

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mapping on discourses on the relationships between gender, sexuality and demand for paid-sex in Spain

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Abstract: This article mapping the explores the relationship that emerges from social discourses between the social construction of gender, the social construction of affective-sexual relationships and the demand for paid sex of men who pay for sex in Murcia (Spain). The methodology has a qualitative approach, based in case studies, through analysis of the social and individual discourses of participants (focus groups and in-depth interviews). Among the main conclusions is that the institution of prostitution reproduces a message of inequality between women and men although this is not always reproduced at the individual level at the time of exchanges between prostitutes and clients. More research is needed on the real situation of women in prostitution in order to address this phenomenon and, at the same time, to reduce gender inequality and protect the rights of women in prostitution.

Keywords: sexuality, prostitution, qualitative methodology

1 Introduction

In the international and Spanish context, there is a broad debate on prostitution and the best public policies to tackle this phenomenon in a context that aims to reduce existing gender inequalities. Spain is, according to the European study on sexual behavior and HIV-AIDS, the first country in the consumption of heterosexual prostitution [1]. Some 9.9% of the men interviewed claimed to have paid for sex in the last year, compared to 4.7% in Portugal, 4.3% in Germany, or 1.1% in France [2]. In the 2003 survey conducted by the National Statistics Institute (INE) on “health and sexual habits”, 27.3% of men who have had sexual relations stated that they have had sexual relations at some time in their lives with people they have paid for it, although only 6.7% have done so in the last twelve months. There are no differences by age group. Both percentages are strikingly higher than those observed in other European surveys [3].

The Balearic Islands is the Autonomous Community with the highest number of men reporting having used prostitution services (40.0%) and Cantabria the lowest (17.0%). In the Region of Murcia, 26.0% of men reported having paid for sex at some time in their lives and 7.0% in the last year (INE, 2003). The 2009 National Sexual Health Survey showed that 4.6% of men affirmed to have paid for sex in the last 12 months and 5.3% admitted having initiated sexual relations by paying someone else. These are the only studies on prostitution in Spain which present quantitative information about paid-sex demand by heterosexual men. Therefore, it is difficult to know the total population involved in the phenomena. According to the Meneses (2010) [4] study, in which 138 male prostitution clients filled out a survey in the same brothels, the average age of the men consuming prostitution was 38.3 years (in a range of 19-68 years). The mean age of the first paid sex experience was 21.8 years (in a range of 14-42) and they consumed paid sex an average of 30.4 times (in a range of 1-250 times).

Prostitution takes place in a context significant gender inequality. The activity rate of women and men differs by 10 points (69.2% for Spanish women and 79.1% for men), and while the estimated average income for a Spanish woman is \$22,200 per year, for men it is \$49,400 (World Economic Forum, 2021). Furthermore, from 2003 to August 17, 2022, 1,158 women have been murdered by their partners or ex-partners. In addition, between January 1, 2009 and March 31, 2022, 490,451 protection orders were pronounced and only during the first five months of the year 2022, 58,645 relevant calls were received to the attention number for women victims of violence (Government Delegation against Gender Violence, INMUGER, 2022).

In a gender unequal context, which directly impact human rights respect, is therefore indispensable to analyze the gender impact of all social interventions, moreover in the case of prostitution policies, which are directly linked to gender and sexual relations between women and men. To do so, we need more empirical research about the role played by prostitution in the unequal gender social structure and better understand the relationship between social models and individual praxis from a feminist critical epistemology. Traditionally, studies on prostitution have not undertaken from a feminist critical approach, since the production of knowledge on the subject has not systematically included how inequalities between women and men impact on the prostitutional system [5]. This occurs despite the fact that prostitution has been widely studied, first in the field of history or epidemiology and, since the 1970s, by the social sciences [6,7]. Moreover, studies on prostitution focus mostly on the figure of the female prostitute, while few refer to the client, despite the high number of men who buy prostitution [8,9]. Some authors assimilate this sort of “unnoticing” of the male in prostitution as a way to protect him and maintain his sexual privileges [10,11].

However, the trend is beginning to reverse and studies focusing on prostitution clients are increasing [3,12,13]. Likewise, over the years, there has been an evolution in the approach to the study of clients, with a gradual increase in studies that integrate an analysis of the client from a gender perspective, taking into account the inequalities that exist between women and men [13]. Thus, at the beginning, studies that treated the client as the protagonist of a deviant behavior of pathological origin stood out, moving later to the study of the client in the framework of his social context and placing particular interest in the epidemiological approach and in the figure of the client as an agent with high-risk behavior for the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV-AIDS [4]. Other studies have focused on the specific characteristics of prostitution clients, comparing them with each other or with non-client men, or establishing different categories among them [14–16]. Finally, other studies have focused on the motivation, behaviors and attitudes of prostitution clients [17–23].

Firstly, we present the theoretical framework to explain how feminist literature considers prostitution as one of the main patriarchal institutions, mainly in the Spanish case. Secondly, we present the main arguments in the feminist Spanish debate concerning policy approaches that could be implemented to tackle prostitution. In the third section of this article, we expose the outcomes of our field research on the relation between demand for paid-sex by heterosexual men and the social construction of gender and sex-emotional relationships according to social discourses and individual experiences. The article finishes with the discussions of outcomes and the conclusions on the best way to tackle prostitution in order to reduce gender inequality and to ensure prostitute women rights.

2 Speaking about prostitution: an of sex, gender or both? The role of prostitution in sexually patriarchal societies

The sexual division of labor, which assigns men a series of tasks and others to women, describes precisely this distribution of social roles that creates inequalities between the two sexes, reflected in the different access to resources such as social capital, economic resources or power in decision-making. According to feminist economics, this social division of labor is a mechanism for reproducing the subordination of women with respect to men [24]. It is one of the many mechanisms on which male domination is based on Bourdieu (2000) [25] and, therefore, the pillar of patriarchal societies.

However, Connell (2003) [26] considers that production relations and the sexual division of labor are only one of the dimensions of the gender structure, to which we must add power relations and emotional relations or cathexis. The main axis of power of the sex-gender system is the subordination of women and the domination of men, in other words, patriarchy. For Connell (1987) [27], this relates more to the symbolic level than to the distribution of material resources. Masculine characteristics thus have greater symbolic power than feminine ones. Once patriarchal relations are settled, different tasks are assigned to men and women in the productive system which, in the framework of a capitalist economy, consist of a “process of gender accumulation”, and the accumulation of capital and power by men [24]. The last dimension of the gender structure according to the author is linked to desire, understood as a social construction created around this generic order. Therefore, power, production and desire are the three pillars of the gender structure and the three main areas in which the masculine and men exercise their power over the feminine and women.

Moreover, they are inseparable spheres and, therefore, the construction of desire linked to sexuality cannot be analyzed separately from the relations of production or power between the sexes. The social construction of sexuality is influenced by the creation of desires and the regularization of sexual practices, translated into the interpretation of the sexual expression of the social actor according to his or her attachment or detachment to the normative sexuality, that is traditionally “heterosexually reproductive” [28]. Foucault (2012) [29] defines heterosexuality as a majority norm resulting from a sociohistorical process (heteronormativity) driven by state powers. This has led to the implementation of a biopolitics that establishes a “device of sexuality” that makes it possible to “discipline bodies” and “regulate populations”. In the context of patriarchal societies, women are expected to be passive, to suffer and to become sexual objects [30]. This causes a permanent tension between the sexual desires of men and the mechanisms of oppression, which generate fantasies and sexual behaviors of domination of the female body and women [31]. Taking all these elements into account, we can deduce that prostitution is the institution that best reflects this symbolic interaction between production, desire and power, since it includes a relationship between women and men on these three dimensions simultaneously. (see in Figure 1)

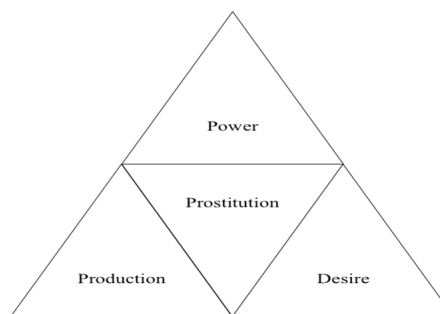


Figure 1 Prostitution as a gender institution on the basis of Connell (2003) masculinities theories. (Source: Elaborated by the author.)

In this sense, any legislative or political action in the field of prostitution will have a strong influence on gender issues, in the same way that measures focused on the regulation of sexuality and gender relations will also have an important influence on the materialization of the phenomenon of prostitution in any society. It remains therefore important to be analyzed how social policy on prostitution could contribute to continue strengthening an unequal gender structure or to reverse it completely.

3 Feminist debate on prostitution in Spain: abolitionist approach against regulationist approaches

Generally speaking, the feminist movement agrees in affirming that prostitution is rooted in the patriarchal structure of societies [32–34]. This is most evident in the context of heterosexual prostitution, in which women sell sexual services and men buy them. This type of market is also the larger prostitution market, above other markets in which women or homosexual men are the demanders. Despite this agreement, there is a great debate in Spain, and internationally, about prostitution. On the one hand, studies associated with the foundations of radical feminism consider prostitution as a violent expression of male domination and exploitation of women, and therefore it can never be accepted. On the other hand, there is the liberal or “sex-radical” perspective, according to which prostitution should be reconigned as a form of work and that advocates the elimination of the stigma associated with it. These two ideal types serve to position researchers, activists or politicians on one side or the other [35–37].

For regulationist groups in Spain [38] the debate should focus on defending the rights of women prostitutes, something that should be achieved through three basic mechanisms: the elimination of any prohibition on the exercise of the activity, the promotion of the participation of women prostitutes in the search for solutions and the fight against the social stigma that is at the basis of discrimination against women who exercise this activity [39]. According to this current, sex work consists of emotional labor, care work, comparable to care work for the elderly or domestic work [40]. This approach argues that prostitution should be regulated like any other work so that prostitutes can have access to the status of workers, thus guaranteeing their rights [39]. This coincides with arguments at the international level defending the regularization of prostitution since this is in the interest of all parties involved: sex workers, local residents,

owners of sex businesses, and public officials [41].

From the abolitionist standpoint, prostitution is considered an institution that legitimizes gender inequality and is incompatible with equality; therefore, it should be eliminated. In general, this approach does not advocate the prohibition or criminalization of prostitution, but rather the disappearance of the activity, as it is undesirable and contrary to women's rights. This approach focuses its proposal on the protection of women prostitutes and the condemnation of clients and pimps, as they are considered as exploiters [42].

Regardless of the current from which prostitution is approached, they all agree that the female prostitute is first and foremost a stigmatized woman. It is a stigma based on the fact of being a "bad woman" who skirts the morality of female sexuality, which should be passive and circumscribed to marriage [32, 33, 43]. Pheterson (1996) [33] describes that the female prostitute is dishonored for various reasons such as having relationships with strangers, having many sexual partners, taking sexual initiative, being an expert in sex, asking for sex in exchange for money, satisfying male sexual fantasies in an impersonal way, or being alone at night on the street.

For the pro-rights movement, where Pheterson (1996) [33] is included, the only way to recognize the rights of women prostitutes is to fight against stigma and recognize that they are women who express their sexuality autonomously [32]. This also includes fighting against the victimization of women prostitutes, a victimization promoted by the abolitionist movement that considers all prostitutes as women who are forced, exploited and conditioned to engage in an activity that denigrates them. For these pro-rights authors, the abolitionist system does not take into account the freedom of decision of the majority of women in prostitution, as it does not differentiate between forced and voluntary prostitution.

In response, the regulationist bloc argues that the lack of capacity for consent and free choice is not inherent to prostitution, but is rather associated with other factors such as poverty, racism, drug addiction or poor working conditions [33]. In this vision of prostitution as work, the opportunity cost of prostitution for women who are in a situation of greater social vulnerability takes on special value. In these situations, prostitution may be the only economic resource to cover basic needs. The possibilities of choice are related to the real freedom that individuals have [44]. These issues are intertwined with the dilemma of consent and the autonomy of the individual to issue it. For regulationist, the consent of the person is a sufficient element, since it is based on will. For abolitionists, consent must be linked to desire and to a higher principle that cannot be ignored and which is not so much a moral principle such as that of human dignity, but that of gender equality. We therefore find ourselves in a tension between the individual, private and intimate sphere and the collective, public and political sphere. Abolitionists remove the individual sphere from the equation while, for regulationist, it is precisely consent (of women who do not suffer from other vulnerabilities linked to lack of economic resources, racism, drug addiction, etc.) that articulates individual freedom with collective principles.

4 Methodology

The methodological design of the research is based on a qualitative methodology of simple discourse analysis. Eight discussion groups were formed with randomly selected participants who met the established socioeconomic characteristics. Discourse analysis aims to understand the meaning and interpretation of reality made by the participants, so we settled on a strategy of inductive and hermeneutic analysis of the object of study [45].

We used a critical approach with feminism as a reference point, which meant the ideal of real and symbolic equality between women and men. We focused on the relationship between the collective discourses collected through the focus groups and the specific experiences of three prostitution clients, analyzed as case studies. This is a multi-strategic research approach [46], based on the indivisible character of the social fact and its construction from a complementarity of points of view and methodologies that allows us to approach the subject of study in a global way.

The information collected, has been systematized through the creation of comparable categories of analysis between the different focus groups and sources of information. The information was collected between 2016 and 2022. The saturation of the information [47, 48], marked the end of the data collection, determining the adequacy in the number of cases. More specifically, the techniques used were as follows: a) Participant observation: visits were carried out to places of prostitution where it was possible to discuss with clients and with female prostitutes or people who knew these environments closely; b) Eight discussion groups were

held (three with men and five with women) with the participation of 13 women and 10 men. The people were selected on the basis of sex, age and social class. Through these groups it was possible to obtain the social discourse existing in society and related to our subject of study; c) Three semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with three prostitution clients who had not participated in the focus groups. The cases were chosen in relation to having a variety of profiles after conducting different focus groups based on a series of socio-demographic data representative of the study area (age range and economic level). The profiles of the participating clients are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1 Profiles of prostitution clients

Client	Sociodemographic profile
Client 1	Male, between 41 and 50 years old, not married and without a partner. No studies. Employed by third party level pawn. With a very low income level. He considers himself a non-practicing Catholic.
Client 2	Male, between 31 and 40 years old, not married and with a partner. University studies. Employed in the services sector. Upper middle income level. Atheist.
Client 3	Male, between 20 and 30 years old. Not married and with a partner. High school studies. Entrepreneur in the services sector. High income level. Atheist.

In the approach to the social phenomenon, discursive categories related to conceptions of masculinity and affective-sexual relationships and the meaning given to prostitution were analyzed. This information was compared with the information collected in the three case studies. Thus, the information obtained through each of these techniques made it possible to correlate the different levels of analysis. The information was classified on the basis of general thematic areas and the identification of thematic fields and discursive categories for each of them, as shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2 Relationship between levels of analysis, dimensions and thematic fields

	Dimensión de análisis	Campo Temático	Fuente
Macrosocial level (Indirect structural factors)	Macrosocial level (Indirect structural factors)	Definition of the concept of man Gender roles	Focus groups
	Social conceptions about affective-sexual relationships and gender roles	Sexuality Sexuality and gender roles Definition of the love and gender roles	
Mesosocial level (Direct structural factors)	Social justification of prostitution	Reasons for access to prostitution	
Microsocial Level (Individualized Experiences)	Experiences and experiences of prostitution consumers	Opinions about women as a generic construction Experiences and conceptions about affective-sexual relationships Motivations for the demand for prostitution Opinion on prostitution	Individual Client Case Studies

Source: Own elaboration from the systematization of the focus groups and interviews.

5 Results

First of all, the results obtained from the systematization of the analysis of the discourse obtained in the 8 discussion groups held are presented. The selected discourses are identified by H (male); M (female), and Group number (G). The categories drawn from the analysis of participants' discourse are shown below.

5.1 Social models of masculinity and femininity

In order to understand the social conception of the models of masculinity and femininity that exist in Spain, taking the Region of Murcia as a reference in the research, the information collected through the social discourses produced in the discussion groups has been analyzed. The discursive categories identified refer to five main elements that reflect a certain tension between old and new models: women and men speak of a change in the model of masculinity, but still have as a reference the traditional "ideal" man in his role as breadwinner and family pillar.

"The role [of a man] has changed over time, ...and now it is equal to that of a woman, in

general, in society, in the family, at least in the sphere in which I move, but perhaps in another sphere it is not like that" (M1, FG2, Women).

The men show disagreement with their traditional role as men, considering that the traditional patterns and roles assigned to their gender are outdated in today's society, which demands educated men, without this predominant role of dominance.

"With manners, with education, being normal. That, as they used to say, before you had to be a macho, you had to be the one who pulled the family. That was before" (H1, FG1, Men).

Along these lines, the perception of women is far removed from this vision of protection. Women see men as partners, with whom to share their lives and not so much as breadwinners or protectors.

"What we want, or what we look for in a man, is that he listens to us, understands us. And help us, but a mutual help" (M3, FG4, Women).

However, both men and women continue to significantly associate women's role with care work. This is justified by the greater "biological capacity of women," who have a better attunement than men with nature and the emotional world and intuitions, elements that have an impact on their social role:

"You sacrifice also a facet of your personal development, such as the work environment, in favor of taking care of your children... I think it is also nice" (M1, FG3, Women).

The rupture of this "naturalized woman's" role in the family, associated with procreation and care, is determined by women's participation in the labor market.

"Women today see what they have seen in their mothers, grandmothers or other women, and now they want to be on a par with men in work, in entertainment, in studies, in everything. And I see that more and more the famous glass ceiling is being broken" (M1, FG2, Women).

5.2 Understanding of sexuality and gender roles

Understanding of sexuality and gender roles are connected with biological, cultural, religious and instinctive aspects. For young people, sexuality is understood as something natural and necessary, and an integral part of people's lives.

"It is a physiological and natural need, you can also live without sex of course, but... I see it as very important, and very necessary" (M1, FG2, Women).

The liberalization of female sexuality is understood as the disappearance of a key social norm that directly conditioned and continues to indirectly condition women's sexuality: female virginity until marriage.

"In that we carry a very important cultural ballast. The theme of our grandmothers, of arriving at marriage as a virgin, which is now unthinkable, but it does resonate, there is an echo in our thoughts and we talk about it, right? and it is talked about, isn't it? It is a topic that is heard and that conditions, less and less, but it conditions" (M2, FG3, Women).

Regarding gender sexual roles, it is observed how male sexuality is conceived as a sexuality dominated by a sexual biological instinct that is active and imperative, which seems to guide men's lives.

"But man is conceived to have, to wherever he goes, to sleep with the first one that..." (H2, FG2 Men).

Female sexuality, although liberated, would not be so active and transmitting like male sexuality, but passive and receiving. Women's sexuality no longer has to be repressed as a social norm, but in a "natural way" their sexuality would be less active.

"There is sexual instinct in both, because otherwise there would be no reproduction of the species (...) we are more impulsive because we are less selective, that is, I like it so I go...but a woman cannot say "I like it so I go". She has to meditate well" (H1, FG2 Men).

5.3 Definition of love and gender roles

Social models of male and female sexuality are related to the way in which a society conceives emotional and sexual relationships. According to collected data, sexual relationships are naturalized, thus liberating female sexuality and, also, couple relationships.

In the discursive categories identified, the partner is understood as a companion for life, with

whom to share day-to-day life, who supports personal development. This situation is favored by the love-sex fragmentation, as well as by the love-marriage consideration. To the extent that love, sex and marriage are separated, sexuality becomes freer, including women sexuality.

“At first I didn’t understand anything [about relationships with men], because besides, it was another era and things were like that [in reference to women assuming all responsibility for the home and having a sexual obligation to the husband]. And it had to be like that. And you fell in love with him, and you saw everything through his eyes, then.... But not now, now you dot the i’s and cross the t’s” (M1, FG5, Women).

5.4 Social justification of the demand for prostitution

In this social framework in which we see that sexual relations are freer and do not necessarily imply love or commitment. In a context where (young) girls also want to have free sex, what are the reasons why men prefer to pay for sex and not have free sex? While the female prostitute has sex in exchange for money, what is the man looking for in paid sex that he cannot get in free sex?

Some justifications show a vision of sex associated with a mechanical, purely pleasurable act, not linked to commitment or more intimate feelings. It is something physical that does not need to be repressed if there are women who can prostitute themselves. In addition, we found other arguments regarding sexual deficiencies resulting from the taboos surrounding sexuality and the search for new experiences, meeting new women or seeking experiences with “exotic” women. In the focus groups with women also highlighted the fact that male clients sought power through payment.

“So they seek them like that, or because of the morbidity that “since I’m going to pay you you have to do this, this and this to me. Because I’m going to pay you. I have the right, even if you don’t want to. Because I am paying you” (M1, FG1, Women).

5.5 In a second moment, the social discourse is presented to the individual experiences of three prostitution clients.

The prostitution clients were interviewed in depth through semi-structured face-to-face interviews of at least one hour. During their discourses, the same questions were asked as in the focus groups to understand each client’s conception of gender roles and affective-sexual relationships, as well as their specific motivations and views on prostitution.

5.6 Opinions on women as a generic construction

The clients’ discourses on their relationships with women allow us to identify three basic discursive categories that serve to understand the vision that male clients may have about femininity and women: “woman-interested”, “intelligence-attraction”, “woman-equal”.

The “woman-interested” places women in a position that makes it easy to justify prostitution, attributing to them stereotypical behaviors with personal gain resulting from amorous relationships, making a simile with those established in prostitution.

“The woman looks for her wellbeing, first a good wallet, she doesn’t look at the guy, she looks for the good wallet and then a good loved one” (Man/Client1).

The discourses grouped around the category “intelligence-attraction” refer to stereotypes related to women’s cunning, their resolute capacity and their ability to attract men.

“Women are more cunning and lively than men, we are more lazy (...) where does a man go without a woman?” (Man/Client2).

Finally, the category of “woman-equal” includes a discourse that is not able to reproduce any stereotype or specific vision of women and that we associate with the consideration of women as equals.

“Well, I don’t know how to describe women, you can’t generalize in anything, neither in character, nor in physique or anything, it’s impossible” (Man/Client3).

5.7 Experiences and conception of affective-sexual relations

The analysis of the experiences in couple relationships and their vision of them, allows us to identify the following discursive categories: “trust-deception” and “couple-team”. (Table 3)

For the clients interviewed, the relationship should be based on trust, and the moment this

Table 3 Discursive categories of prostitution clients regarding their experiences and conception of affective-sexual relationships

Categories	Identified discursive subcategories	Clients
Experiences and conception of affective-sexual relations	Confidence – Disappointment	Client 2: “Above all respect and trust. If I go anywhere, loyalty. If there is no respect and trust and loyalty in a couple, it’s no good (...) But well, it’s an amicable separation, everything’s fine, I haven’t seen her again for 16 years. I would like to ask a couple of questions. Resentment makes you not be you”
	Partner-Team”	Client 3: “Help me to be like a team, so that we can multiply (...) help you to grow”

Source: elaborated by the authors.

trust is broken, there is a major situation of disillusionment, which can affect other situations with women and even one’s own life. Although they also understand the relationship as a team, which serves to reinforce the individual capacities of each one.

5.8 Motivations for the demand for prostitution

An important aspect of understanding the consumption patterns of clients is to understand the motivations that make them pay for sex. These motivations can be identified, not only through the discourses they reproduce when asked directly about their motivations, but also through their accounts of their relationships with prostitutes and the ways in which they occur. This exercise has made it possible to identify three discursive categories that refer to the interviewed clients’ motivations for paying for sex: “lack of possibilities to have sex with women”, “fun and leisure” and “living an experience, fantasy”, which are set out in [Table 4](#).

Table 4 Discursive categories of prostitution clients regarding their motivations for prostitution demand

Categories	Identified discursive subcategories	Client
Motivations/clients for using prostitution	Lack of possibilities to do so with other women	Client 1: “Maybe I didn’t have anything at the time. I felt like having sex and I had no other recourse. If I have something else I don’t go”
	Fun and leisure	Client 2: “Dancing, talking, laughing, not knowing each other and we treat each other as friends and maintain relationships (...) If I go I have to go with that atmosphere of drinking alcohol, that’s why I don’t usually go. It leads to relapses and I don’t want to relapse. I look more for the atmosphere, I would never think of going at 9 o’clock in the morning. I’m under the influence of alcohol”.
	Living an experience / fantasy	Client 3: “It’s about experiences. The last time I went, for example, my girlfriend took me. She wanted me to do it and she wanted to watch. But then I was with both of them”.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

In many cases, the chances of having sex with prostitutes also depend on the existence of a sexual connection between client and prostitute, as well as the level of trust between the two, as one client states:

“With the one I have hired there has not been rapport, not with everyone you can understand each other while fucking” (Male, client 3).

5.9 Opinion on prostitution

In relation to the positionings towards prostitution of male clients, we found favorable discourses, but also contrary ones in the analysis of the thematic field “opinion on prostitution”. ([Table 5](#))

Clients also express the goodness of prostitution in relation to the availability of a service that serves to satisfy the sexual needs of men; preserving the social structure, thus avoiding chaos and disorder in the relations between women and men (increase of divorces, marriages based only on sexual need or increase of rapes), constituting a “public good and service”; the vision of prostitution as an economic opportunity for women in precarious situations; the consideration that it is equally good, insofar as it offers a sexual service that can be sold or bought by men and women and that responds to the rules of the market and to human needs. In other words, it is a much more economic discourse that does not take into account gender inequalities. Another identified category was “exploitation of women (but inevitable)”. Within this category is the view that prostitution is a serious violation of women’s rights, since women are discriminated in general and prostitute women are stigmatized.

Table 5 Discursive categories of prostitution clients regarding their opinions on prostitution

Categories	Identified discursive subcategories	Clients
Opinions on prostitution	Good and necessary	Client 2: “There are women who have no means, who feed their children like this” Client 1: “There are people who for whatever reason cannot have a partner and they are there. I don’t rule out going again one day. If I ever see that I don’t have a way out, that’s one”
	Public good and public service	Client 2: “Thanks to prostitution, marriages are preserved, the man leaves knowing that he will have no problem sleeping with another woman” Client 3: “I think it’s good, there are people who offer it and there are people who want to hire it”
	Exploitation of women (but unavoidable)	Client 2: “Mistreatment, and on a globalised level, women are secondary and above all prostitutes and have no rights, no dignity and no rights”

Source: elaborated by the authors.

6 Discussion

Prostitution and the motivations of prostitution clients to pay for sex are embedded in a broad socio-cultural system that structures relationships between men and women. It can be seen how the experiences of individual male costumers reflect and integrate coherently with prevailing social discourses regarding the construction of masculinity and femininity and affective-sexual relationships. This has been highlighted by other research [49, 50].

If we analyze the social discourses surrounding the construction of masculinity and femininity, we see that the definitions of man and woman are still constructed in opposition to each other. This coincides with the theories of authors such as who affirm that being a man consists precisely in not being a woman. Although progress is being made towards an egalitarian distribution of roles, we continue to identify discourses that identify women as natural mothers, which would also justify their greater intuition to assume the work of care and upbringing, coinciding with Puleo-García (2000) [51]. In this sense, women appear inevitably conditioned by biology and are therefore described “by what they are”, while men escape this conditioning and are defined “by what they do” [52]. This process would be in evolution and change, based on women’s refusal to assume a traditional role and on their possibilities of access to education, paid work and social life, which makes men feel obliged to redefine their roles. The discourses of the clients analyzed move between those who continue to perceive women in their traditional role and others in which women are defined as equals. No special macho and patriarchal vision of male prostitution clients is observed that presents qualitative differences with other types of general social discourse in the majority. In this sense, the results coincide with Ranea-Triviño’s (2022) [50] research in Spain in which she concludes that male prostitution clients do not have a specific discourse in terms of gender stereotypes. Along the same lines, also concludes that there is no identity as a “client” of prostitution, but that the fact of consuming prostitution constitutes an element proper to male identity in a general way and not specific to men who pay for sex.

With regard to the social conception of emotional and sexual relationships, a process of sexual liberalization and liberalism can be glimpsed. Sex is understood as an integral part of people’s lives, also of women, observing social discourses in which a generational change is evident. The triad “love-sex-marriage” on which the patriarchal social contract was founded [53] separates. Sexuality becomes freer, and so does the woman; and the liberalization of women also contributes to this sexual freedom. These are interdependent variables. In this sense, women’s economic independence, achieved through access to paid work, is an element that favors sexual freedom, since it gives women a greater capacity for choice.

Nevertheless, it is observed that despite the social acceptance that men and women have a sexuality, women represent the object, the passive, the receiving body, while men are represented as responding to a biological imperative, to the independent will of their penis, which in this case would act as a symbol of their power [54]. Male clients and their individual experiences in the framework of emotional and sexual relationships maintain a discourse that is coherent with this positioning, reproducing gender stereotypes linked to sexuality in a recurrent manner. We observe the reproduction of gender stereotypes linked to sexuality that define, on the one hand, the arguments that justify male demand, as well as the stigmatization of the female prostitute [55].

In the analysis of the motivations for male demand for paid sex, the reasoning, social and individual equally coincide and both highlight the role of prostitution as an institution to satisfy

the unmet sexual needs of males.

This is consistent to the extent that the distinctive socialization of female and male sexuality produces mismatches in the type of practices desired (as socially constructed). However, the experience and narratives of the clients participating in this research show that prostitution is more than just selling sex, with an affective dimension in the sexual exchange between prostitute and client as other authors have highlighted [2, 13, 49]. Similarly, in the study conducted with female prostitutes in the city of Murcia in 2009, female prostitutes offered four types of client motivations: to have a classic sexual contact, to seek companionship and conversation, to satisfy their attraction to the characteristics attributed to foreign women, or to exploit their homosexual, bisexual or transsexual side, which they cannot enjoy in their daily lives [56]. These findings nuance the capacity of that hegemonic masculinity theory [27, 57] to provide a complete and useful description to explain the range of behaviors that prostitution clients engage in when paying for sex [49]. Nevertheless, all of the individual or societal arguments used to justify the demand for prostitution argue for a male legitimacy of being able to satisfy men's sexual needs at all times. These arguments are directly related to gender inequality. Thus, the sexual domination of men by women, an essential constituent of the social category "man", would be the basis of men's behavior when they use prostitution. The set of arguments put forward by men in the different categories imply a vision of sex and sexual satisfaction as a man's right and, as something natural, the fact of paying to satisfy this need. It is therefore assumed that prostitution has a social role, at the service of men who need female prostitutes to satisfy their sexual needs [8].

The modalities of regulation of prostitution in the framework of public policies and the actions that derive from them must take these findings into account if we consider as a universal principle the advance towards gender equality and as a practical priority the defence of the rights of women prostitutes. The abolition of prostitution or its transformation into an egalitarian market can be a long road, the same road that remains to be travelled towards gender equality, so it is necessary to think of measures that assume this precept and that protect the women who exercise and will continue to exercise prostitution for many decades to come. For this reason, legislation on prostitution policies must take into account the complexity of the prostitution market and the relationships between social and individual spheres, avoiding moralistic policies or those that are blind to structural inequalities and their reproduction.

It is therefore necessary to ask yourself at this point if women act in the same way. The prostitution market is dominated by male demand and female supply. There are no women, or at least not in the same number as men, who want to satisfy sexual needs in the same way. Indeed, although the female prostitute is a woman who exercises an active sexuality, she does so in exchange for money. In this sense, the social message that is sent through prostitution is that women activate their sexuality only as a need and not as a pleasure. It is a message that does not differ from the role traditionally given to women's sexuality, always at the service of men, as it is reflected in work and in the background. Prostitution is a pillar that reproduces stereotypes about gender inequality, not to mention the stigma, the situation of vulnerability and even the risk of aggression and violence experienced by female prostitutes [58]. These circumstances are exacerbated by race, gender, and context [59, 60].

The relationship between prostitution and the maintenance of gender inequality while observing a variety of particular situations in the behaviors and attitudes of each client, hints at the difficulty in legislating around prostitution. It also demonstrates the need for in-depth research in these areas to learn more about this phenomenon [61]. More needs to be known about the relationship between the majority prostitution market and other minority markets (women who pay for sex with men or the homosexual market) or about the effects of the different public policies implemented in different countries on gender equality and the situation of women prostitutes. These processes should be developed with priority consideration of the experiences and choices of women prostitutes [41, 44, 62] and from a feminist critical epistemology.

7 Conclusion

A direct causal relationship between gender inequality, conception of masculinity, construction of affective-sexual relationships, and demand for paid sex by heterosexual males is found in the discourse analysis. However, this relationship is complex. On the one hand, both in social discourses and in individual case studies, we observe the reproduction of a kind of "myth of male sexuality", whereby men's sexuality implies a mandate for sexual satisfaction. The existence of heterosexual prostitution is justified in this way. On the other hand, the experiences of prostitution clients are varied and do not seem to represent a group with specific discourses

or behaviors among the male group.

From these precepts, it can be concluded that the institution of prostitution reproduces a message of inequality between women and men and helps to perpetuate and reproduce gender stereotypes at the social level, but this is not always reproduced at the individual level at the time of exchanges between prostitutes and clients. More research on prostitution is needed to be able to tackle this phenomenon while reducing gender inequality and protecting prostitute women's rights.

8 Limitations

One of the main limitations of our study has been to be able to reach a larger number of clients. The fear of lack of confidentiality, the lack of motivation to participate in this type of study, has made it difficult to have a broader view of the discourses and perceptions of these clients.

Compliance with ethical standards

The research includes the voluntary participation of people who gave their informed oral consent to participate in the research and also for the conversations to be recorded. The participation of all individuals is done under the criteria of confidentiality and anonymity. All the information collected in this article faithfully reproduces the information collected during the exchanges, the objective of which was known to all the participants. The research was conducted without specific funding and there is no conflict of interest.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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