

The gig economy: Learning from sex work

'How the state pimps us all'

Ruby

Red Umbrella Sweden

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Research on platform economies and the gig economy have gained increased scholarly attention in the last decade. Critical platform studies (Alfonsson, 2019; Aloisi, 2015; Fagioli, 2021) argues that the economy of work on-demand via apps restructure labor and creates new forms of precarity, mostly focusing on the situation for migrants. However, research fails to recognize sex work as part of this economy, and how such work has existed long before the gig economy (and on-demand apps) became popularized.

In the mainstream Nordic context, sex work is considered as violence against women, as exploitative and therefore as *non-work*. However, considering the vast Marxist literature on labor, work is per definition exploitation of the bodies of workers. The Nordic law, policy, and discourse on sex work as violence and non-work, makes it almost impossible for sex workers to gain recognition, to unionize, claim labor rights and basic protection. While it is not illegal to sell sex, everyday acts are criminalized through means of surveillance, policing, evictions, and deportations. The Swedish state positions sex workers as unworthy of the state, yet not their taxes.

Anti-trafficking organizations campaign to shut down sex work internet platforms, without recognizing that it pushes sex workers 'back to the street corners'. Benefits of online platform work are more agency, safety, and financial stability for sex workers. However, sex workers are also negatively affected by the platforms' design and policies, which are developed without consideration of sex workers' health, safety, and wellbeing (ESWA, 2023).

We argue that research on the precarisation and platformisation of work has much to learn from sex work. Drawing on insights from sex workers, we suggest other ways of understanding work by centering experiences of workers in the intersections of criminalization, informalization, and the gig economy. In doing so, we make visible the tensions, contradictions, and continuations of exploitative labor.