierarchization of Sex/uality

The societal norms we reproduce are entrenched in power structures and inequalities, among them the hierarchy of sex/uality and the theory of sexual oppression. All sex is not created equal (Angel 2021) and as Gayle Rubin (2011) states, both gender and sexuality are political, as they are “organized into systems of power” (180), which means that “sex is always political” (ibid. 4). This connects to the notion that sex carries an unnecessarily significant burden in many societies (ibid.). Further, there is “an *unequal* burden on *women* to manage the risks of sex” (Angel 2021: 26; *emph. author*).

Heteronormative values coupled with capitalist frameworks of achievements and success effectively categorize sex/uality into binaries of good/bad, right/wrong, etc. This categorization creates a hierarchy of sex/uality that devalues any sexualities that are not deemed ideal or

normative. As such it grants privilege to the people adhering to these constructed ideals.

Sex discourse often centers around what is “normal,” which is especially poignant for women, even more so if they are further marginalized, as a lot of research and opinions about sex are based on ‘male’ anatomy and ‘male’ experiences (see e.g. Nagoski 2021; Fahs and McClelland 2016). Despite heterosexual privilege being the foundation and the focus of most studies, explicit “research on heterosexuality often stops short of critically examining it” (Fahs and McClelland 2016: 405) precisely due to its perception of being the norm (and as such, the same for everyone), which results in dangerous structures fostering rape culture and sexual discrimination. Additionally, it disregards bodies that fall out of their allocated space, like old or sick bodies engaging in sex and experiencing sexual pleasure (Fahs and Swank 2015: 160).

These narratives also promote specific stereotypes and expectations, which lack a concept of sexual variation and present the idea of a single ideal sexuality (Fahs and McClelland 2016; Rubin 2011). People of color – and especially women of color – “bear the weight of negative stereotypes that destroy social, psychological, and sexual well-being” (Fahs and McClelland 2016: 402) which goes as far as impacting reproductive politics and upholding reproductive racism, leading to legal and structural barriers (ibid.).

By contrast, “gendered sexual scripts are more readily disrupted within same-gender partnerships wherein women feel less pressure to conform to gendered sex roles” (Foust et al. 2022: 3899). Interviewing five women who explicitly put themselves outside of heteronormative expectations offers the opportunity to analyze them from the margins. There were three ways in which (hetero-)sexual privilege became apparent: 1. relationships vs. casual sex, 2. the difference between sex with men and non-men, and 3. the experiences of solo vs. partnered sex.

Relationships vs. Casual Sex

All six participants I interviewed grew up in societies that were built on heterosexuality as the norm and where sex was viewed as a central aspect of building intimacy within a monogamous relationship, even

though none of them were (formally) taught what sex entails beyond reproductive discourses. The continued societal focus on the “core family,” which pushes heterosexuality and monogamy, results in women who want to explore their sexuality outside this framework being looked at negatively (see e.g. Reid et al 2011: 549). Hence, the sanctity of heteronormative monogamy only allows for sexual exploration within the framework of achieving intimacy and “creating permanence with a singular partner” (Tee Noir 2022: 15;33; see also Foust et al. 2022: 3898). The purpose of sex can never be without an end goal or for the supposedly selfish reason of experiencing pleasure.

The perceived difference of having casual sex and sex with a (long-term) partner is something that is highly promoted to us and women are generally more harshly judged than their male counterparts for engaging in casual sex (Garcia et al. 2015: 212; 16: 112). Additionally, studies – much like societal discourse – about casual sex often discuss the reduction of pleasure for women, usually measured by reaching orgasm (or rather the lack thereof; see Mahar, Mintz, and Akers 2020), and possible negative consequences, such as unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs; Garcia et al. 2015: 213). Others, however, also emphasize the potential of sexual agency outside of relationships (Reid et al. 2011: 546).

My interview participants embodied the confusion that came along with having internalized the message of differentiated impact and enjoyment, and then not feeling like it was the case in their lives. I witnessed the internal struggle of reconciling the excitement of casual sex with the promoted ideal of finding happiness within a monogamous relationship (I1.2: 239-48). In response to whether she feels that casual sex and sex within a relationship are different, one participant struggled to answer, but finally said:

“I think I have internalized that message and I think I do subconsciously have an expectation that I should feel that sex with my partner is so special and so different, but I don’t feel like [it] is, because you can have sexual connection, sexual tension with other people and the sex will be just as great. In a different way, but it will also be special and good and you will

feel connected and the quality of sex can be really, really good. So yeah, I don't think there is that much of a difference. But there is a big expectation that there should be." (I4: 43)

Another participant voiced the idea that it does feel different. However, this difference is not based on the idea that sex with a long-term partner is inherently more special because it is a committed partner, but that to her it fulfills distinctive functions. While she engages in casual sex for the no-strings attached functionality of feeling good without having to engage in emotional labor that comes with commitment, she also states that she enjoys doing emotional labor for a partner and that sex in a committed situation takes on a broader significance within that relationship. Thus, the meaning of pleasure shifts from feeling solely sexually satisfied to feeling emotionally connected (I2: 60-2; 70). This underlines the idea that the meaning of sex is what we ascribe to it and thus, it can change depending on the circumstances and people involved.

Sex with Men vs. with Non-Men

Sexual encounters are shaped by preconceptions and internalized messages of their participants. Roles become especially apparent in spaces where they are being reformed or broken (Butler 2009: 218). Thus, the reproduction of gender roles is revealed in encounters of same-gendered persons. The difference in the approach of having sex with women versus with men and the expectations put on it show internalized messages around gender performance in sex. In this case it means that "same-gender sexual encounters more readily enable women to disrupt heterosexual scripts and establish new roles" as it takes away the focus on penetration and instead allows for an exploration of other desires (Foust et al. 2022: 3890).

Five out of six women that I interviewed have engaged and/or are interested in having sex with women, some exclusively. They describe the difficulty in meeting and engaging with women based on societal assumptions and roles that they were assigned. Overall, they reported that the process moves much more slowly and that there are fewer guidelines (sexual scripts) on how to act in sexual encounters, which also impacts the way the encounters themselves are approached.

One aspect is an enhanced awareness of a partner's boundaries and not wanting to overstep them (I2: 17). Another is the willingness to prioritize someone else's pleasure. One of the participants shared the following in relation to whether it is important to her if her partner reaches orgasm or not:

"It's harder for girls to come so you have to work a bit harder. I'm just not worried about guys, they mostly come anyways. [...] But with a girl I think it would be just a bit more effort and a bit more attention and trying a bit harder to make it happen." (I4: 63)

This quote reveals several layers. The first one is the perception that men have an easier time reaching orgasm. Secondly, it is assumed that it is harder for women. Both ideas can be based on experience and/or internalized messaging about sex. The third layer is the conclusion, that if men experience more orgasms (or orgasm more easily) than women, one should actively try to counteract that. This reveals an understanding that sex and pleasure are not equally distributed across different genders. This acknowledgment of unequal access to pleasure was explicitly mentioned by another interviewee, who told me that she focuses much less on her own pleasure when she is having sex with women or non-men as she feels like she has to make up for all the previous men who have been solely focusing on their own pleasure and ignored their partners (I2: 15-17). Through her storytelling the participant showed an understanding of sexual privilege and its effect on female pleasure.

Solo Sex

The general discourses surrounding sex negates and ignores masturbation as a part of it, and it is rarely viewed as a positive addition to socially sanctioned versions of sex. Separating the acts of touching oneself when being alone and being touched by someone else in a consensual situation can even lead to completely ignoring the knowledge gathered from self-exploration and replacing it with desires being applied from outside, as one participant realized during the interview:

"That's actually interesting to know, right? Asking other people when they started. Because now when you ask me that way it's

like ‘okay, this relationship started more from myself and my needs coming from my body rather than-’ because I said, that it has always been dictated a lot by guys and what they like, when actually I’ve just been touching myself from quite young and I know what I like.” (I1.2: 108)

The interviewee revealed that she had never quite thought of masturbation as a version of sex before reflecting on the connection between it and partnered sex during the interview (I1.2: 111). This connects to the common reduction of masturbation when in a relationship, as it is considered unnecessary or maybe even inappropriate. After all, why would you need to touch yourself when you have another person to do it for you (Thorpe, Peterson, et al. 2022: 1412)? Following that thought, masturbation is seen as purely a replacement for partnered sex. Similar to previous research about masturbation, partnered sex was considered the more superior form of experiencing sexual pleasure in my interviews, especially in heterosexual couplings, as it carries the “social significance and legitimacy” (Foust et al. 2022: 3895), once again hierarchizing sexual activities under heterosexual partnered encounters (Thorpe, Peterson, et al. 2022).

It is no coincidence that the separation of solo and partnered sex is a widespread narrative as it is strongly linked to heteronormative ideals and the indication that sexuality is to be explored only within socially sanctioned interactions (Foust et al. 2022: 3898; Tee Noir 2022: 15:53). Additionally, I would argue that it is then used as a control mechanism to limit women’s understanding of their own bodies and pushing them to engage in partnered sex as a perceived necessity of exploring and expanding intimate knowledge about themselves. In a negative view, partnered sex is regarded superior and seen as the rightful way to engage in sexual exploration (Foust et al. 2022: 3895), leading women to negate personally acquired knowledge about their own bodies and instead focusing on what is applied externally or discovered in connection with partners. In a positive reflection, solo and partnered sex are considered two sides of the same coin, as shared below:

“I love masturbation and I love also that it’s also a practice including sexuality without a person. I think it’s so fun. ... But I

feel like [having sex with your partner] is not the same, it’s not that you are dating somebody and then you’re not – I mean it’s two different things, you need both in your life, for me.” (I5: 110)

The space solo sex inhabits once being in a partnered situation is linked to how it is seen by a person in the first place. Engaging in masturbation purely for functional reasons will probably lead to a decrease once these goals can be reached elsewhere. However, especially for women, masturbation can have a positive impact on their overall sexual experience and pleasure.

The hierarchization of sex/uality limits the perceived appropriateness of masturbation and gaining intimate knowledge of oneself. Externally placed scripts are effective in limiting women in their own intimate exploration, which becomes a problem when voicing one’s needs and boundaries. There is a big divergence between how women might act on their own and once they enter a sexual encounter with someone else, the latter inviting the possibility of external judgement (Reid et al. 2011: 559), but also a sense of responsibility for the other person’s pleasure (Mahar et al. 2020). This causes modification of one’s personal behavior, even if it is to one’s own detriment.

Accessibility of Pleasure

In most cases, it is decided right after birth which gender role we are to perform and, accordingly, we are raised with specific values and expectations, including sexual ideologies that are being produced and pushed by different institutions. While “sexual ideology may change” (Reiss 2015: 52), most societies – and all societies in which my participants grew up in – morally evaluate sexuality, shifting it from the private sphere into a social trait that is judged externally (ibid.). Different backgrounds bring forth different influences that can both positively and negatively impact women’s sexual agency and well-being. These can include the state (e.g. laws), religious institutions (e.g. rules surrounding and supporting the sanctity of sexual relations), medical institutions (e.g. by framing “normalization” and pushing health concerns), families (e.g. through the way sex is or is not talked about), friends (e.g. peer pressure and/or empowerment), schools

(e.g. sexual education curricula) and media (e.g. pornography, but also the portrayal of sex in movies/TV), which has been enhanced through internet and the staggering influence of social media. The “controlling images” these institutions promote “influence not only how women experience their bodies and sexualities but also how they experience sexual desire and pleasure” (Fahs and Swank 2015: 155). All of these institutions follow their own (albeit overlapping) discourses around sex, which serves to influence and potentially limit female sexuality. These have a further differentiated impact if a person espouses two or more marginalized identities (see e.g. Thorpe, Peterson, et al. 2022; Thorpe, Praise, et al. 2022). Additionally, as previously discussed, the sexual double standard limits women’s sexual agency to being in relationships and as such upholds the hierarchization of desire, in which men’s desires and needs are dominant (Klein et al. 2022: 1884f). This also has “implications for gender inequality that transcend intimate relationships” (Reid et al. 2011: 549).

Through the limitations around sex discourse, the conversations about female sexuality often focus on negative (health) consequences with a strong emphasis on unwanted pregnancies, STDs and assault prevention, narrowing in on women’s potential vulnerabilities, which can, in turn, be used as a control mechanism. This leaves little room for exploring pleasure and other positive aspects of sex (Klein et al. 2022: 1885; Angel 2021: 94; Mahar et al. 2020: 5). Even more so, an incomplete sexual education leaves women with an “inadequate understanding of their *own* sexuality, bodies, and autonomy” (Estrada 2022: 130; emph. author), making it incredibly hard to adequately categorize personal experiences and to recognize limits. Additionally, the concept of consent was undervalued for a long time and is still often conceptualized in dichotomized terms, differentiating between wanting (saying yes) and refusing (saying no). This dichotomy is flawed in many ways, as having sex, much like anything people do, is taking place within “complex networks of power” (Fahs and McClelland 2016: 399) and requires consideration of gender roles and inequalities outside of sexuality (ibid.).

The accessibility of pleasure is deeply entrenched in these politics of desirability, gender roles and expectations, double standards, heteronormativity, and questions of identity. Consequently, pleasure

is a privilege (Fahs and McClelland 2016: 405ff). Pleasure requires resources such as time and space – privacy – to engage and explore safely; a supportive environment – or the chance to escape a non-supportive one – to be able to fully embrace one’s desires and needs, and to find out what they are in the first place; societal structures that allow for all of this; societal expectations that “grant” you the experience of pleasure and are not internalized in a way that makes you feel guilty for prioritizing it. The unequal access to pleasure links to greater societal inequalities (ibid.; Klein and Conley 2022; Sanchez et al. 2012). One participant highlighted this point by discussing how bewildered she feels about how people are engaging in sex in her hometown. Coming from a very poor, rural part of her country, she explains that it is common for the entire (core) family to share a bed. Generally, people live in close quarters together, so the chances of having a full-fledged sex life are very slim. She elaborated:

“It’s just bewildering how quiet people have to be. And then you imagine, is pleasure even a factor there? And even if it is, it is for the men. [...] And not just [...] the act, but joint family, big houses, you have shared [washing areas], which is at quite a distance from your room. So, the logistics of it, I cannot figure out. Again, then that’s where comes that pleasure is privilege. [...] it also has to be super quick. Your kids are in your room. [...] where does romance fit in? Where does foreplay fit in? Where does any-? I don’t, I can’t imagine anything, whatever- because, you are short in time, short in space, basically invisible. And then you have to keep things neat [...] and in that also people manage to do extramarital sex. Forget about the ethicality or morality of this, but I am like logistically, ‘how?’” (I6: 88; 90-2)

Her description sums up the privilege of experiencing pleasure in sex. She adds that often people will engage in sex outside or generally if they’re outside their houses, for example at a function (I6: 96). Besides emphasizing the privilege that precedes being able to experience sexual pleasure, her story also shows that people will have sex regardless of their structures and societal limits. Sex is an essential part of life for many people but, as described, there are many barriers in place to hinder women from experiencing the full spectrum of pleasure.

My participants voiced feeling selfish when asking for or prioritizing pleasure (see e.g. I2: 15-7; I4: 53). This fear is often rooted in the question of whether one *deserves* to experience pleasure (I1.1: 161). At the same time, my interviewees recognized the societal expectations these feelings are based on and expressed their frustration of feeling like they cannot voice their needs (I1.1: 278-9; I2: 51; I6: 21; 77). One way to face these feelings and maybe combat them is by adapting an approach that is usually reserved for and accepted by men. One participant (I2) mentioned being “selfishly” focused on her pleasure at one point in her life as she was trying to reclaim this part of herself after experiencing a bad break-up and was not willing to engage in any emotional labor around sex. Answering my question of whether she considered this a pleasurable experience, she answered:

“Yeah, I would still call it pleasure and maybe also some form of empowerment in some weird way. A little bit this- I couldn’t feel anything and I knew I could do this just for my own pleasure. Because I’m not feeling anything so I can’t get hurt by this anyway. So, I think that was maybe something that was connected to it. So, the pleasure became more selfish and it felt good in a way, but of course it doesn’t sound like I’m a nice person. laughs. [...] I mean, it’s like pseudo-political, maybe, but it’s a little bit this, so many men have thought about their pleasure and just their thing for so long, that now I’m just gonna do it and don’t care about their pleasure. [...] which also wasn’t nice, because it also isn’t necessarily their fault, that that’s how patriarchy has worked.” (I2: 15-17)

Interestingly, in the same moment she explained that she feels like men have been focused very much on satisfying their own needs, she declares herself as “not nice” and “selfish” for following a similar approach. Even while acknowledging that the men she had slept with also had a “good time” (I2: 41) and being aware of the double standards directed at her, she upholds herself to the standard of being a provider – not primary beneficiary – of pleasure, indicating that she neglected one of her expected roles while having sex. And while the interviewee enjoyed this period of her life, she also recognized that she would not want to continue having sex this way, as it does not solve the overarching gap

of pleasure (I2: 41). Closing off all emotion is not necessarily the road to opening yourself to pleasure, after all.

Pleasure Activism and Pleasure as Resistance

The experience of pleasure often stands against the cultural ideals provided in many societies and there is a big disparity between “[w]hose body is imagined as a site of pleasure and whose is not” (Fahs and McClelland 2016: 405). Consequently, pleasure can be considered a form of individual resistance to oppressing, often patriarchal, norms. It also requires, however, social structures that support and make a prioritization possible, once again pointing out the contradictory role of societal norms on sexuality. Pleasure activists, such as adrienne maree brown, believe that pleasure is a human birth right and thus urge for the change of societal structures and power dynamics so that everyone can benefit from it, especially highlighting the most marginalized communities (brown 2019: 13). As her definition, brown (2019) writes that “pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (13). brown links her ideas to Audre Lorde’s conceptualizations of “the erotic,” in which Lorde argues for a return to our innermost selves and remaining true to our own needs and desires, as no outsider can decide our personal truths for us (Lorde 2019). These notions are essential for a redefinition of sex and embodied resistance² aids in shifting the narrative onto marginalized bodies and (imaginings of) sexualities (Fahs and McClelland 2016: 405).

After discussing at length all the ways sex does not work for women and how socialization impacts their enjoyment of sex, I wanted to know what actually constitutes pleasure for my interviewees. Even though the questions were not steered in this direction particularly, all participants answered them regarding partnered sex and as such this section will focus on pleasurable parts of having sex with a partner. There were six commonly stated aspects of pleasurable sex: emotional connection, open communication, sense of validation, confidence, sexual tension, and genuineness.

One participant summarized her ideal sexual experience as the following:

“There are a lot of different elements in which you have to be compatible and for me that is sexual tension, chemistry, emotional and intellectual connection, and physiology in terms of size, body shape, smell, and taste. [...] And then also the openness to have honest and open communication, where you feel safe to communicate what you like and what you don’t like.”
(14: 21)

Of course, these aspects require a lot of vulnerability and the awareness that every sexual encounter will be different and appreciating the *process* of connecting with another person as opposed to chasing a goal and feeling frustrated if it is not reached. After internalizing a lot of messages referring to the opposite this may seem like a difficult approach. As one participant explained:

“I feel there’s a lot of social pressure about being good at sex. I don’t like that. I don’t like that approach to it. [...] I don’t think there should be something you have to be good at or bad-It’s not a competition. It’s all about you and your desires and experience that you are sharing with yourself or someone, where you’re getting to feel good. So, it can be an art and talent and everything, but it does not have to be. It could be like eating.”
(16: 101)

The idea of comparing sex to eating is a metaphor that really stuck with me as a person who argues for the need to de-segregate sex from the rest of life, and this perspective views it as another aspect of existing, another form of human interaction. Consequently, I believe there must be a re-definition of sex/uality. Asking my interviewees their opinion, there are five aspects that I gathered.

The first one is recognizing that *sex is more than just the final act*, and instead to consider the surrounding or accompanying aspects. The second aspect is *de-centering sex from relationships* or even embracing new relationship models, such as ethical non-monogamy (ENM),

in order to take the pressure off the function of sex as the center of romantic relationships. Connectedly, *disrupting the male-centered discourse* and breaking taboos to openly talk about pleasure is essential. Talking about what we want and where our boundaries are – generally talking openly about sex and sharing knowledge about different aspects of sex/uality – will also make it easier to navigate consent and be aware of *both* risks and pleasure. Broadening the discourse to include genuine narrations and replacing common narratives is an important step in de- and reconstructing sex/uality. Additionally, it is important to *foster internal knowledge* and to be aware of one’s own wants, needs and boundaries. Rejecting the sexual scripts we have been taught and turning from a sexuality that has been placed upon us towards one that feels genuine and authentic to ourselves is an important step towards reclaiming our right to pleasure (Lorde 2019). While circumstances, environments and partners may change; while our personal moods, desires and needs might change, the knowledge we have acquired through past experiences and experimentations always remains valid. And while having someone to share sexuality with is a great addition to life, the only way to consistently experience pleasure is by being able to create it for yourself (Driel and Vincent 2012: 4). Hence, *prioritizing pleasure* is another – if not *the* – essential aspect of re-defining sexuality. Pleasure is a human right and as much as it is necessary to fight for it on a public stage, it starts within us, acknowledging that we deserve to feel it and making sure we get to experience it.

Conclusion

In a world where societal expectations and structures limit women’s agency over their bodies and desires, embracing and prioritizing pleasure becomes an act of rebellion and activism (The Orgasm Lab 2021: 24:30). As the discourse evolves, language and societal perceptions must be reshaped to empower women to reclaim their bodies and sexual autonomy. Pleasure means liberation from pressures of socialization and society.

This paper discussed how the hierarchization of sex/uality promotes heterosexual ideals – including monogamy and the elevation of partnered sex in opposition to solo sex – under which women’s enjoyment of sex

suffers, as shown with the contrast drawn to encounters with non-men. Sexual scripts and the general sex discourse being centered around the ‘male’ experience – and consequently awarding it privilege – additionally affects women’s sense of entitlement to pleasure. As such, pleasure can be considered an act of resistance against harmful socialization and gender role expectations that are detrimental to women’s sexual – and overall – well-being.

The question of who deserves to experience pleasure is strongly connected to the understanding that all people deserve equal and humane treatment. It is a question of both mental and physical health and well-being. In this sense, redefining sex/uality to include a varied range of perspectives and experiences ultimately serves as a “social justice opportunity” (Hargons et al. 2017: 540). Pleasure signifies freedom to do and be as you please – freedom on the most intimate, personal and profound level – and thus, pleasure can be interpreted as liberation from pressures of socialization and society. I argue that experiencing (sexual) pleasure is a way of rebellion and political activism in a world that upholds aspirational ideals of chastity, purity and subservience for women. Or, as many other researchers and activists have put it: pleasure is a birthright. And it is about time we act like it.

Endnotes

1 Socialization in this paper refers to the way society viewed my participants based on their assigned sex at birth and the gender roles and norms they were brought up with consequently. I acknowledge that socialization processes can feel very disruptive if an individual does feel resistance to the gender they have been assigned. An in-depth analysis of this problem goes beyond the scope of this paper, warranting additional research into how learned gender roles and assigned identities are impacted by/impact sex/uality for trans* and non-binary people.

2 Embodied resistance refers to the idea of using the body to carry a message that changes, rejects and overall resists ideals prescribed by society. This happens by reframing bodies falling out of the desired “norm” as healthy, normal and – in the discourse of sexual pleasure – equally desirable, both to be in and to being attracted to (Fahs and Swank 2015).

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GENDER ROLES AND REALITIES WITHIN THE BALINESE FAMILY SYSTEM: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS

Aurora Festl

The island of Bali, part of the Indonesian archipelago, is widely recognized for its rich cultural heritage and continues to be promoted as a major tourist destination. Having spent nearly a decade traveling, studying, living, working and conducting research on the island, I was driven by a deep curiosity about the intersection of gender, societal organization, and religious practice – and their impacts on the roles of women within the Balinese family system. Therefore, the focus of this examination is to understand how Indonesian and local politics intersect with Balinese Hinduism and the ways in which these dynamics actively shape societal expectations for women and create their lived realities.

Having been a Dutch colony before becoming part of the independent Indonesian Republic in 1945, Bali has experienced various political transformations, including 31 years of dictatorship under Suharto. As part of a predominantly Muslim nation – home to the world's largest Muslim population – the island remains unique due to its strong Hindu traditions. Bali has been shaped into a tourist destination since Dutch colonial rule, making it a site of both national and international mobility. As the tourism industry has flourished, bringing economic advancements, religious practices have simultaneously gained increased significance and visibility.

Beyond its global reputation for spirituality and religious vibrancy, Bali is also a place of continuous social negotiation for the Balinese

themselves. The social structures embedded in Balinese Hinduism shape the everyday lives of its people, particularly women, whose roles are influenced by both tradition and contemporary socio-political shifts. This transformation raises important questions about the evolving roles of women in both religious and societal contexts.

Research Question and Approach

The research I conducted between 2022 and 2024 revolves around the question: How do women in Bali perceive their role and reality within the family system?¹ It seeks to unravel the layers of tradition, duty, and identity that shape the experiences of Balinese women, offering insights into how they navigate their roles within both the family and the broader societal framework. Through this exploration, the study aims to illuminate the nuanced ways in which Balinese women engage with, contribute to, and find meaning in the familial and social structures that surround them.

At its core, this investigation embraces the diversity of experiences among my interlocutors, engaging with the intricacies and complexities that shape their realities and perceptions. Recognizing that positionality influences experience, this study considers each woman's intersection with societal norms as a reflection of the broader entanglements they face within Balinese society. Through my analysis, I will examine the ideals, expectations, and cultural concepts that influence women's thinking and behavior, the discourses that sustain and reproduce these narratives, and the struggles that arise in relation to their roles within the family system. Ultimately, this study strives to understand how Hindu-Balinese women conceptualize and perceive their roles – individually, within their families, and in society at large. By examining these perspectives, I aim to contribute to a broader understanding of gender dynamics in Bali and highlight the ways in which women navigate, challenge, and redefine their roles within the evolving social landscape.

A key aim of this study is to center the perspectives of female scholars, particularly those from Indonesia and the region, in order to minimize the dominant influence of male perceptions in discussions on female

realities. Additionally, I have made a deliberate effort to include voices from the Global South. As a researcher already engaging through the lens of European knowledge production, I recognize that my perception and interpretation differ from those of my Balinese interlocutors. Thus, incorporating Balinese perspectives is critical in highlighting contrasting perceptions, ways of living, and the diversity of experiences, serving as a gateway to deeper understanding.

Methodological Approaches

To situate this research within a broader statistical context, the Gender Inequality Index provides key indicators of reproductive health and gender disparities. In 2020, Indonesia's maternal mortality rate stood at 173 deaths per 100,000 births, compared to 2 deaths in Malaysia and 4 in Germany. Similarly, the adolescent birth rate (women aged 15–19) in 2022 was 32.9 births per 1,000 women in Indonesia, while Malaysia recorded 9.0 and Germany 7.2 (United Nations Development Programme 2022). It is important to note that Indonesia consists of roughly 6,000 inhabited islands, where trust in and access to medical care varies widely, making these statistics indicative but not uniformly representative of reproductive healthcare conditions across the country.

This research employs a qualitative mixed-methods approach, incorporating ethnographic research, biographical and semi-structured interviews, grounded theory as well as situational analysis. I explored gendered spaces in accordance with life events, observing how rituals, domestic responsibilities, and social expectations shape women's roles within the Balinese family system. To contextualize my ethnographic approach, I employed situational analysis, which allows for a nuanced understanding of local complexities, shifting power dynamics, and silences within discourse (Clarke 2003).

Caroline Criado-Perez refers to these discursive silencings from a feminist perspective on female representation. "When it comes to the lives of the other half of humanity, there is often nothing but silence. And these silences are everywhere. Our entire culture is riddled with them. [...] They are all marked – disfigured – by a female-shaped 'absent presence'" (Criado-Perez 2019). This is something I came across

repeatedly throughout my ethnographic research, in which I aimed for an in-depth engagement with lived experiences by situating narratives within cultural, economic, and social structures. During my fieldwork, I encountered both access and resistance – while I was able to connect with many women, establishing trust proved challenging. Many potential interlocutors withdrew from contact when discussions turned toward personal experiences. As a result, I relied on long-standing connections from previous years, which provided a foundation of trust that was largely missing in new encounters. All interviews were conducted in the participants' work environments, a space where they felt comfortable and retained a sense of agency. Through field research and interviews, I gained deep insight into my participants' life stories, enabling a nuanced analysis of Balinese women's lived realities.

An intersectional lens was applied in order to explore how caste, gender, economic shifts, and social norms shape their experiences within the family system and beyond. My participants belong to the Hindu-Balinese ethnicity and are embedded within the Balinese caste system, which significantly shapes their social positioning. The interlocutors come from the Sudra, Wesya, and Ksatria castes, thus representing both the *triwangsa* (the three upper castes) and the lower caste groups. However, caste is not the sole determinant of social positioning. Bali's dependency on tourism has integrated the population into a capitalist economy, strongly shaped by the rapidly evolving tourism industry. Recent data from the Bali Statistics Office illustrates the tourism industry's continued expansion: From 2,888,004 arrivals of foreign tourist between January and July 2023 to 3,526,862 visitors – in the same period the following year – an increase of 22,3% (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Bali 2024). This shift influences gender roles, family structures, and economic opportunities for Balinese women. While my work adopts an intersectional perspective, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. This study does not include the perspectives of differently-abled women or queer individuals, whose experiences remain largely unrecognized within Bali's predominantly binary and heteronormative system. All my interviewees articulated the significance of this structure within Balinese society, recognizing its role in maintaining social order and cultural continuity, even as it simultaneously excludes and marginalizes certain groups. Recognizing these limitations is essential

in ensuring a more nuanced and inclusive discussion of gender in Bali. This research is centered around the experiences of six women, aged between 20 and 50, whose perspectives provide a lens into contemporary Balinese society. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2023 and May 2023, each lasting between 40 and 100 minutes. Additionally, conversations in the field took place, which provided insight into situations, spontaneous encounters revealing their underlying dynamics. By revisiting long-standing connections as well as forming new ones, I aimed to uncover current gendered understandings and the socio-economic transformations influencing women's roles within the family system. This inquiry seeks to amplify voices that are often underrepresented or unheard, acknowledging existing structures and power dynamics while considering their potential for transformation.

Positionality and Ethics

As a woman conducting research on gender, my personal identification with this role has shaped my interests and exploration of these themes. Having spent extensive time in the region in various roles – both personal and professional – I have developed long-standing connections and gained insights into Balinese society. These experiences, while enriching, have also presented challenges that ultimately deepened my research.

Being read as a woman allowed me to form resonating relationships with Balinese women, facilitating open discussions on topics often reserved for personal and intimate conversations. Yet establishing new connections with interlocutors willing to discuss their upbringing and familial roles proved difficult. This process revealed the ways in which Balinese women create protective boundaries around their private lives, particularly in interactions with *bule* (white foreigners). Additionally, being read as a white person placed me in the category of *tamu* (guest). However, my proficiency in Indonesian and familiarity with the northeastern Balinese dialect often sparked curiosity and engagement, creating an entry point for deeper conversations. While practicing a collaborative and respectful research dynamic, I increased my awareness of the existing structures of power and hierarchy that shape both Balinese society and the researcher-participant relationship. This learning process left me feeling humbled and very grateful for the

trust, openness, and honesty extended by the women I worked with. Ethical challenges arose throughout the research process, particularly regarding confidentiality, consent, and representation. In conducting interviews, my approach was to invite discussion through open-ended questions. However, I observed that certain topics were deliberately avoided, subtly referenced, or dismissed outright – a phenomenon Adele Clarke (2003: 561) describes as “sites of silence”.

Concerning the ethical challenges, in some cases interlocutors explicitly requested that certain details not be included in my thesis, while in others, they would share personal insights in moments when I was seen as a friend rather than a researcher. In response, I adopted an approach that integrates existing research to support and contextualize individual narratives while ensuring the privacy of my interlocutors. This method allows me to include lived experiences without compromising the trust and confidentiality of those who shared them with me. These experiences underscored the subtle negotiations that Balinese women engage in: balancing social expectations, privacy, and personal agency. Their narrative choices reflected care and strategic omission, reinforcing the richness and complexity of the gendered dynamics they navigate daily.

The Politics of Role Construction

The construction of gender in Bali is deeply intertwined with social traditions, historical developments, and political shifts. As the feminist scholar McClintock states, “all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender” (McClintock 1993), where women are often seen as symbols of tradition and continuity, while men embody modernity and progress. In Southeast Asia, men are traditionally the breadwinners and leaders, while women are positioned relationally, as daughters, wives, or mothers (Mina Roces 2022). Balinese society operates under a patrilineal kinship system, where descent is traced through the male line, reinforcing male authority while positioning women in supportive roles (Arlette Ottino 2003). The *dadia* framework, which I will delve into in a later chapter, ensures the continuation of patrilineality, the lineage through men, strengthening gendered responsibilities and limiting women's autonomy.

Gendered Adat Governance & Economic Development

In the history of political representation, Balinese women actively participated in politics in the 1960s, notably through Gerwani, the women's wing of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). However, after Suharto's rise in 1965, Gerwani was violently suppressed, and the New Order from 1968 until 1998 reinforced traditional gender roles, positioning women as mothers and caregivers while men dominated public and economic spheres (Julia Suryakusuma 1996). National events like Kartini Day continue to emphasize motherhood as the ideal role for women and persist until the present day (Roces 2022). Tourism in Bali, initiated during Dutch colonial rule and expanded under Suharto's "Repelita" development plans, significantly altered gender roles. Women were expected to maintain their traditional domestic roles while contributing economically. Their labor in tourism was often framed as "supplementary" to men's earnings (Anette Fagertun 2016). The promotion of "cultural tourism" in the 1970s positioned Balinese culture as a key attraction, leading to an embellishment of religious rituals (Yogi Paramitha Dewi 2020). Women became responsible for maintaining these practices, which increased their workload while they remained economically and socially subordinate (Michael Picard 1990).

Bali's dual governance system consists of the administrative *dinas* structure and the customary *adat* structure (Carol Warren 1993). While the *dinas* system aligns with state policies, *adat* villages regulate customary and religious affairs, often excluding women from decision-making spaces (I Wayan Gede Suacana & Diah Rukmawati 2017). Decentralization post-1998 allowed for greater local governance but also revived conservative gender norms. Customary *adat* courts became influential in personal and family matters, often ruling against women in inheritance and custody cases (Evelyn Blackburn 2004).

In response, legal reforms in 2003 introduced gender quotas in political parties and inheritance rights for women though past conceptions of womanhood that maintain social and structural barriers persist. Women's participation in governance typically occurs through their husbands, requiring education and advocacy to ensure their concerns are represented (Ni Nengah Budawati, January 2023). Despite advocacy efforts by grassroots organizations like LBH Bali Women Crisis Center,

societal stigma and lack of support hinder women from voicing grievances, particularly in cases of domestic violence (Dewi 2020). Traditional structures continue to reinforce patriarchal norms, limiting women's empowerment at the village level.

The Triple Burden: Domestic, Economic, and Cultural Responsibilities

Balinese women navigate multiple responsibilities: maintaining lineage and caregiving, participating in economic production, and preserving cultural and religious traditions. Hindu ceremonies require women's unpaid labor in preparing offerings and organizing rituals, a role amplified by the tourism industry's demand for cultural preservation and the performance of religious rituals (Suacana & Rukmawati 2017: 90). This "triple burden" reflects the complexities of gender dynamics in Bali, where modernization and economic pressures coexist with deep-rooted patriarchal norms (Dewi 2020: 31). The threefold burden comes with significant demands towards women's roles and contributions to the family and society on a broader level. Furthermore, it reflects the complicated nature of gender dynamics in Bali where, apart from the traditional roles, women have to keep up with socio-cultural changes driven by modernization and the tourism industry as well as the emerging economic situations. Hence, it is necessary to comprehend the challenges faced by Balinese women in order understand the complexities of gender relations in modern Balinese society.

Ethnographic Research: Individual Construction of Contemporary Gendered Roles

This section examines the practical repercussions of gendered frameworks by analyzing key life-cycle events and their significance for women's social standing. Highlighting the obstacles and constraints imposed by gender norms, this investigation offers a comprehensive perspective on how traditional kinship structures continue to shape Balinese women's realities. Nine life events serve as determining factors in this analysis, as domestic, familial, and public spheres are deeply interconnected. These stages illuminate the negotiations and challenges that shape women's roles throughout their lives: birth,

childhood, womanhood, caste status, labor, class mobility, marriage, motherhood, widowhood and inheritance.

Gendered Preferences of Birth

In Bali the heteronormative understanding of distinct roles allocated to men and women is deeply ingrained from early on. Due to the importance of *dadia*, the assigned gender of a newborn child forms the foundation of perceived family security. According to my conversation with Yogi, „being born as a woman“, is perceived “like a lack” (Yogi, May 2023). The arrival of a son is seen as a fulfillment of the father’s obligation, underscoring the preference for male offspring. Men are considered essential for carrying on the family name, lineage, and traditions, while women are perceived as having fewer familial obligations in this regard. This phenomenon is widely acknowledged in feminist research, as well as in Balinese literature. When discussing the significance of *dadia* and the preference for male children, my acquaintance Ngurah, a 40-year-old painter from Ubud, described the cultural pressure to produce a male heir:

“Why the man is so important is because of the *budaya* [tradition], we need like community, *untuk* [for] keep, keep. Sometimes they stress, like ya I have no boys, need to do, do, do. And I have to four, five girls, because they say need to get generation, get generation.” (Ngurah, April 2022)

My friend Putu, a 37-year-old mother of three children I lived with, further reinforced this preference, emphasizing the expectation that marriage and childbearing are essential responsibilities, particularly in producing a male heir:

“Ya, *punyai anak* [having kids], yes. That’s important. That’s the first problem for *laki-laki* [men]: *Harus punyai anak* [Need to have kids]. [...] *Anak laki-laki, dia mau just anak laki-laki* [Boys, he only wants boys]. [...] For example, ‘for what we marry, if not kids?’ something like this.” (Putu, April 2022)

The expectation of bearing sons places immense pressure on women, whose ability to produce a male heir is often tied to their status and

security within the family. Rubin argues that within kinship systems women are often treated as social currency in the transactions of marriage, reinforcing gendered power structures that limit female agency (Gayle Rubin 2006: 95). This preference for sons is not merely an individual desire but rather a deeply embedded structural expectation that shapes the lived experiences of Balinese women.

Gendered Upbringing: Skills, Roles, and Social Identities

This section highlights the interplay between practical skills, cultural values, and evolving societal roles as shared by Putu, 20-year-old Tunik from Karangasem, and Ayu from Ubud. A central aspect of girls’ upbringing in Bali is their early involvement in domestic responsibilities. From a young age, daughters assist their mothers with household tasks, acquiring the practical skills fundamental to managing a household. Tunik, a young relative of Putu, described her routine at age thirteen:

“After waking up at 5 a.m. to help prepare goods, I’d go to the market with my mother at around 6 o’clock and sell our produce before going to school half an hour later. After school, I would support my mother with the family business, pray, and play with my friends.” (Tunik, April 2022)

Similarly, Putu, who is from a village in Karangasem and now living in Ungasan, recalled her childhood responsibilities:

“When I was ten years old, when I came back from school, my mum say to me: *Pergi ke sugai* [river], no? Maybe from house to *sungai*, maybe 800 meters. Long, and with small road. I went, go and back, go and back, maybe eight, *delapan kali* [eight times]. [...] Saturday, Sunday my friend like play with friend, but I am is not. I am go to garden, *cari kayu bakar* [look for firewood] and put onto my head, like this. So sometime in the afternoon I go to farm, *sawah* [rice field] with my grandma, when my grandpa has farm.” (Putu, April 2022)

These recollections illustrate how domestic labor is deeply ingrained in girls’ upbringings, shaping their sense of duty and responsibility from an early age. Their obligations contribute to the family’s well-

being while reinforcing traditional gender expectations. Ayu, a 50-year-old woman working in a fruit shop in Ubud, also provided insight into the gendered division of labor within her family: “That’s my old sister who help with take the water, because that’s my old brother doesn’t do anything for my family, just... cockfighting... ya, ya” (Ayu, May 2022). Her statement underscores the asymmetry in labor expectations – while girls are conditioned for domestic responsibilities, boys may be absolved of similar obligations. This gendered division of labor is also noted by Nyoman Tantrayana: “The whole of Balinese culture is close-knit, but it is also divided by gender. Both the male & female culture have their own strong, responsible, traditional forms” (Tantrayana 1997: 36). This gendered division aligns with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1969) argument that kinship as a symbolic and cultural system is governed by societal rules. Rubin further conceptualizes kinship systems as fundamentally relying on a division of the sexes, with women’s rights and responsibilities shaped by their role within patriarchal frameworks (Rubin 2006: 100). Balinese girls thus emerge from their upbringing with deeply ingrained notions of duty, discipline, and cultural preservation, conditioned to accept their roles within a rigidly structured system. While their contributions sustain the family and community, they are often framed as natural extensions of womanhood rather than forms of labor requiring recognition and reward. This dynamic continues to shape the lived realities of Balinese women as they navigate adulthood, marriage, and motherhood within these entrenched structures.

The Meaning of Womanhood

The societal conditioning and internalized norms that shape young women’s transition into adulthood are reinforced by traditional expectations. Following my interview with Ngurah in a cafe, I asked his colleague Kadek about the meaning of being a woman. She immediately distinguished between married and unmarried women, stating, “the tasks of a married woman and an unmarried woman, *belum menikah*, are entirely different” (Kadek, April 2022). This distinction was a recurring theme in my conversations, with womanhood being predominantly associated with the roles of mother and wife.

Putu described the essence of womanhood through the lens of motherhood and domestic responsibilities: “For me, a woman is a

mother of my kids. So, for me, a woman is so, so good, but so hard. So many *tugas* [tasks], like taking care of kids, pregnancy, breastfeeding, cooking, preparing ceremonies, many things, so many *tugas*” (Putu, April 2022). Similarly, Wayan, a self-employed woman aged 44 from Tegallalang, highlighted the integral role women play in family stability and emotional balance: “A woman is very important. She has a lot of ideas to make the family happy, to handle work. Without women, men are done. When a husband is angry, we can say, ‘Oh no, like this,’ and calm him down” (Wayan, April 2022). Putu’s perspective emphasizes the demanding roles women fulfill within the family system, from motherhood to domestic duties. Wayan, on the other hand, underscores emotional labor in maintaining emotional equilibrium and harmony, suggesting that men rely on women for (psychological) stability. These insights align with Suacana’s and Rukamawati’s observation that gender roles are inherited and form a fundamental part of one’s social identity, particularly within domestic and communal settings. Traditional household and village obligations are deeply ingrained, viewed as an automatic extension of a woman’s social identity that reflects the societal expectation to exceed in the fulfillment of these roles, which involves taking on the triple burden of production, reproduction and ritual (Suacana and Rukmawati 2017: 88).

The Religious Concept of Marriage and Societal Expectations

Marriage holds deep societal and religious significance in Bali. The ceremony *Upacara Perkawinan* varies by region, religion, caste, and local customs. In Balinese *adat* law, the concepts of *purusa* (soul) and *pradana* (physical body) shape marriage, family roles, and spousal obligations. While not inherently gendered, *kawin ke luar* – where the bride moves into the groom’s family – positions the husband as *purusa* and the wife as *pradana*. This framework not only reinforces female dependence but also embeds gender hierarchy within religious and social structures (I Ketut Wiana 2010).

Despite these expectations, some women challenge traditional norms. Luh Manis, for instance, left an unfaithful partner, traveled abroad, and eventually became an ordained Balinese priestess. Reflecting on marriage, she noted:

“Balinese are married so young and they do not even have a dream to travel or not having so much dream for your own, because they will please others. And then also the ideas of happiness is when you get married, you have a kid, you do the ceremonies, offerings and don’t speak.” (Adams 2022: 8:10)

Her perspective highlights how marriage and societal obligations can limit personal aspirations. Ibu Budawati further observed that many Balinese women accept their husband’s decisions without protest due to social conditioning (Budawati, January 2023). For self-employed women like Luh, societal judgment is an additional challenge:

“No, its very, very hard for the beginning. Like you know, in the beginning of five years that I can really feel like every time I go to the village, all of the women behind me or men, you know like chit-chat, and like ‘look at her’, you know like kind of weird and bizarre.” (Adams 2022: 9:43)

These experiences illustrate the social stigma faced by women who deviate from traditional expectations. According to Balinese customary law, normality is defined by adherence to societal norms, which leaves little room for alternative paths (Cahyaningtyas 2016: 197). Deviating from these norms invites gossip and social pressure, as seen in cases of premarital pregnancy, where families conduct small weddings to preserve their honor (Didi, March 2023).

Marriage remains central to Balinese identity, providing social validation and aligning with religious customs. Putu’s reaction to the new criminal code penalizing premarital sex reflects this sentiment: “I think it’s good, no? Many young people in Bali meet but don’t marry. That’s not good. If you love, just marry” (Putu, January 2023). This perspective reinforces the deep-rooted belief that love should lead directly to marriage, further solidifying the institution’s cultural importance. Anthropologist Evelyn Blackwood notes that in Southeast Asia, adulthood and respect within the community are closely tied to marriage (Blackwood 1999: 191). In Sulawesi, for instance, refraining from marriage poses a potential threat to the family’s honor (Roces 2022: 32). Caste further influences marriage dynamics, as social status

dictates expectations and limitations. Upper-caste women often face stricter behavioral norms, while lower-caste women navigate different social pressures.

The Intersection of Gender and Status: Negotiating Marriage in Terms of Caste

“Telaga understood and silently reflected on the difficulty of being a woman. In her own family, Sekar had to act like a true high-born aristocrat. [...] Meanwhile, in her husband’s family, Sekar had to act like a Sudra woman. She had to speak a more refined level of language with the people from the *griya*. She could not share her glass with her own child. She could not share her leftovers with people of the *griya*, not even with the child she herself had given birth to.” (Rusmini 2011: 49)

This passage from Oka Rusmini’s novel *Earth Dance* foregrounds the emotional intricacy due to the intersection of status and caste when it comes to marriage. Here, it revolves around marrying up into a higher caste as a Sudra woman. Marrying among one’s caste is a practice rooted in preserving caste purity and the transmission of cultural and religious traditions. However, when marital relationships cross caste stratification, differences emerge that can lead to complicated social and familial dynamics. Therefore, I seek to elaborate how this system of social stratification influences forms of discrimination and how differentiation in prescribed status impacts the life cycle and realities for my interlocutors.

Caste positions people differently in the social space of differences (Pierre Bourdieu 1998). In the Balinese caste system, its intersection with gender reinforces “the structural subordination of women” (Fagertun 2016: 10). Due to patrilineality and virilocality, “inter-caste marriage in Bali has important sociopolitical consequences for the bride rather than the groom” (Cahyaningtyas 2016: 199). Women from lower castes may face greater economic hardships and fewer opportunities for advancement as they often encounter discrimination based on both their gender and social status. They are more likely to engage in labor-intensive jobs, have limited access to education, and face challenges in asserting their rights and agency within the family and community.

In contrast, women from higher castes, such as Brahmins or Satriyas, may have greater access to resources and more opportunities for leadership roles or participation in traditional ceremonies, which can elevate their status in society. Yet they also face a different set of expectations and norms they are expected to live up to. Being high caste is very complicated due to the pressure of maintaining one's social status (Budwati, January 2023). My friend Didi, born as a Satriya, shared with me how being from a higher social status entails a more elaborate set of expectations that are distinct from those of women from lower castes. She attended an international school when she was young and is currently studying marine science in Denpasar, where she lives with her family. Her sister is studying this semester in Rostock, reflecting her family's sufficient financial resources to support a semester in the Global North. Given Didi's position, it is essential for a high-caste woman to achieve higher education in order to be considered a good wife, as being clever is an important criterion for finding a good husband. She contrasts these expectations with those of the Sudra caste, where education is not perceived as a societal standard when it comes to marriage. Furthermore, she points out that, "if you marry right after high school, it's so embarrassing in the city" (Didi, March 2023).

These challenges faced by those of higher caste backgrounds illustrate how women with different social identities experience unique patterns of privilege and discrimination. Another example from the field representing the expectation to live up to the social status, is reflected by Ayu's marriage, arranged by her parents when she was 25. She emphasizes that back in the day *triwangsa* was of great importance and determined the profession. Today this is different. There are many Satriyas who possess only a little economic capital (Ayu, January 2023).

Gendered Labor and Social Mobility

As explored in the discussion on gendered upbringing, labor plays a central role in women's duties from an early age. Tourism structures labor opportunities and possibilities for development on the island, making it a crucial part of their life cycle. Many individuals move from rural areas to the south to seek employment in urban and tourist hubs. When Putu first relocated to the southern part of the island to work at

Dreamland Beach, her working conditions were harsh and demanding: Selling her labor power, Putu worked long hours selling goods and giving massages, with minimal breaks and little sleep. Despite her efforts, she earned only 300,000 Indonesian Rupiah (IDR) per month, which is around 20 Euros, highlighting the financial hardships of her occupation. Today, Putu and her husband run a homestay in Ungasan. Reflecting on her current responsibilities, she explained:

"Ya, sometimes like this, but sometimes I have to direct. *Harus* [must] take care. I cannot be like 'Tunik, you can go and play', I cannot. *Harus, harus* meet *langsung* [directly], I cannot use somebody for important *tugas*. [...] Yes, *harus pikir* [must think]. I have to think and maybe I cannot sleep." (Putu, April 2022)

Transitioning from employment to responsibility and leadership, Putu's experiences now reflect a position where she has to take charge. Her repeated use of *harus* emphasizes the necessity of direct involvement in decision-making. She describes the weight of her role, where delegation is not always possible, and the pressure sometimes affects her ability to sleep. This shift in agency is tied to her increased economic capital and class mobility, which have brought greater accountability, including the management of employees and business operations.

Opportunities created by tourism and capitalism have made private land and property essential to social mobility. After working in Japan with her husband, Putu purchased land in the Bukit area 20 years ago. Today, she owns and manages several little properties on the island, handling guest accommodations, rental agreements, and leases. Her monthly income starts at approximately 12,000,000 IDR, even in months with few customers. With these earnings, she can support her children's education on Java, affording them the opportunity to pursue their individual interests. In contrast, Ayu, a *triwangsa* woman of higher prescribed status, works in a fruit shop six days a week for 1,200,000 IDR per month – insufficient to cover her children's education. Despite her caste position, her limited financial means restrict her agency. Even though Putu's income is not stable due to her self-employment, her revenue is tenfold in months of low income. In both cases besides care-work and the production of offerings, the women are responsible

for generating the family's income, emphasizing that social mobility is gendered. The rise of tourism led to an emerging middle class, as well as a shift in the social structure from *kasta* (caste) to class, dividing individuals into laborers and capitalists (Fagertun 2016: 11).

Nyentana: Controversial Non-Normative Marriages

In families without sons, parents often want at least one daughter remain at home (Putu, March 2022). *Nyentana* is most common in the *kabupaten* (district) of Tabanan and serves the purpose of ensuring that one child stays in the family, in order to carry on the family's lineage. In *nyentana* marriages, the woman takes the role of the *purusa* (head of the household), while the husband becomes the *pradana*, making the wife the dominant figure (Doktrinaya 2022). A derogatory slang term for this dynamic is *paid bangkung* ("being pulled by a female pig"), implying humiliation and male powerlessness. The fear of social degradation leads to regional variations in how *nyentana* is perceived. Ibu Budawati notes that Tabanan is open-minded toward *nyentana*, while other regions require family approval, viewing it as "no good" (Budawati, January 2023).

As a father of two daughters, Ngurah finds himself in that situation. He acknowledges that men are expected to provide financially and continue the lineage. Furthermore, he highlights the complexities of these expectations given his personal context. Due to his financial situation, he does not aspire to have another child and expresses the desire to have his older daughter stay with him and for her future husband join his family as *nyentana*. However, he perceives that it will be a complicated situation for the future husband. Rusmini describes the struggle of losing one's rights and traditional status from a character's perspective: "It's painful to be a man with the status of a woman. You no longer have the rights of a normal man. I had to obey my wife's every order... That was a choice I didn't really want to make. I needed a life, and for that, I had to sacrifice life itself!" (Rusmini 2011: 98). In Karangasem, Putu's hometown, *nyentana* is seen as *jelek* (bad). She dislikes the tradition, sharing how a friend who moved to Tabanan as a *nyentana*. He struggled a lot as he had to clean, cook, and take care of the children there. It was too much for him, so he separated from his wife and married a "normal" woman (Putu, January 2023).

This disruption of gender roles brings hardships for men, mirroring the sacrifices women make within societal constraints.

Challenges for Widows: Janda and Female Inheritance

Ibu Budawati identifies the lack of social support as the primary issue affecting women's safety: "When women speak up, the society doesn't support them" (Budawati, January 2023). She highlights two key challenges for Balinese women: submission to husbands and the stigma of divorce. Many women accept their husband's decisions without protest, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal norms. This lack of autonomy led Budawati to establish the Bali Women Crisis Center, which advocates for legal change and provides support for survivors of domestic violence. Surveys indicate that acceptance of domestic abuse is higher in rural areas and decreases with education and wealth. In Bali, 14% of women and 20.5% of men believe domestic violence is justified (National Population and Family Planning Board et al. 2018: 223). Bali is the only region where the percentage of men justifying domestic abuse exceeds the percentage of women. This could point toward a higher percentage of domestic abuse in comparison to other provinces. After all, since most of these voices are silenced, as mentioned by Budawati, empirical research and surveys can hardly provide sufficient insight into this realm.

The second significant challenge for women in Bali is the one of *cerai*, divorce, highlighting the stigmatization of women who seek to end their marriages. Budawati explains that Balinese women rarely gain child custody post-divorce, making them vulnerable (Budawati, January 2023). As stated in a survey on marital status, 2.8% of women in Indonesia are divorced and 1.8% are widowed. Compared to 50% in Java, Bali's divorce rate is approximately 1% (National Population and Family Planning Board et al. 2018: 55). The term *janda* (widow or divorced woman) carries a strong stigma, often associating them with black magic. It is deeply rooted in the belief that such individuals have detrimental effects on the village in which they live (Dewi 2020).

Until 2010, Balinese women had no inheritance rights under patrilineal customs. Advocacy led to a new policy granting women half the inheritance rights of men, after deducting one-third for preservation

interests (Wahyuni 2023). Many women remain unaware of their inheritance rights. “In case of a divorce, the wife has nothing. Actually, she does, but she doesn’t fight for it since she is not aware of her rights” (Budawati, January 2023). Budawati argues for greater support systems, as economic independence remains difficult to achieve and believes this issue could worsen if women continue suffering in silence. Luh highlights another possibility: before the pandemic, discussing unhealthy relationships was very much taboo, since suffering was seen as karmic. However, smartphones have allowed women to access information and provided an opportunity for them to educate themselves, recognize patterns and question traditional narratives (Adams 2022: 12:33). All these structures and dynamics are formed by a changing society, and just as Balinese customs are fluid, so are these existing dynamics.

The complexity and interdependence of these interwoven layers of society are constantly shifting, and so are the realities and interactions of their individuals.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Balinese women perceive their roles within the family system, uncovering the deep-rooted gendered structures that shape their realities. Bound by *adat* customs and a patrilineal lineage, women’s identities remain closely tied to men, reinforcing social hierarchies that limit their autonomy. The triple burden of household labor, economic participation, and religious duties places immense pressure on them, while the rise of tourism has introduced both new opportunities and intensified challenges. Despite these constraints, Balinese women continue to uphold the social fabric, often lacking recognition or support. As Criado-Perez puts it: “Women have always worked. They have worked unpaid, unappreciated, and invisibly, but they have always worked” (Criado-Perez 2019: 142).

Through the voices of my interlocutors, I have highlighted the complexities of navigating womanhood in Bali. Many have adapted within the existing system, yet their aspirations reflect a quiet defiance – whether seeking financial independence, challenging traditional

roles, or reimagining family structures. Their experiences illustrate both resilience and the nuanced ways in which change can take root, even within seemingly rigid societal frameworks. Balinese women do not simply fulfill prescribed roles – they bear the weight of cultural continuity while striving for dignity and self-determination. Their struggles are not only about being women, but also about the expectations of the role imposed upon them. Yet within their realities lies power: in their endurance, their agency, and their ability to shape their own paths, even in the face of deeply ingrained traditions. Change may be slow, but their voices carry the possibility of transformation.

Endnotes

1 In this study, I speak from a binary understanding of gender – where “male” and “female” denote socially assigned attributes, and “man” and “woman” refer to corresponding roles, responsibilities, and expectations traditionally linked to various spheres of life, while acknowledging that this framework does not preclude non-binary identities or experiences. Within this framework, “woman” refers to a person perceived as female and assigned the associated societal roles.

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- Yogi Paramitha Dewi, interviewed on 24 May 2023 via Zoom.

ON HOW TO LOVE OUR MOTHERS:
HOW DO DAUGHTERS BARGAIN WITH PATRIARCHY,
WHEN IN CONFLICT OR CARE WITH THEIR
MOTHERS IN GLOBALISED CONTEXTS?

Maya Ibrahim

What initially started as inspiration for a book titled “How to love our mothers” has turned into an academic effort from my encounters with women from diverse cultural contexts during the Global Studies Programme (GSP). This thesis delves into a sociological exploration, focused on understanding our need to recognize specific ways in which systems of domination are maintained - in this case, the patriarchy. It examines closely how the patriarchy is embedded in mother daughter relationships through the reinforcement of gender roles, expectations, and power dynamics through intergenerational cycles. The conceptual frameworks of the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1988) and love as a political act (hooks 1952-2021) are analysed by examining how power relations between mother and daughter are defined and maintained. This thesis highlights the structural sociological dimensions embedded in the shared experiences of these daughters through a situational analysis (Clarke 2005) and a feminist methodological approach. A closer look at how globalisation processes have led to changing family dynamics where patriarchal norms are reconfigured aim to connect everyday gendered practices to persistent global patterns of gender power relations (Ackerley and True 2006). Yet, this work does not seek to universalize the experiences of the daughters interviewed but to describe their nuance and lived reality in terms of how we (myself included) engage with the patriarchy.

Context

I am a daughter who chose to move to different continents away from my family in an effort to “emancipate” myself from my home environment in Singapore. This essay thus seeks to amplify the voice of daughters across diverse global contexts by scrutinising our role in conflict and care contexts with our mothers. The goal is to advocate for a deeper understanding and radical ethic of love (hooks 1994) while unveiling the structural power relations conditioned by the patriarchy that are inconspicuously ingrained in mother-daughter relationships.

The root of this conflict and inquiry stemmed from my personal experience of navigating the complexities of interfaith and interethnic marriage within the Singaporean context. Two years post this conflict and I realised that it was not the end of the relationship that I had not healed from, but the emotional wounds from the words and reactions from my mother in dealing with the situation. The fact that my mother had considered disowning me – which meant my social ostracization from the immediate family – prompted my interrogation of filial piety, a critical examination of societal expectations and familial obligations, especially as a daughter, within a patriarchal context.

Since completing my thesis on 8 March 2024 (International Women’s Day), this work has blossomed into pieces of poetry that I have written and performed at Berlin Spoken Word, subsequently shared with my mother. I guess I discovered a new way of communicating with her. She was shocked at first. That her daughter would go up on stage and talk about our relationship. But then I discovered how much the content resonated with the audience since many daughters came up to me and found the story relatable. Because of this, I choose to pursue this path of writing, and am thankful for the spaces of solidarity that exist in Berlin, Singapore, and beyond. As the world seems like it is falling apart with multiple conflicts around the globe, I invite people to take a look at their lives to find pockets of love and where things matter most. For those with mothers, or especially so for those without, love for the Other is lacking and we need to find creative ways to (re)build it.

When Mothers Reinforce Patriarchal Norms

One theme this paper echoes is Teo You Yenn's sociological work on the dilemma of "Doing Family Correctly" (Teo 2013). Despite living in the same household, the different cultural scripts, rules and constraints between my mother and I due to different degrees of globalization, education and socialization have influenced alternate ways in which we perceive our personhood, let alone womanhood. While I was deeply affected by these differences, I came to recognise that it was not original. Almost every other daughter I encountered at home or abroad had almost similar complicated relationships with their mothers, especially if you identify as the eldest daughter.

This inquiry thus advocates for a deeper understanding of how daughters negotiate relationships with their mothers, where daughters choose reconciliation and love, or distance and emotional suppression, especially in instances of conflict or care. Through an ethnographic study of 15 interviews from daughters around the world, enabled through Global Studies Programme (GSP), this study delves into the dialogue, strategic silences, and perpetual resistance that shape mother-daughter relationships. By exploring how daughters and mothers navigate societal expectations, I aim to contribute to a nuanced academic understanding of this intricate intergenerational dynamic within diverse cultural and globalised contexts. I argue that recognising both conflict and care with mothers can be rooted in patriarchal structures helps to clarify the importance of interrogating the entrenched power dynamics between daughters and mothers. In Ira Raja's work on *Desiring Daughters: Intergenerational Connectedness in Recent Indian Fiction* (Raja 2003), she emphasises how the complicated relationship between mothers and daughters have been historically accounted for with tension – where it is often perceived to involve more conflict than collaboration. First wave feminists categorically painted mothers as the perceived problem, however, recent scholarship has challenged this notion, thus charting new territory for the potential of academic analysis on mother daughter relationships to meaningfully contribute to feminist agendas (Raja 2003).

To understand how to collaborate, or communicate better with our mothers, this essay asks:

How do daughters' bargain with the patriarchy?
 How do mothers' bargain with the patriarchy?
 How do daughters love their mothers?

Mother-Daughter Relationships

Here, I examine relevant academic work on daughter's perspectives in mother-daughter dynamics. It seeks to address a knowledge gap of how daughters navigate conflict with mothers across global contexts while contributing to the discourse through a non-western feminist lens that is my own. The mother-child relationship is regarded by early anthropologists to be the most basic social bond. Early feminist scholars such as Shulamith Firestone (1970), Nancy Chodorow (1978; 2000) and Adrienne Rich (1976) have argued that the myth of motherhood and mothering as "natural" to women is rooted deeply in the patriarchy which locks women into biological reproduction and negates their identities of "self" and personhood outside the mothering experience (Devasahayam 2007). In "Navigating a man's world", Devasahayam highlights the link between working and mothering by focusing on the complex strategies employed by women while balancing both caregiver and worker roles (Devasahayam, 2007). I seek to build on part of this work by contributing my research which spotlights "daughtering" rather than "mothering" strategies, to illustrate how daughters I interviewed navigate family life and their mothers.

Transnational Daughterhood

My aim is to inspect from a daughters perspective in how we experience our mothers' "mothering". A recent article by Hanna Kara and Sirpa Wrede (2021) builds sociological knowledge on daughterhood by analysing how separation shapes the moral and emotional dynamics of transnational daughterhood. It argues how daughtering is a set of concrete social practices which involve kinship through an empirical study of Latin American women living in Barcelona who talk about their transnational family lives and filial responsibilities (Kara and Wrede 2021). The presence of filial piety across different cultures is fascinating to me, as it defies my preconceived notion of its association exclusively with Asian traditions. The connection between filial piety

and patriarchal structures becomes visible when examining the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and power dynamics within families. Expectations often fall upon daughters, who are socialised to prioritise the needs and desires of their parents, over their own. This sustains the patriarchal notion of women as caregivers and nurturers, to prove their love and respect whilst navigating tensions between filial expectations and their autonomy. Kara and Wrede (2021) argue how migration's physical separation poses practical challenges of fulfilling moral obligations as good daughters. This study resonated strongly with me due to my own experience of transnational daughterhood. During a recent visit to Singapore, marked by a packed itinerary of two weddings and quality moments with family and friends, I found myself navigating the constraints of time. I consciously dedicated the initial days of my visit to reconnecting with my family as my brother was getting married, amidst other social obligations, such as fulfilling my friendship duties as a bridesmaid at my best friend's wedding.

Women's identities as daughters, mothers, sisters', friends, and wives represent a culturally embedded gendered status in the expectations of "being there" for others. This is seen not just in love through words and gestures, but the willingness and ability to offer practical care and support (Schmidt et. al. 2012), recognised by early feminist literature on caring as a labour of love (Graham 1983). Research also underscores the relevance of economic yet unpaid contributions by women which devalues the status of women's work in society. My research on how daughters bargain with the patriarchy and how they love their mothers is thus an ode to the emotional labour and care that daughters put into the filial relationship with their mothers (whether they choose to work on them or not) at each stage in their life course. Once entering motherhood, they are still daughters, and subject to the same constraints. This reveals how deeply the unending cycle of the patriarchy influences the expectations of women at each life stage.

A Non-Western Feminist Viewpoint

Feminism has served as a diagnostic tool of women's status across cultures and as a way to change their often perceived to be subordinate or oppressed situations (Strathern 1987). While women's

empowerment and agency is tied to resisting hegemonic patriarchal power structures, it is assumed that freedom should be a fundamental societal goal. This contributes to the dual character of feminism as both an analytical tool and guide for political action (Mahmood 2001) which in this case is applied to mother-daughter relationships in a global context. Mahmood's work strongly resonates with me and has bolstered my confidence and conviction in writing about feminism in the first place. The cultural connotations of having been brought up in a Muslim household from a Singaporean sociocultural context adds further nuance to this perspective which I believe is valuable in contributing to the discourse. This research thus seeks to address a gap in understanding how women's agency is perceived in diverse cultural contexts, in terms of their bargaining power in relationships with their mothers while challenging Western-centric views. It also questions the role of globalisation and culture in shaping these power dynamics.

On the politics of piety, Saba Mahmood offers a sharp critique of the universal desire of women to be free from subordination structures of male domination, often characterised by progressive and liberal thought which places strong assumptions on resistance (Mahmood 2001). Mahmood's rich ethnographic insights of particular relevance includes the representation of a nuanced feminist consciousness that are at times, active or suppressed in opposition to male dominant cultural norms in Arab Muslim societies. Even in situations where explicit feminist agency might not be readily apparent, there is a tendency to interpret expressions and forms of resistance as potential challenges to male dominance. Actions that may on the surface seem to oppress women could actually be moments where women actually challenge male authority, whether consciously or unconsciously (Mahmood 2001). This underscores the significance of understanding the sociocultural environments in which these actions are embedded in, especially in scholarly feminist discourse, which is often influenced from dominant Western feminist viewpoints. In agreement with Mahmood's point, it is important to recognise that the focus on women's agency when it first emerged in feminist scholarship played a significant role in problematizing and broadening the debates on gender, especially in non-Western societies, transcending the simple views of submission and patriarchy (Mahmood 2001).

Conceptual Baggage

The term conceptual baggage is used to highlight the diverse and boundary-transcending contexts of Global Studies (also because this article has been written across a number of flights). In line with the notion of women's agency raised by Mahmood, Deniz Kandiyoti's introduction of the concept "patriarchal bargain" makes a valid point about how women strategize within a set of constraints in their patriarchal context (Kandiyoti 1988). In this thesis, I argue that while the patriarchy as a system limits the ways in which this process occurs, a form of emotional and other forms of bargaining occur within the mother-daughter relationship as both navigate the life course. Through unpacking these conflicts, this research also focuses on the fraught choices made by daughters in choosing to love their mothers (or not) while enduring these constraints. The patriarchal bargain is relevant in outlining how this occurs.

In resisting patriarchal expectations, daughters can challenge oppressive norms by choosing to love our mothers anyway – which can be categorized in this sense as a political act of resistance. This is meant to challenge the patriarchy on a personal level by engaging in political acts of love, despite the conflict faced by daughters with their mothers that arise as a result of patriarchal tendencies and expectations (e.g. in choice of marriage partner, gender roles in the household). In this sense, common ground is established through female solidarity against patriarchal oppression – where daughters choose love and understanding over conflict with their mothers. However, this does not come without a generous degree of patience and openness. hooks' further elaborates on how embracing vulnerability is key to open and understanding communication to bridge generational or cultural gaps between daughters and mothers (hooks 1994), echoing the inherent risks of vulnerability when it comes to love. This must be done in order to practice love within the context of community in order to unmask our overall collective fear of love and pave the way for courage to make essential changes.

Thus, my argument outlines how daughters' expressions of love towards their mothers are affected by patriarchal influences. In line

with hooks argument, the power dynamics within patriarchal systems often overshadow genuine displays of affection and hence building barriers to creating authentic emotional connection (hooks 1994). This is especially in situations where one party seeks to maintain control, in this case, not men over women, but mothers over daughters, which can hinder the potential for love to thrive (hooks 1994). This emphasis on the politicisation of love underscores its potential to challenge patriarchal structures, and what better way to do so than through the 'basic bond' of mother daughter relationships.

Methodology

Over a 9-month period, I conducted interviews with fifteen women¹ who I met throughout my Global Studies Programme, who were aged between 16 and 50 and came from nine different nationalities. To understand their perspectives as daughters and how they navigated conflict with their mothers, I asked 10 open-ended questions on their relationship, reasons for and strategies related to conflict, a significant memory, how affection is given and received, what constitutes a healthy relationship, and influences on identity. For participant selection, interviewees came from diverse national origins, diasporas and family structures – from single mothers, to lesbian mothers, to divorced parents, as well as nuclear and extended family guardians. This range helped to capture the multiplicities of maternal relations and how differently daughters bargain with the patriarchy in diverse cultural and globalised contexts. The 8 out of the 15 women interviewed came from Southeast Asian (with a focus on Singapore, Thailand) and South Asian (India) contexts, while others were from Europe and the United States of America.

As pointed out by Ackerley (2010), doing feminist research is extremely demanding both analytically and theoretically as well on a political and ethical level. Ongoing communication with interview participants who were also close peers presented certain ethical ambiguities. However, they all mentioned how the interview was a cathartic and safe space for them to share things about their mother that they previously thought better to silence. The politics of silences is a significant methodological point highlighted by several feminist authors. Annica Kronsell (2006) and Carol Cohn (2006) begin by questioning seemingly ordinary

everyday life practices to highlight the visible elements of gender in international relations practices. These feminist research methods seek to fracture institutionalised silences on gender while highlighting the linkage to wider perpetual patterns of global gender power relations (Ackerley and True 2006). Relating this to the context of my own research, I focus attention on the patriarchy as a discursive practice and its hidden embeddedness in mother daughter relationships. This helps to explain the broader macro-scale political aims of this thesis in terms of uncovering what the study of mother-daughter relationships can do in contributing knowledge.

Thesis As Kin

In Lauren Tynan's seminal work on Thesis as kin, she highlights how we are living relationality with our research. On this note, this thesis is my kin, my sister. Her translation of Thesis as kin into "thesis askin" (Tynan 2020: 5) where knowledge production is situated in the thesis itself catalyses the agency of the thesis asking questions. As I reflect on Tynan's work, I feel as though I am constantly searching for the relatability that brings myself and another together. For Indigenous Peoples, a core concern of knowing the world, ourselves, and each other is through relationships (Martin 2008; Wilson 2008). This very research is focused on that. I get to know myself, and my relationship with my mother better by listening to stories from other daughters on how they deal with their mothers. It is a collective attempt to understand how we engage with the patriarchy, in ways that both ourselves as daughters and mothers encounter it.

"Come, I'd like to introduce you to someone. She is a relation of mine who holds and translates knowledge. She is committed to increasing relatedness. She started as a thesis, and now, through our processes of co-becoming (Bawaka Country including Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013), she is my sister; kin to be cared for who, in turn, will nurture me." (Tynan 2020)

I strive to write a narrative that resonates with me, as well as you, the reader. While maintaining interview subjects' anonymity, I wanted to underscore the indispensable role of my other sisters in this endeavour whose stories are spotlighted in the next section.

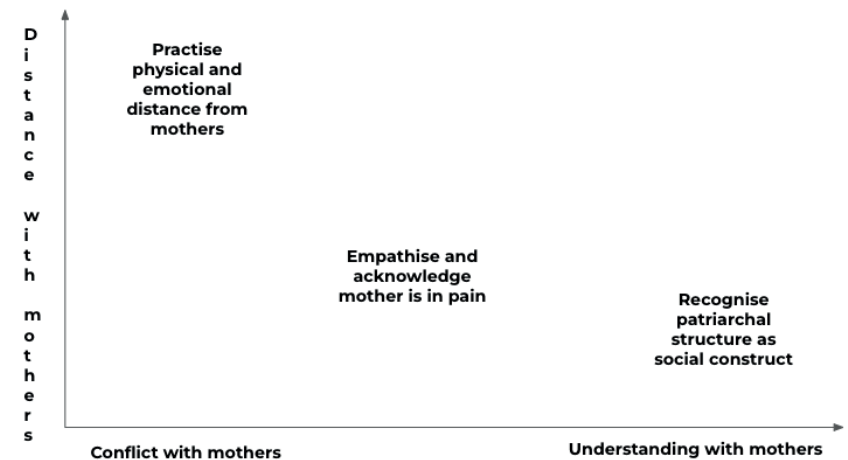


Figure 1: Discursive/positional map showing how daughters bargain with the patriarchy

How Do Daughters Bargain With The Patriarchy?

The impact of globalisation on gender roles have resulted in a reconfiguration of patriarchal norms. In exploring how daughters bargain with the patriarchy, this thesis finds that daughters practice a range of distance, understanding, and managing expectations when in conflict with their mothers as seen in Figure 1.

This asserts how daughters on the top left end of the spectrum have completely cut off relationships with their mothers while the those on the bottom right involves more understanding by recognising the patriarchal structure as a social construct imposed on daughters and mothers.

Social Distancing as a Strategy

It has been found that daughters often employ social-distancing strategies to navigate conflict with their mothers through emotional bargaining. Here, the home becomes a contested space related to peace and pro-tection. This is where distance proves useful in repairing the relationship.

“I think that when we had conflicts, the things that helped the most was distance. It was being away and starting to see things differently. I think it shows how much you actually love someone.”
- Iva, 26, Slovenia

“It took 3 – 4 years of small steps, including me not talking with her for 6 months – 1 year. Now it’s going way better because she makes some effort. The fact that I left really helped.” - Martine, 23, Belgium

“Things got better. Because I left home for my studies. It has been good mainly because of conversation. Realising that talking and communication is key. I started to tell her how I really felt about all these expectations. And that’s when she started to communicate how she felt like a burden.” - Onika, 22, India

Building Understanding with Emotional Labour

We see how daughters undertake emotional labour to build better understanding and communication with mothers to comprehend reasons behind their behaviour.

“She put it in a way that made me in that moment realise - fuck they are also for the first time in their life parents and I’m the first born daughter and they grew up in this DDR regime and then there comes this daughter who questions their lifestyle, who wants to travel the world that wants to study economics that wants to dadadada that goes to Berlin and for them, it’s just really overwhelming. I think that moment was outstanding because the way she said it so dry made me for the first time flip and be like wow I never thought of that, it must be quite challenging for you to get me.” - Greta, 35, (East) Germany

“I worked a lot on trying to understand where she comes from, like learning more about her background. And connecting the dots of why she would act a certain way. I was born when she was already 42. There were all these 40 years that I hadn’t known her. Like the relationship with my father 20 years before I was born. That puts a lot of things into perspective.” - Iva, 26, Slovenia

“Their family had a boy and following which lost two daughters before Claudia’s birth. They could never love a girl again. Her mother could love her brothers but not her. This is why Claudia calls for attention all the time. My grandfather was terrible. He was rough and not very nice to my Mother. So I know that my Mother can’t express feelings because she didn’t learn how.” - Martine, 23, Belgium

Daughters’ vs. Mothers’ Expectations

Next, we discover how both mothers and daughters have different expectations of each other, from societal pressures and to whether they fit into traditional gender roles. Hearing experiences from women around the world builds an alternative narrative where empathy acts as a subversive force challenging traditional notions of power and authority.

“I felt very lonely because I wanted my mom to like me. I felt I was not heard as a child, she never hugged me, she never said I love you. I kept that heartache for a long time. Especially mother’s day when people would talk about their love for their mothers, buying flowers for their mother, I just couldn’t do that. I felt she didn’t deserve to have flowers because of everything she put me through” - Aree, 49, Thailand

“When you grow up you see a lot of other people’s stories. Bollywood basically. It ruined your imagination. You already constructed a role of “Mother” in your mind. It creates a lot of expectations. I always saw other people doing stuff with their mothers. Even reading books about mother relationships and how sometimes she can sacrifice. This created a lot of false imagination for me. I think being unbiased and totally free from expectations is key to having a good real relationship. She’s a human being at the end of the day and she’s not perfect.” - Onika, 22, India

“So basically my mom has paralysis. She had a lot of responsibilities but did not quite always manage to fulfil them. Me being the girl child, I had to do that for her. I was expected to do household work, dishes, make food for my family. Whenever

there would be guests, I had to entertain them. I also had to do the cleaning and laundry. My brother was there too but he wasn't expected to do any of that. I was expected to. I started to tell her how I really felt about all these expectations. And that's when she started to communicate how she felt like a burden." - Onika, 22, India

How Do Mothers Bargain With The Patriarchy?

In exploring how mothers bargain with the patriarchy, mothers practice a range of preserving power, exercising authority, and the possibility of death often stemming from past traumas with their own mothers. This asserts in Figure 2 how mothers on the left end of the spectrum may seek for their daughter to unlearn gender roles through emancipatory experiences abroad, in the middle zone, ways mothers preserve the patriarchy, while the right end of the spectrum details how mothers are defeated by the patriarchy.

Our Mothers' Strategies of Preserving Their Power

As our mothers are shaped by encounters where men are often power holders, and women are largely excluded, they inadvertently transmit these same challenges to their daughters, especially in expectations of safety and protection.

"I have experienced low vision since I was 8. Once my mother knew I had this condition, she didn't know how to deal with me. She was in denial from then until now. She refuses to believe that I cannot see, or that I'm blind."

"She forced me to eat the kinds I hate. And when I refused what she did, that stuck with me for a really long time, she took off my clothes. I was 9 years old, and she made me wear only underwear and she made me stand outside the gate at the intersection where all the cars pass by. All the friends and people laughed at me while I was standing there naked just in my underwear, even though I was not developed, as a young girl, I was still a child, having your own mother putting you there and you cry and you

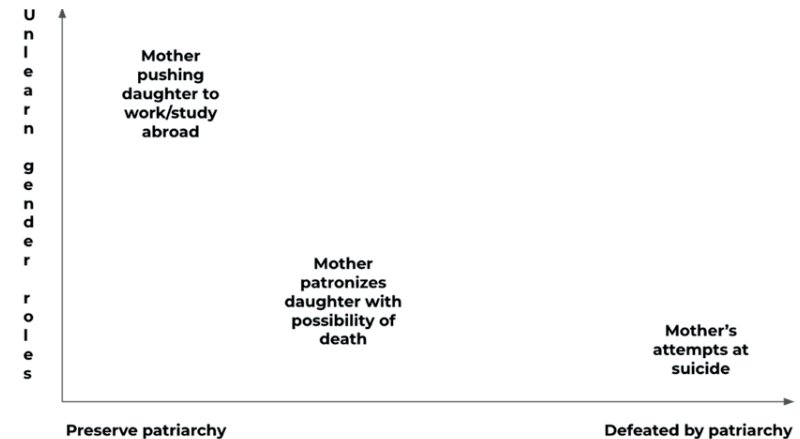


Figure 2: Discursive/positional map showing how mothers bargain with the patriarchy

just want to be taken in the house and be safe and not humiliated because you just didn't want to eat the smelly vegetables, I just couldn't bring myself to eat it. After that age, I was 9, I could not forgive her for what she did. And I still remember the laughter of people passing by. It felt so painful, you know. No one could help me, they were just laughing. And I decided not to have a close relationship with my mom." - Aree, 48, Thailand

"My mother and I actually have the same background haha. She's the daughter of a career army man, and I'm one too. So it is a very conservative kind of upbringing where you have to be perfect all the time. You cannot show your emotions. You cannot cry in public, and this also suppressed her from showing love because she's never been shown love, you know by my grandmother. I think she did not know how to show her love." - Aree, 48, Thailand

"We were raised in an evangelical church setting with the "white is right" mindset. We can't ask questions about military missions. Every male in my family was military. I didn't know what imperialism was until I was 18 and studied politics. I was so aware of war at such a young age. I remember asking my mum if it was a sporting event.

I asked her every single morning if we were winning. I literally thought it was a huge sporting event. And my mum would always say “Yes, we’re winning! We’re getting the bad guys.” I literally thought war was a sporting event.” – Rose, 26, USA

“She was a happy woman. Then she started to have serious relationship problems with my father, this affected her so much. She lost many of her good traits towards her kids. So this is where it started. It evolved in a way where there was less love, less understanding, less communication, and more hate, so much, I started hating her so much.” - Aylin, 29, Türkiye

“Yeah, my dad was in Belgrade and she figured out he was cheating and already by that time, I was quite detached from their relationship. To me it’s like, “whatever that’s your problem, not mine.” She tried to prepare me for a possible divorce. And I was like, “okay whatever if you want to get divorced, then divorce. I said to her that despite everything the 2 of them had, he was still a great Dad for me. And she said, “How can you say that when he’s lying to the people he’s supposed to love the most?” - Iva, 26, Slovenia

In the diverse range of examples above, we uncover how mothers lack power in certain situations and seek to preserve it in others, especially when in conflict or care contexts with their daughters.

Authority and Influence

As absolute rulers, parents typically exercise authority and influence to make decisions for their children. Still, as daughters, we always yearn for our mothers to be proud of us.

“Having two lesbian mothers, my sister and I were expected to only like girls. To them, announcing we had a boyfriend or liked boys was like “coming out” - Martine, 23, Belgium

“I was watching Grey’s Anatomy when Arizona, in a lesbian couple, wanted to get married, and one parent disagreed. I was there with my mum, unaware that I liked girls. I started criticizing those parents, and she said, “Iva, it’s different when it’s your child.” That comment made me fearful of coming out. By 16, I knew I wasn’t straight. Later, she revealed she read a diary entry I wrote about a

girl. The entry was titled “The Suffering of Young Iva”. After seeing that title, she felt the need to read it. So when I told her I was gay, she already knew.” - Iva, 26, Slovenia

“A few weeks ago, she said she was proud of me, I don’t know. That was funny. I didn’t expect her to say that. I don’t know, maybe she sees me taking care of the people around me, and myself, and what I’ve built here.” - Maya

“I sent her my research proposal from our Buenos Aires semester. In the email I wrote, “Despite my best efforts, I still seek your validation”. And you know the response I got? “We are very happy and pleased that you are so proud and pleased of your own work.” They can’t even say they’re proud of me. I stopped for a while after that. I can’t say anything of sustenance that they can respond to. I just said I’m really happy.” - Rose, 26, USA

“Growing up, she used to tell me to be open minded, there’s no right and wrong. It’s all very grey. Yeah I should go out and see the world and whatever. But now, she takes all of that back. She says a lot that she wishes she brought me up differently. And that hurts me a lot because it means like what now I’m a complete failure?” - Maya

Whether it be choice of romantic partner, or definitions of success in life or at school, our mothers assert a sense of authority and influence over our decision making as daughters, impacting how we feel about the decisions we make and who we are.

Possibility of a Mother’s Death

One surprising finding that emerged through the interviews was the recounting of suicide attempts by mothers, something that caught me completely off guard. This unexpected finding suggests that a potential manifestation of how some mothers negotiate with patriarchal pressures is through the possibility of their suicide as a form of bargain. Among the 15 daughters interviewed, a striking pattern was that 7 had recounted suicide attempts by their mothers. Of particular significance, was the fact that these women, hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds, described this memory in remarkably similar ways.

“I came home and she had this empty look in her eyes and told me that the weather is nice outside. That’s when it really hit me that I lost my mum. She doesn’t even perceive me or my presence anymore. She gave me her doctor’s papers about her diagnosis because she didn’t know how to scan it herself and of course I read them and it was basically about how she wanted to kill herself.”
- Iva, 26, Slovenia

“This is really traumatic actually. When we were already living in Izmir, one day, she came home, and had taken some pills? And she had a different face structure? Like her eyes have changed. And my mum used to have very...I don’t know how to call, like small eyes? And this time...they were round. Hahaha. And since then, I don’t recognize her. This stayed with me also like okay this is it. This is not your mom. There is no more of this person. This is a new person, this is a different person.” - Aylin, 29, Türkiye

“There was one strange, or rather, bad memory. My mum got addicted to some kind of painkillers. I was in Chandigarh and then came home; I was all happy to meet my family. When I came home, my mum saw me and asked, “Who are you? I don’t recognize you.”
- Onika, 22, India

The qualitative accounts of the daughters above mention instances of not recognising their mothers because of a physical change in their mother’s eyes and that they seemed “a different person”. One reason why this happened could involve the role loss they feel as a mother once their children leave home, and due to their life not revolving around their role as a mother anymore, they feel powerless due to patriarchal pressures in other areas of their life. In Kandiyoti’s work, *Emancipated but Unliberated* (1987), she describes how women often deal with role loss more profoundly. This often results in them to fundamentally reconsider their roles and potentially explore alternative lifestyles. She goes on to explain how understanding the psychological impacts on the life stages of women must include the emancipation of children, adolescents and young adults (Kandiyoti 1987). The fact that their daughters experience this painful memory in some ways passes on the pain and yet, is often kept very silent.

This narrative underscores the intergenerational negotiation of power within mother-daughter relationships. The portrayal of mothers as both agents and products of their environment of patriarchal structures reflects broader societal norms and gendered expectations that shape women’s experiences and perceptions of self-worth as mothers and daughters. Moreover, the silence that pervades these familial interactions potently symbolises the accumulation of unspoken grievances and emotional burdens. This narrative sheds light on the sociocultural mechanisms through which women internalize and perpetuate patriarchal norms, as well as the ways in which maternal distress may be both a manifestation of personal struggle and a call for collective recognition and support.

This thus illustrates how the patriarchy functions as a discursive practice that exposes the devastating impact of patriarchal norms on a mother’s mental health, as they grapple with feelings of defeat within oppressive systems. The woman’s role as a caretaker or mother is often assumed to be a social construct in which women are forced to negotiate and confront which prompts several sociological questions. While emotions (to a large extent in most typical mother daughter relationships) are involved, we often glaze over the immense amount of labour demanded by this relationship. Contemplating suicide surfaces as a desperate plea for recognition and validation of their suffering from their daughters or others, revealing the silent agony endured amidst societal expectations. This extreme response calls the urgent need for sociological inquiry into the intersections of gendered oppression and mental health outcomes among women, emphasizing the systemic nature of their distress and for interventions to dismantle patriarchal structures and promote emotional well-being. Consequently, this results in a comprehensiveness of caring which in many cases has driven mothers, consciously or subconsciously to question whether this is their only role. Women are always preoccupied with weaving work and family obligations which is in opposition to the typical representation of the home and workplace as opposites.

This echoes with my experience of seeing my own mother weave through her work and home worlds, many times integrating the two. Bringing the point back to this very moment, I find myself too weaving

through the fulfilling my social obligations as daughter, worker, and student.

How Do Daughters Love Their Mothers?

It is found that daughters practice a range of communication and silence, creativity and courage, and collective care when expressing love to our mothers.

Figure 3 shows how daughters on the top left end of the spectrum may choose to discontinue the relationship with their mother for their own well-being while those on the bottom right learn how to build courage and creativity to communicate their needs with a focus on collective care.

Communication and Silence

Daughters commonly resort to silence to prevent pain or conflict, with mothers. Interviewing my mother about her perspective as a daughter was a key moment in my research and unexpectedly caused writer's block in my thesis development.

Maya: "Can you share a particular memory or experience that has impacted your relationship with your mother?"

Umi: "Hmmm. I can't because that would mean that I would talk bad about her. Hahaha."

Maya: "Hahaha. It not about talking bad, it's just talking about it."

Umi: "I think I'm just gonna generalise it okay there's a couple things that really bothered me. That's why I didn't get along with her. But then I forgave her and I kinda like, well I didn't forget about it. It doesn't mean anything to me right now, I'm not angry right now anymore about it wallahi. I just felt so sorry for my mom. And I do feel like I can make her life much better now. I just felt that, there were so many deceptions and some blatant ones and then she tried to kind of like cover it up or. And I swear to you, nobody does that to me anymore. So I just shut off. But I can't shut off because she's my mom right. She was at my place almost

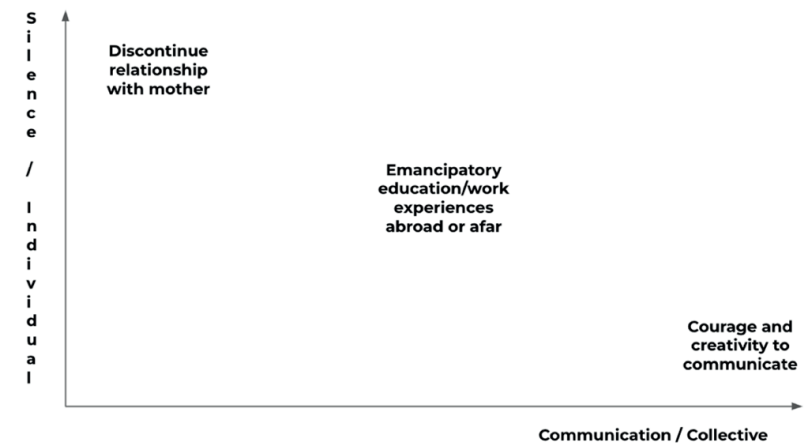


Figure 3: Discursive/positional map showing how daughters love their mothers

every week. Until I mean I got married. So that was the reason why my mother also don't... Because she knows, because I have always been doing the right thing. And she knows she has not. So she tries to make me feel really bad because I'm not doing anything... I mean I don't know how it works but it is how it is. If you wanna see...yup. No no nevermind, that's the summary of it."

I initially struggled to grasp the nuance of my mother's responses and the unspoken parts of our interaction. She was hesitant to discuss her relationship with her mom, questioning why I was doing this, though I think she knows deep down. The first five minutes were just us laughing, navigating this uncharted territory. Conducting the interview digitally gave us space to express ourselves, but her role as a daughter/mother seemed to limit her honesty about her emotions, making me feel guilty for writing about mine. Frustrated, I questioned the purpose of this research until reflecting on literature about communicative silences helped me let go of decoding every moment of (non)communication.

"Communication is the major player or at least it helps to tell them to not do things that hurt you. Don't let things pile up, otherwise, you won't talk nicely and instead aggressively. You

should tell her what you feel, the moment you feel that. I'm mostly away from home. So when I'm home I'll tell her I need to talk to you and we'll talk. If we're on the phone, and an issue comes up, I'll tell her I hang up first and take some time to think about what she said. Then I'll call her again after and tell her, "These things you said, they hurt me." - Onika, 22 India

"It's really a lot about communicating in our relationship. Taking her out of the home environment helps. For example, going to places she likes when I want to talk to her about certain topics that I'm not too happy about. In the past I used to type it all out in a very "rage" mode I guess this seems rude and as much as it comes from my heart it may also seem very rude. But when I take her out of the home environment and I don't type it out but find an environment to talk about my thoughts I also take a step back and understand from her perspective and share with her. Me messaging her in the past, there was a lot of anger in my tone and putting the blame and fault on her because the expectations of "mother" did not match what I thought it's supposed to be." - Jana, 28, Singapore

"I stopped addressing her as Mum for 10 years. She was very angry at me about this throughout the years. Since we were barely talking, the longer I didn't address her as Mum, the harder it became to start calling her Mum again. The more she got angry at me for not addressing her, the more I didn't want to." - Gemma, 28, Singapore

The examples above detail how important communication with our mothers are, especially when trying to explain what they said or did hurt us in some way or another.

Creativity and Courage

We often find creative ways to reject or be in denial of how similar we are to our mothers, yet it takes courage to recognise, care, and try to change it.

"The idea for the mum's weekend originated during a reflection session with my close friend circle of five girls. We discovered many of us had broken relationships with our fathers. Realizing it would be impossible to have open conversations with our fathers, we pondered the idea of replicating the weekend away with our mothers. All the mothers agreed! Each pair prepared a small offering for the group, resulting in activities such as ceramics, painting, and meditation, fostering a relaxed and respectful atmosphere." - Greta, 33, (East) Germany

Collective Care

Daughters use multiple approaches convey love to their mothers despite past conflict. Forgiveness becomes a transformative power that aligns with hooks' assertion that love, when practiced as a political act, has the potential to dismantle and challenge oppressive systems.

"Forgiveness is something that we should practise. It's not easy. But if you carry it with you, it's like you're carrying trash with you wherever you go. It's never too late to learn to love. Once you are able to forgive, you are able to move on, and you have free mind space to do so many other things that would be more enlightening, uplifting, and more fun. Because death is real, and I've seen it. Now, I'm able to feel the love that I was doubting of myself and my own mother. And now that we learn to love one another, we have more giggles. Even though I'm partly blind, I'm still able to see love, I'm able to feel it." - Aree, 48, Thailand

"I think at one point I just didn't want to be angry anymore. I wanted to have a better relationship with her. I wanted it. I didn't know how to achieve it, what to do nor not to do. Eventually, it all came together but it took a long time. I accepted that there was nothing I could do to change her but instead for me to work on my reactions towards her and me trying to be a better daughter and better person in general." - Iva, 26, Slovenia

With collective liberation in mind, expressing love for another, is an active choice. Whether it be in the role as a better daughter or member of society, collective care is an important aspect of envisioning and realizing alternative futures towards a more inclusive society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, daughters express love for their mothers in diverse ways shaped by their unique experiences and relationships. This thesis, particularly in the context of how daughters bargain with patriarchy, serves as a site for recoding women's agency (Mahmood 2021). Acts of love encompass open communication, understanding, empathy, and navigating conflicts while negotiating boundaries. The complexity of mother-daughter relationships challenges the assumptions tied to the socially constructed term "mother," often viewed as fundamentally loving.

Daughters often cope with conflict by creating distance before engaging in constructive communication. Exposure to mobility, whether global or local, through interactions with women from different cultures and educational or work opportunities abroad enhances these daughters' consciousness in learning to love their mothers. A key contribution of this study is illuminating the invisible emotional labor daughters undertake to understand their mothers' behaviors. Those who engage in this process often recognize the specific contexts their mothers faced during their own childhoods while being socialized into caretaking roles.

Methodologically, this study offers conceptual tools applicable across global contexts, empowering women to navigate and challenge intergenerational patriarchal norms. The findings promote a holistic understanding that seeks to improve relationships among mothers and daughters, fostering awareness of the hegemonic patriarchal constraints we all face. A collective approach to caretaking is essential to alleviate the pressures that burden many mothers and daughters around the globe who find themselves alone in their struggle.

Additionally, the intersectional analysis reveals how daughters' multiple identities, from sexuality, physical ability, and migration status, shape their experiences of daughterhood. This relational analysis emphasizes the interdependence of women across different life stages, challenging the notion that mothering must always entail selfless sacrifice. This supports the argument that women at each stage of their life cycle, whether as a daughter and as a mother is about both giving and importantly, receiving love and care in turn.

Endnotes

¹ Gender is socially and historically constructed and thus not biologically determined. In this study, I use a binary understanding of gender, focusing on women specifically. All women interviewed were cis women.

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TACKLING THE COMPLEXITIES OF TRAFFICKING IN
HUMAN BEINGS IN GERMANY:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGES IN
PREVENTING AND COMBATING TRAFFICKING IN
WOMEN FOR THE PURPOSE OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Nina Stephainsky

“Trafficking in human beings has been recognised as one of the major global challenges of the 21st century due to its overwhelming extent and presence throughout the world. Europe, especially Western Europe, is one of the main destinations for trafficked people from across the world, with a large volume of intra-regional trafficking.” (Jovanovic 2018: 8)

Trafficking in human beings (THB) is a dynamic, multidimensional global crime that affects all countries and requires ongoing attention at national and international levels. In Germany, THB for the purpose of sexual exploitation and forced prostitution (THB-SEFP)¹ is the most recognised form of THB and has been a widely discussed subject in the media.

The issue of THB-SEFP in Germany gained attention in the 1980s with sexual exploitation in tourism in Southeast Asia and labour exploitation of women with a migratory background. Politicians and the media labelled them as ‘illegal’, ignoring their plight (Gatzke 2008: 14). The fall of the Soviet Union exacerbated the situation, as women entered Germany on tourist visas for sex work or were recruited into THB-SEFP. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) began anti-trafficking efforts in the early 2000s (Interview 27 2020). Migration increased in the wake of the European Union’s (EU) eastern enlargement and Germany’s 2002 legalisation of sex work, but language barriers and lack of awareness of their rights left women

vulnerable. While the number of sex workers rose, working conditions and prices for sexual services declined (Interview 14 2019).

THB-SEFP is an increasing but still relatively small-scale crime, often occurring on society’s margins and remaining largely invisible. The number of unreported cases is much higher than those recorded by law enforcement. Prevention and intervention efforts reach only a few individuals, and research on the issue is limited (Helfferich et al. 2010). The individual experiences of trafficked women² also differ significantly, making it difficult to generalise trends. Efforts to prosecute THB and support trafficked women vary across Germany’s federal states, with differing resources and expertise in each. Specialised units within law enforcement for THB-SEFP are scarce (Interview 26 2019). Despite legal frameworks and international programs, progress in combating THB-SEFP and improving the situation for trafficked women and enforcing their rights has been insufficient. Crime numbers continue to rise (Interview 20 2019). The knowledge of THB-SEFP is shaped primarily by reports from advocacy groups, NGOs and government agencies, highlighting the urgent need for unbiased empirical research (Zhang 2009).

Given this background, the objective of this paper is to analyse the challenges in preventing and combating trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Germany, excluding cases in which smuggling³ led to THB-SEFP. After a brief overview of the research design, conceptual terrain and legislation, perceptions of the structure and dynamics of THB-SEFP are described. An analysis of the challenges in combating and preventing THB-SEFP follows. Strategies to address them are presented before summarising the main challenges in Germany.

Research Design and Methodology

This research follows grounded theory to analyse the complexities of addressing THB-SEFP, particularly Clarke’s situational analysis. Situational maps examine the relationships between various (non-) human and discursive elements (Clarke 2003). Throughout the process, memos documenting observations, thoughts and reflections

were recorded. The situational map was adapted after each interview, event (three conferences, four symposia, one panel discussion, one rally on sex workers' rights and/or THB-SEFP between 2018 and 2023), and secondary research. This approach allowed the identification of new data and theoretical areas of interest.

A data triangulation was conducted, involving the views of professionals, women subjected to THB-SEFP, and sex workers. Their experiences were examined in 29 semi-structured interviews, conducted between April 2019 and February 2020 (see Table 1 in the Bibliography). The interviewees were approached through conferences, referrals and members from the German NGO Network against Trafficking in Human Beings (KOK e. V.). The experts were mostly from Germany, as well as from Canada, India, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, the UK and USA. Interviews were held with both advocates and opponents of sex work and the 'Nordic model'.⁴ One-third of interviewees focused specifically on THB-SEFP. Perspectives on sex work and from sex workers were included, as some anti-THB-SEFP measures could affect and regulate sex work.⁵ The data was inductively coded and categorised, following Mayring's (2015) approach.

Positionality of the Researcher

"We don't have dreams for our own lives but our dream is that our daughters have opportunities to access a safe place for education and be able to live normal lives." (McKean 2016: 14)

Such statements made by trafficked women, living in one of Asia's largest red-light districts in Sonagachi, were formative during my 2018 traineeship at Apne Aap Women Worldwide, a specialised counselling centre for trafficked persons (counselling centre) in Kolkata, India. These women had lost their hope, dreams and trust due to repeated betrayal. Above all, they desired to offer their children a better future, despite the lack of opportunities.

Through further involvement in the field – for example, a traineeship at KOK e. V. in 2019/2020, data collection for this research and my work as a policy specialist for THB since 2022 – I realised that, despite the visibility of THB, there is a misconception in German society that THB

is a rare phenomenon that mainly occurs in other countries. I aimed to understand the complex, dynamic nature of THB-SEFP.

Conceptual Terrain and Legislation

Research on THB-SEFP and sexual services involves many seemingly obvious terms which are in fact highly ambiguous depending on the socio-political and disciplinary context of use (Brantl/Vogeler 2021). An interviewed social worker from a shelter for trafficked women stated that the boundaries between THB-SEFP, exploitative working conditions and sex work are blurred, rendering it difficult to make a general statement despite years of experience in this field (Interview 25 2019).

Trafficking in Women for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation

According to Article 2 of the EU Directive 2024/1712, THB-SEFP, whether intended or actual, occurs at various levels, involving the 'action' of:

"recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by *means* of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the *purpose* of [sexual] exploitation."

THB is a serious crime and a violation of human rights and dignity. THB treats individuals as commodities for exploitation. Human traffickers gain control through violence, threats, deception or dependence to create situations of hopelessness, restricting freedom of movement and free will. THB can occur within a single country and does not require crossing borders (Lindner 2014). Under international law, a trafficked person's consent is irrelevant due to their compromised freedom of choice (Skrivankova 2018).

THB-SEFP forces women into prostitution or to stay in forced prostitution or other exploitative sexual services (Interview 16 2019). Trafficked women lose control over their conditions in forced prostitution; they

face un(der)payment, no choice of clients and/or forced sexual practices, making their situation incomparable to sex work (ibid.; KOK 2017).

THB-SEFP has been a criminal offense in Germany since 1973. The law was updated in 2016 due to the Directive 2011/36/EU and it must align with the EU Directive 2024/1712 by July 2026. The German Criminal Code (StGB) covers recruitment (THB), initiation of exploitation (forced prostitution) and exploitation itself (KOK 2017). Clients exploiting trafficked persons face prosecution unless they voluntarily report an undetected crime. However, the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony (KFN e. V.) considers the law complex, ineffective and impractical with challenges such as a lack of specialised personnel and inconsistent enforcement across federal states (Bartsch et al. 2021).

Sex Work and the Prostitute Protection Act

This research defines sex work based on section 1 (2) of the German Prostitute Protection Act (ProstSchG), which characterises sex work as a sexual service and sex workers as individuals providing these services. Yet, sex work is a highly diverse field with no ‘typical’ cases. Claudia Fischer et al. (2005: 18) defines sex work using three different criteria: ‘motivation/self-image’, ‘voluntariness’ and ‘legality’. The boundaries between those distinctions are fluid and not always obvious. Based on the above criteria, THB-SEFP cannot be considered sex work.

The ProstSchG,⁶ enacted in 2017, aims to improve the working conditions and rights of sex workers while addressing THB-SEFP. It mandates permits for sex work businesses, registration for sex workers, health consultations and condom use and requires separation between workspace and private accommodation. Sex workers and counselling centres argue the law is only partially effective, even in identifying trafficked women⁷ (Interviews 28/29 2020). One concern is that mandatory registration does not necessarily improve conditions or rights for sex workers (KOK 2015) and may be avoided by sex workers because of fears of exposure, stigma, discrimination, illegal residence status or potential repression in their countries of origin, where sex work is illegal (Interviews 14 2019; 28 2020; KOK 2015). The regulations have increased insecurity, pushing vulnerable women into more precarious situations (Interviews 14/22 2019): Some sex workers fear losing their primary job if their employer discovers their involvement in sex work, while others

worry about losing child custody. These factors can lead to dependency (Weber 2018). Some within the industry try to comply with the law to avoid jeopardising their business, but smaller businesses, especially those run by women who cannot separate their work and living areas, have struggled to comply, had to close and faced increased risks of exploitation. Sex workers with a migratory background, who often struggle financially, face additional challenges such as high costs for registered addresses and long waiting times for registration certificates, leading some to borrow money, and thus are more at risk of exploitation and subject to precarious working conditions (Interview 27 2020).

Perceptions of Trafficking in Women for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation in Germany

The lack of knowledge about THB-SEFP does not only affect the official case numbers of trafficked women but all the other determinants too (Lindner 2014). Defining a ‘typical’ trafficker, client or trafficked woman is not possible. An interviewee at an NGO against THB (16 2019) described THB-SEFP as a parallel world that is not recognisable at first glance and in which sexual exploitation occurs daily.

Forms of Trafficking in Women

Since Germany is not only a transit and destination country for THB-SEFP but also a country of origin, THB can be divided into three forms: *Domestic trafficking* occurs entirely within Germany’s borders and affects women residing in the country. *Transnational trafficking* occurs in multiple states, e.g. women are trafficked across international borders, sometimes without official identification. *Cyber-trafficking* is when traffickers use the internet to operate across borders, making detection and prosecution more challenging. Each element of THB can occur online, may involve both online and offline activities with multiple actors worldwide. With ongoing digitalisation, cyber-trafficking is rising significantly (OSCE/ODIHR 2022).

Causes

The global imbalance of opportunities, gender discrimination and social instability are significant risk factors to THB-SEFP (Interview 13

2019). Various factors drive women to emigrate or accept precarious job offers, e.g. economic hardship, poverty, debt, lack of education, prospects for them or their children, risk awareness, limited job opportunities, drug addiction, independence, providing for a family, discrimination or a history of abuse or neglect (Interviews 3/18/19 2019). Misconceptions about sex work – such as the potential for high earnings – often overlook the high cost of living in Germany and risks involved (Interview 21 2019). However, causes cannot be generalised, as women from middle-class or secure backgrounds with a high level of education are also affected (Interview 25 2019).

Restrictive German immigration and labour-market policies further contribute to vulnerability, particularly for women with temporary or no residence permits, as they struggle to access legal employment (Howe 2021). Stigmatisation of sex work also increases risks, as trafficked women may conceal their situation from family and friends, making them susceptible to blackmail (Interviews 3/20 2019). Johanna Weber (2018), sex worker and co-founder of the German professional association for erotic and sexual services (BesD e.V.) stresses that the lack of a minimum price for sexual services exacerbates the risk of THB-SEFP.

Human Traffickers

“The role of the traffickers is to deprive the victims of their self-determination and, by doing so, to treat them *de facto* as things and not as persons.” (Renzikowski 2018: 16)

In Germany, both individual perpetrators and organised criminal groups are becoming increasingly professional. Suspects tend to act individually rather than in large organised criminal groups. Bettina Zietlow and Dirk Baier (2021) point out that law enforcement agencies are less successful in detecting organised groups or identifying the entire network. Individual offenders or group members often have personal ties to trafficked women, such as family, friends or region of origin (Interviews 25/26 2019). Due to this personal bond, vulnerable women initially rely on their origin-related networks for immigration and do not open up to the outside world (BKA 2025). In other cases, women do not know their traffickers or only encounter few members of

a more extensive network, as traffickers conceal their identities (OSCE/ODIHR 2022).

One reason for the prevalence of THB-SEFP is the low risk and high profit for perpetrators, who are often resourceful and flexible in exploiting individuals (Hitzke 2020). In 2023, about one-third of trafficking suspects were German citizens; the most non-German suspects came from Romania and Bulgaria. The average age was 35 (BKA 2025). Some traffickers are from disadvantaged backgrounds, sharing similar profiles with trafficked women. While the majority of perpetrators are male, women also play a role, especially in recruitment and managing exploitative brothels (McAdam/Gerasimov 2022).

Avoiding stereotypes about traffickers is crucial: they can come from any background, appear as ordinary citizens or remain hidden. Their only common trait is the criminal intent to profit from exploiting other human beings (OSCE/ODIHR 2022).

Sex Work Clients

Dirk Baier et al. (2018) investigated the role of sex work clients as potential witnesses of THB-SEFP, as too little was known about their awareness, the frequency of such situations and their willingness to help. Their results are ambivalent: While nearly half of the respondents showed high awareness of exploitation and frequently noticed potential signs, their willingness to help depended on clear indicators, such as visible violence or explicit requests for help. Concerns about anonymity and possible encounters with traffickers often prevented them from acting, possibly due to fear of stigma or a degree of acceptance of sex workers' conditions.

It remains unclear if criminalising clients under section 232a StGB improves conditions for trafficked women, since many clients are reluctant to report their observations. Increased legal pressure may discourage them from coming forward (ibid.).

Trafficked Women

Trafficked women differ in nationality, socio-economic background, age, ethnicity, religion as well as in terms of the level of force or coercion they

experience. This diversity makes it difficult to generalise their needs, even if they have all been subjected to a crime (Rijken 2018). Cornelia Helfferich et al. (2010) identified four types of victimisation processes in their study on trafficked women's willingness to testify:

Type 1: Immediate recognition and rejection – Women realise they have been trafficked as soon as they are forced. They reject sexual services, perceive themselves as trafficked throughout and experience violence or coercion (Helfferich/Kavemann 2011).

Type 2: Delayed realisation and reluctant acceptance – Long-term victimisation is involved, where sustained pressure, control and hopelessness lead trafficked women to perceive forced prostitution as work rather than coercion. Over time, they may lose awareness of their exploitation, as cooperation leads to less violence and more mobility. In other cases, women initially view sex work as work but later recognise their exploitation due to (increasing) violence or exploitative living and working conditions, withheld wages or restrictions (ibid.).

Type 3: Pre-existing history of violence – Women with a background of abuse, neglect or THB-SEFP from an early age see trafficking as part of a continued pattern of misfortune, adapting survival strategies to cope (ibid.).

Type 4: Distorted perception and redefinition – Some do not perceive themselves as trafficked, viewing forced prostitution as a means of survival or immigration. Despite intending to do sex work, their conditions violate ProstSchG and fall under the StGB. They prioritise financial earnings and see traffickers as enablers rather than exploiters (ibid.).

Official reports refute the notion that only women from economically disadvantaged countries are trafficked. In 2023, the German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) identified 407 trafficked women. The average age was 27, with one in three under 21 years old. While 30.1 per cent held German citizenship, most came from Eastern Europe, 17.1 per cent from Asia, 5.6 per cent from Africa and 2.8 per cent from North and South America (BKA 2025). KOK (2024) found that most counselling centre clients were Nigerian, Romanian, German, Serbian and Gambian citizens.

Recruitment Methods and Perpetuation of Sexual Exploitation

Recruitment and maintenance of exploitation⁸ methods for THB-SEFP are diverse and constantly evolving, with no dominant approach (OSCE/ODIHR 2022). Common tactics for recruitment are false job promises, dependence, abuse of trust and family ties⁹ or gradual coercion (Interviews 13/21 2019). Recruitment via the internet (29.9 per cent), for example via social media and online advertising platforms, has increased significantly over the years and poses considerable challenges to the identification of perpetrators (BKA 2025). Most trafficked persons supported by counselling centres were recruited in their country of origin (64 per cent), in Germany (10 per cent) and in transit countries (13 per cent). Exploitation occurred mainly in Germany (KOK 2024).

The second most prevalent recruitment method is the 'loverboy strategy', mainly affecting female German citizens. Traffickers – also referred to as 'loverboys' – pretend to be romantic partners to manipulate women into emotional dependency and forced prostitution. They isolate women, exploit emotional bonds and often use social media or online game forums for recruiting (BKA 2025).

To maintain control, perpetrators use threats against the women or their families, especially children, as well as blackmail, intimidation (e.g. by using video recordings or photos), manipulation and financial coercion. Common strategies include exploitation of a predicament, withholding or falsifying identity documents, restricting movement, isolation, surveillance and abusive living and working conditions (KOK 2017; Skrivankova 2018). Some women are trapped in debt bondage and are forced by unclear contracts to repay alleged costs for accommodation and clothing. Psychological pressure, self-blame and not knowing their rights further exacerbate women's predicament (Interview 14 2019). Constant relocation disrupts their ability to build social connections or seek support (Interviews 18/21 2019; 28 2020), while language barriers and cultural differences increase their vulnerability and dependency (BKA 2025).

Organised violence, such as 'voodoo oaths' or 'juju ceremonies', particularly in West African communities, are used to instil fear and

reinforce debt bondage. Women are made to believe that breaking their oath will lead to severe consequences, such as illness or death. Stories of violent retribution within trafficking networks further solidify these fears (Schmitt 2020).

Challenges in Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women

THB-SEFP changes over time, with traffickers adapting their methods to maximise profit while minimising risk, often using inhumane tactics. Trafficked women's testimonies are sometimes met with disbelief – e.g. from police officers or wider society – highlighting the need for flexible and open approaches from all stakeholders (Hitzke 2020) who face multiple challenges in combating and preventing THB-SEFP.

Challenges in Research and Data Collection

There is a lack of reliable and comparable international and national data on THB-SEFP (Howe 2021). In Germany, data primarily stems from the National Situation Reports by the BKA, based on completed police investigations. Since 2020, KOK (2024) has been publishing annual data reports in cooperation with counselling centres on trafficked persons' rights, and their access to legal aid and support services. The first National Rapporteur on THB report analysed developments in Germany and government measures to comply with the Council of Europe Anti-Trafficking Convention and EU Anti-Trafficking Directive (GIHR 2024).

The disparity between trafficked women identified by police and counselling centres and figures stated by the media poses interpretation challenges. Low official case numbers could indicate successful countermeasures or inadequate law enforcement awareness and training (Howe 2021). Additionally, bias in data interpretation arises from ideological debates around sex work and THB-SEFP, as well as in the context of restrictive migration policies, with different interest groups manipulating figures to support their political agendas (Lindner 2014). The debate related to bias and ideology was also noted during the analysis of expert interviews and was one of the biggest challenges at the outset of this research process.

Given the complexity of THB-SEFP, evidence-based research to produce a reliable statement on the extent of THB and the associated human rights violations is indispensable, yet it is challenging to obtain. The media often oversimplify the issue. A nuanced, multi-faceted perspective is necessary to derive effective policies and measures to protect trafficked women and to combat THB-SEFP (ibid.).

Challenges for Law Enforcement Agencies

Law enforcement agencies face significant challenges in combatting THB-SEFP, particularly in identifying trafficked women and ensuring successful prosecution of perpetrators. Several factors contribute to this discrepancy between the “high number of suspects [...] and the low number of convictions”, including evidentiary challenges in proving complex offences, resource limitations and obstacles to international cooperation (European Commission 2020: 11). The transnational nature of THB-SEFP complicates investigations due to disparities in national laws, jurisdictions and limited intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Additionally, inconsistencies in forensic and digital investigation tools across countries hinder efforts to track and prosecute traffickers.

Stateless or unregistered trafficked women often lack official identification, which complicates both their identification and the prosecution of trafficking crimes, particularly in comparison to trafficked women born and raised in Germany. Traffickers exploit gaps in law enforcement, making detection and investigation even more challenging (OSCE/ODIHR 2022). Moreover, traffickers exploit trafficked women's lack of knowledge regarding their rights and available support services, as well as their fear of law enforcement agencies and discrimination (Howe 2021). Many women, especially non-German citizens, hesitate to cooperate with the police due to past negative experiences with authorities, fear of deportation or threats. Some also fear losing custody of their children (Interviews 21 2019; 27 2020) or believe that law enforcement colludes with traffickers, especially if perpetrators have been informed of police raids or police officers have been clients of the trafficked women (Interview 8 2019).

Furthermore, traffickers use trafficked women to avoid prosecution by involving them in recruitment, financial transactions and other

activities that expose them to criminal liability. This tactic reduces traffickers' risk of conviction while further maintaining exploitative situations. Those affected are often criminalised rather than protected, undermining trust in law enforcement and discouraging cooperation. The risk of re-trafficking increases (UNODC 2020). In Germany, the 'non-punishment principle' applies to those affected but is often not implemented by public prosecutors (GIHR 2024).

All these determinants, which influence trafficked women's willingness to report to the law enforcement agencies, are also the reason why not all cases at counselling centres are reported to the police. This underscores the need for proactive law enforcement to initiate investigations, identify trafficked women and perpetrators and uncover criminal activities. However, Germany lacks a unified National Referral Mechanism (NRM)¹⁰ for identifying and supporting trafficked women, leaving responsibility to federal states and municipalities (Haverkamp/Vogeler 2021). Frequent relocations further hinder trust-building with law enforcement and counselling centres. A universal list of indicators does not exist. The presence of specialist police services and counselling centres varies across regions, influencing the number of identified cases. Federal states with well-resourced services, such as Berlin, North Rhine-Westphalia or Lower Saxony, have higher identification rates than regions with limited resources (Interview 26 2019).

Within the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), *caseworkers as special representatives for trafficked persons* assist in identifying trafficked women during asylum proceedings. However, the challenge is that trafficked women rarely perceive themselves as such. Essential aspects are thus concealed and decision-makers may lack the expertise to recognise the indicators of THB, and so special representatives are not always requested (Hinz 2020). Trafficked women without German citizenship are entitled to a three-month 'recovery and reflection period' to escape the traffickers' influence, to consider cooperating with authorities and to recover and receive care (Haverkamp/Vogeler 2021). Critically, many are unaware of this recourse. The process of officially recognising their status as trafficked is often led by law enforcement agencies, linking access to support with their willingness to cooperate (Turner 2019). If women

refuse to testify, they risk deportation and receiving social benefits, which undermines the protective aim of the reflection period. Even if they cooperate, trafficked women may not secure residency beyond the criminal proceedings. Residence permits are contingent on the following factors: the trafficked woman's presence is deemed appropriate for the detection of the offence in criminal proceedings, the suspect's identity can be verified, contact with the trafficker is broken off or the person is willing to testify. After proceedings, the permit may be extended by two years for humanitarian reasons (Muresan 2015). Martin Heger (2018) argues that these conditions exploit trafficked women in vulnerable situations, using them for procedural advancement without guaranteeing permanent residency.¹¹

Criminal proceedings present further challenges. Trafficked women often endure lengthy legal processes. Many fear re-traumatisation, aggressive cross-examinations or confrontation with their traffickers in court (Interview 25 2019; Krug 2021). Proving trafficking cases remains challenging due to the lack of objective evidence, inconsistencies in trafficked women's testimonies,¹² prosecutors unfamiliar with THB, and the high legal threshold for conviction. Many cases result in dropped charges or lenient sentences, undermining anti-trafficking efforts, rights, redress and financial compensation for those affected (Interview 26 2019). Psychosocial support helps trafficked women navigate criminal proceedings. Specialised professionals provide psychological and pedagogical assistance to trafficked women before, during and after main hearings. Yet, limited resources and staffing shortages hinder the effectiveness of these services. Improved interdisciplinary cooperation between counselling centres, law enforcement and judicial authorities is necessary to enhance trafficked women protection and strengthen prosecutions (Köhncke/Robbe 2015).

Challenges for Specialised Counselling Centres for Trafficked Persons

Counselling centres emerged in the late 1980s and have become professionalised due to their network within KOK. While at least one counselling centre is present in every federal state, nationwide coverage remains insufficient, particularly in rural areas.

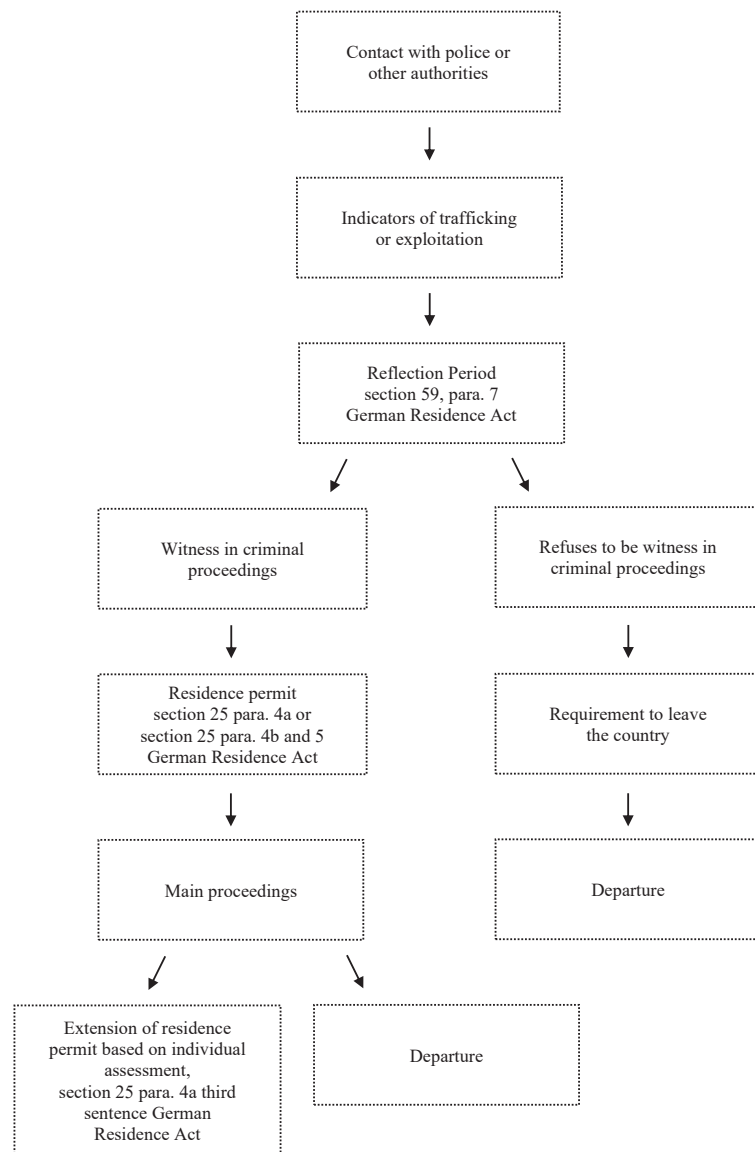


Figure 1: Graph on the identification of trafficked persons and their residence rights. Source: KOK e. V. 2020: 86

Counselling Centres operate independently of governmental and state institutions, providing a safe and confidential space for trafficked women. Their services include outreach work, psychosocial support, emergency housing, legal aid and reintegration assistance. Furthermore, they support those subjected to THB throughout investigations and criminal proceedings while advocating for policy changes to improve trafficked women's rights (Interview 25 2019).

A major challenge for counselling centres is the lack of sufficient availability, financial sustainability and scarcity of resources. Demand for counselling and shelters exceeds available resources, forcing centres to rely on donations and temporary project funding (Interviews 25/27 2019). Financial constraints limit their ability to guarantee essential services, such as full-time positions, interpreters or transport for outreach work. Shelter housing is "chronically" occupied (Interview 28 2020). Moreover, many shelters are located in rural areas, making it difficult for staff to travel there. As a result, trafficked women are left to fend for themselves with insufficient links to recreational activities, internships, language courses and networks (Interview 25 2019; Krug 2021).

Many trafficked women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and physical health issues. Access to appropriate therapy is limited due to long waiting lists, language skills and a lack of trained specialists (Krug 2021). In addition, doctors can be the first point of contact for trafficked women, but perpetrators may accompany them to medical appointments, making independent consultation difficult (Titchen/Stoklosa 2020).

Reintegration into society poses further obstacles. Lack of education and discrimination on the labour market make it difficult to find a job (Interview 25 2019). Without alternatives, most have no choice but to return to sex work and risk being re-trafficked (Interview 27 2020). To prevent re-trafficking, women who wish to work as sex workers should reach out to counselling centres for sex workers (Interview 28 2020). Reintegration should prioritise trafficked women's needs and wishes without imposing decisions on them. For those returning to their country of origin, reintegration depends on support structures, which

are often underfunded or unreliable. Ideally, cooperation between German counselling centres and those in the country of origin should facilitate a safe return, but such partnerships remain inconsistent (Muresan 2015).

Approaches to Address Trafficking in Women

A comprehensive approach to anti-trafficking strategies comprises the ‘five Ps’, ‘three Rs’ and ‘three Cs’ (see Figure 2), based on the ‘Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime’ (Palermo Protocol) (Lindner 2014).

Protection is a fundamental aspect, prioritising the rights and safety of trafficked women. This includes access to healthcare, legal aid and non-deportation rights, along with early identification through specialised training for law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers and social workers (Turner 2019). *Prosecution* plays a key role in bringing traffickers to justice, requiring effective legal frameworks, dedicated law enforcement units and evidence collection methods that do not rely on trafficked women’s testimony. To deter traffickers, *punishment* must be stringent, ensuring severe penalties. Trafficked women must not be criminalised for illegal activities they were coerced into. *Prevention* is equally crucial, achieved through awareness campaigns without reproducing stereotypes of ‘helpless victims’ (Interviews 13/18/19/21/25/26 2019), counselling centres, (legal) consultations for sex workers (Interviews 14 2019; 28 2020), prevention programmes for potential offenders (Interview 12 2019) and addressing socioeconomic challenges in affected women’s countries of origin to reduce vulnerability to THB (Interviews 19/20/21/25 2019; 27 2020). A strong *partnership* between government agencies, NGOs and international organisations is necessary for a coordinated response, including a ‘National Action Plan to prevent and combat THB’¹³ and the implementation of a ‘National Coordinator on THB’. “It matters where decisions are made. Because it shows how committed a country is” (Interview 20 2019). The German ‘National Rapporteur on THB’ provides continuous, independent national reporting on the implementation of the Council of Europe Anti-Trafficking Convention and the EU Anti-Trafficking

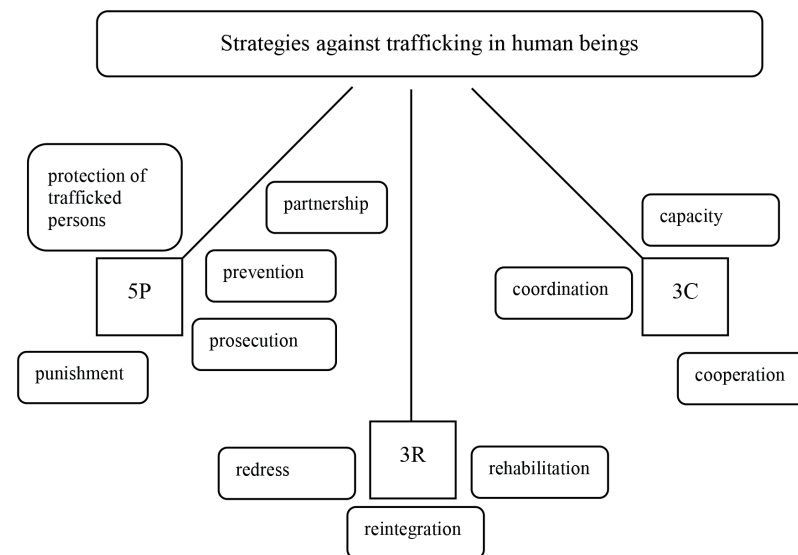


Figure 2: Dimensions of strategies against trafficking in human beings
Source: Lindner 2014: 45

Directive. Anchored in a human rights-based monitoring approach, the ‘National Rapporteur on THB’ advances harmonised data collection, supports evidence-based policymaking and scientific analysis. The aim is to strengthen protection against THB and to improve support for trafficked persons (GIHR 2024).

Redress involves compensation funded by perpetrators, creating a national fund for women facing financial hardship and legal aid to support trafficked women in asserting their rights. *Rehabilitation* ensures access to psychological, medical and social support services, including safe housing and structured recovery programmes (Völschow/Gahleitner 2021). *Reintegration* efforts facilitate access to education and employment opportunities while also supporting family reunion and voluntary repatriation efforts (Interviews 20/25 2019; Muresan 2015).

To enhance effectiveness, the ‘three Cs’ address the operational capacity of professionals working in the anti-trafficking field. *Capacity* building includes comprehensive training, integration of THB courses into study programmes, development of standards and urgency of sufficient funding which was emphasised in almost every expert interview. Effective and trusting *cooperation* among all relevant stakeholders, especially with law enforcement agencies and counselling centres, at (federal) state and municipal level is essential and encourages international knowledge-sharing (Interviews 14/21 2019; 27/28 2020) and implementation of THB strategies (Interview 1 2019). It is crucial to listen to trafficked women on anti-trafficking strategies and to give them the opportunity to actively participate as experts while receiving adequate funding (Interviews 3/4/8/23 2019). Lastly, *coordination* ensures a multidisciplinary, sectoral and binding standardised approach at federal level, adapted to the federal state level through mechanisms like NRM, which facilitates trafficked women’s identification and support while monitoring and evaluating policy effectiveness (Turner 2019).

This holistic strategy integrates legal, social and preventive measures, creating a comprehensive framework to combat and prevent THB-SEFP and safeguard the rights of trafficked women.

Conclusion

Despite international and national efforts, THB-SEFP remains a persistent issue, causing severe human, social and economic harm. Traffickers and those (un)knowingly involved generate enormous profits, while trafficked women endure immense suffering, violence and threats (European Commission 2020). This research was motivated by the need to shed light on the situation of THB-SEFP in Germany by offering valuable insights from multiple anti-trafficking perspectives, as THB remains an underestimated and complex issue. For a more in-depth analysis and to identify the growing impact of THB in general, future studies should focus on the following: a specific profession, a marginalised group, such as children, refugees, persons with disabilities or of different gender identities subjected to THB-SEFP, an individual federal state, traffickers’ perspectives or other forms of exploitation.

Individual motivation, funding and personnel significantly influence the effectiveness of anti-trafficking measures. Major obstacles are identifying trafficked women, lack of support structures, of financial stability of counselling centres, of awareness training for professionals, as well as inconsistent practice-oriented implementation of international laws and gaps in data collection throughout Germany. Law enforcement agencies face challenges in gathering evidence and securing convictions, often leading to traffickers being charged with lesser offences or not being prosecuted at all. The public debate on sex work further complicates anti-trafficking efforts.

This paper highlights that THB-SEFP is a transnational, multidimensional and dynamic crime that continually adapts to legal and policy changes and exploits new gaps in the system. THB-SEFP manifests itself in various forms, affects various individuals and groups and is subject to constant change. Addressing this issue effectively requires long-term commitment and adequate funding for counselling centres and law enforcement, continuous professional training, public awareness, a human rights-based approach, comprehensive and sustainable measures and cooperation among all relevant stakeholders, both nationally and globally. Additionally, reducing vulnerabilities such as poverty or educational and gender inequality is essential in lowering the risks of THB-SEFP.

In conclusion, the challenges in preventing and combating THB-SEFP are as complex and diverse as the crime itself. Recognising the complex nature of THB-SEFP and implementing a multifaceted strategy focused on trafficked persons is crucial to achieving long-term progress.

Endnotes

1 In December 2024, Germany adopted its first 'National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Human Beings and Protect Trafficked Persons' (BMBFSFJ 2025b).

2 The term 'trafficked women/persons' is used instead of 'victims' to avoid reinforcing stereotypes of passivity and lack of agency, which can affect how persons are perceived and treated by the criminal justice system and society. As a result, "many victims do not recognise themselves as victims" (Rijken 2018: 240).

3 Smuggling can lead to THB-SEFP when women become dependent on smugglers, losing control over their freedom and being forced into prostitution to repay debts. However, THB and smuggling are distinct concepts. Smuggling involves illegally transporting people across borders, often under life-threatening circumstances, but is based on consent. Smuggled persons typically pay large sums in advance, covering excessive transport, accommodation or visa costs (Skrivankova 2018).

4 The 'Nordic model' aims to ban sex work, signal social rejection and address demand by criminalising sex work clients, decriminalising sex workers and banning third-party profits. Expert interviews revealed that proponents of the 'Nordic model' often do not distinguish between THB-SEFP and sex work, viewing most sex workers as 'victims' of male violence and having their human dignity violated. Yet, a former policy specialist of a women's rights NGO emphasised that despite the implementation of a 'Nordic model', THB-SEFP would persist and trafficked women would not receive effective support. Thus, the demand for the 'Nordic model' should not be equated with anti-THB-SEFP efforts (Interview 18 2019).

5 The debate between sex work and THB-SEFP is highly ideological, requiring a broad range of perspectives for a full understanding. Getting consent for interviews with sex work advocates was difficult, as they feared that research involving 'Nordic model' advocates could link sex work negatively to THB.

6 In June 2025, the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ) submitted the results of an independent evaluation of the ProstSchG to the Bundestag, which had been carried out by the KFN e. V. (BMBFSFJ 2025a).

7 In 2023, only 11.9 per cent of trafficked women were registered under ProstSchG, mainly due to lack of legal status, being underage or working in unlicensed businesses (BKA 2025).

8 In 2023, 47 per cent of trafficked persons were exploited in rented apartments, 35.5 per cent through house and hotel calls, 13.1 per cent in bars and brothels, 5.6 per cent in street prostitution and 3.3 per cent in massage parlours (BKA 2025).

9 When perpetrators are acquaintances, women are more likely to initially consent or consciously enter sex work. However, over time, conditions gradually shift towards exploitation, making it harder for them to leave. Since the change is progressive, distancing themselves from the perpetrator becomes increasingly difficult (Zietlow/Baier 2021).

10 In accordance with the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, Germany is legally obligated to establish a NRM by July 2026.

11 KOK e.V. (2020: 86) has created a "graph on the identification of trafficked persons and their residence rights". Please see Figure 1 for further details.

12 Inconsistent testimonies from trafficked women may stem from trauma, limited articulation skills, language barriers, mistrust of police, fear of perpetrators, memory loss or delays in proceedings. Convictions are less likely if trafficked women have lived with suspects, previously worked as sex workers, a criminal record or continued in sex work during the investigation (Zietlow/Baier 2021).

13 In December 2024, Germany adopted its first 'National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Human Beings and Protect Trafficked Persons' (BMBFSFJ 2025b).

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Interviews

Table 1: Overview of the expert interviews

	Institution	Origin	Date	Type
1	Ambassador at Large for Combating Trafficking in Persons	Sweden	03/04/2019	In person
2	Politician	Lithuania	03/04/2019	In person
3	Women subjected to THB-SEFP	USA	04/04/2019	In person
4	Intergovernmental organisation	Poland	05/04/2019	In person
5	Social ethicist	Germany	08/04/2019	Video call
6	NGO for women's rights	Germany	11/04/2019	Video call
7	NGO for women's rights	Germany	18/04/2019	Telephone call
8	Women subjected to THB-SEFP	Germany	03/05/2019	Video call
9	Specialised counselling centre for trafficked persons	India	05/04/2019	Video call
10	Counselling centre for women subjected to sexual exploitation	Canada	09/05/2019	Video call
11	Specialised counselling centre for trafficked persons	Germany	18/06/2019	Telephone call
12	NGO against THB	Germany	02/07/2019	In person

	Institution	Origin	Date	Type
13	General practitioner	Germany	05/07/2019	Video call
14	Counselling centre for sex workers	Germany	15/07/2019	In person
15	Politician	Germany	17/07/2019	In person
16	NGO against THB	Germany	18/07/2019	Telephone call
17	Psychologist	Germany	24/07/2019	Video call
18	NGO for women's rights	Germany	07/08/2019	In person
19	Specialised counselling centre for trafficked persons	Germany	26/08/2019	In person
20	Intergovernmental organisation and independent anti-slavery commissioner	United Kingdom	10/10/2019	Video call
21	Detective superintendent	Germany	11/10/2019	Telephone call
22	Sex worker	Germany	15/10/2019	Telephone call
23	Women subjected to THB-SEFP	Germany	21/10/2019	Telephone call
24	Politician	Ireland	22/10/2019	Telephone call
25	Shelter for trafficked women	Germany	23/10/2019	In person
26	Detective chief superintendent	Germany	25/10/2019	In person
27	Specialised counselling centre for trafficked persons	Germany	21/01/2020	Telephone call
28	Specialised counselling centre for trafficked persons	Germany	03/02/2020	Telephone call
29	NGO against THB	Germany	05/02/2020	Telephone call

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kristina Bör holds a master's degree in Global Studies from Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and previously earned her bachelor's degree in Cultural and Social Anthropology from the University of Vienna. She is currently working towards her PhD in Gender Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, where she aims to expand upon her research about female sexuality and pleasure in close vicinity to the Kinsey Institute.

Aurora Festl studied Buddhist and South Asian Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich and received her master's degree in Modern South and Southeast Asian Studies from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. During her studies, she spent extended periods on Bali, Indonesia, exploring how cultural and societal structures shape individual experience. Today, she works as a somatic counselor specializing in developmental psychology, supporting individuals in cultivating self-efficacy and understanding behavioral patterns rooted in internalized norms.

Maya Ibrahim is from Singapore and holds a master's degree in Global Studies from the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She currently works in an NGO that provides refugees and asylum seekers with higher education and job integration opportunities. She enjoys writing about intersectional feminism, decoloniality and reimagining education. Currently, Maya is writing a book, "How to love our mothers", which is part of a larger project and community she is building that spotlights daughters perspectives, especially those living abroad and away from their family. Prior, she worked in Management Consulting at PwC

and Accenture. Right now, she lives in Berlin and writes poetry, often performed at berlinspokenword. Her work aims to address systemic inequalities linked to migration, gender equality, and education.

Matthias London holds an MA in Global Studies (HU Berlin, JNU Delhi, and the University of Pretoria) and previously worked as a research assistant for the S.U.C.RE. project at the University of Cologne. Inspired by Gonzo journalism and intersectional feminism, his work often employs subjective digital ethnography to challenge both academic content and form, hoping to spice up cultural studies a little.

Nina Stephainky holds a master's degree in Global Studies from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and FLACSO Argentina. She works as a policy specialist on the protection of children from trafficking at ECPAT Germany e.V., a non-governmental organisation dedicated to the protection of children from sexualised violence, exploitation and trafficking in human beings.