

“Cleansing the city”: A sex worker-led analysis of impacts of the closure and the relocating of De Wallen’s Red-Light District

PHOEBE MARSH



Prostitution
Information
Center

TURING SCHEME AWARD REPORT

“WE ARE PART OF THE FABRIC, WE HAVE A RIGHT TO STAY IN THE CITY AS MUCH AS EVERYONE ELSE” - PARTICIPANT WORKING IN THE WINDOWS

Overview

Geographic location: De Wallen, the red-light district in Amsterdam

Organisation: Prostitution Information Center

Placement job title: Historical archiver

Placement dates: May 18th - July 27th 2022

Research participants: Staff of the Prostitution Information Center (PIC)

The work placement was centred in the heart of Amsterdam, within an organisation that aims to address and challenge the stigma society holds against sex workers in the Netherlands. As part of a collaborative agreement between myself and the PIC, we agreed I would archive their collection of sex worker relevant materials, in exchange for interviews, and the ability to engage with participant observation with staff members. The data collected would be used in my Master's dissertation, which was analysing the impacts that the closure and relocation of the red-light district would have on sex workers in De Wallen



IMPACT SNAPSHOT

161

Historically relevant
items archives

67

Pages of data collected

120

Hours of participant
observation at the
Prostitution
Information Center



Work Placement

The Prostitution Information Centre (PIC) is located in the heart of Amsterdam's red-light district (De Wallen) in the Netherlands. They serve as an educational centre, providing resources, information and advice for sex workers, clients, and visitors to Amsterdam. The PIC's aim is to provide accurate information from a sex worker perspective, challenging myths and misperceptions about sex work. Their current focus is on addressing the conflation between sex work and trafficking. The PIC also hosts workshops for sex workers on labour rights, better work practices, wellbeing and selfcare.

What I achieved

My role at the PIC was to archive the PIC's historical records and library. The PIC needed help storing, categorising and digitally archiving their 20-year-old records. The PIC archive contains rich and historically valuable documents that give insight into the lives of sex workers in De Wallen, and the advocacy of the PIC in the past two decades.

I created an archive which can now be accessed online, allowing the people to see what documents we have in the building. Providing sex worker related knowledge to politicians, academics, students, sex workers and the public.

Therefore, building on PIC's status as a place of historical and cultural significance. This is increasingly important, as the Amsterdam Municipality is attempting to remove the sex industry from the city centre, and deny the important influence sex workers have had historically and culturally on the capital.

My research focused on Amsterdam's Municipalities plan to close the red-light windows in De Wallen and build an 'erotic' hotel on the outskirts of the city. The relocation of sex work in both Rotterdam and Utrecht has impacted human and labour rights of sex workers and well-being. Throughout the relocation planning in Amsterdam, there has been a lack of effective consultation with sex workers. Explored how sex workers feel about the relocation, their critiques, how they will navigate the relocation if it continues, and what their perspectives are on reducing the negative impacts.

Through participant observation, focus groups and semi-structured interviews, this research analysed the consequences sex workers could experience if this relocation happens. This research highlighted the views of sex workers on how to minimise the impact of the relocation project on rights and wellbeing. This research criticises the municipality of not respecting the perspectives of sex workers before moving to the relocation, and suggests the relocation will reproduce the narrative binary of sex workers as victims, or villains of society that need controlling and surveying. Further endangering sex workers.

EXPENSES BURSARY

HELPED COVER

Moving costs

Rent

Bills (Including food)

JUSTIFICATION

I needed to move to the Netherlands to conduct in person research. With 1 bedroom flats in Amsterdam starting at 1,500EUR a month, living outside the city and to commuting in made more sense. Half-way through the placement, I had to move to Tilburg, thus incurring more moving cost. While the award did not cover all my expenses, and I has saved up quite a substantial amount before the placement, the award was extremely useful to help with unexpected financial costs and the financial costs of moving from the UK to the Netherlands.

Moving Forward

My hope is that the Municipality will read this dissertation and take seriously the suggestions made by sex workers, thereby reducing the risk and impact of the relocation, or scrapping the idea altogether. I hope this research will have a national and international impact, as the forced relocation of sex workers and precarious examples of legislation and tolerance zones are becoming more frequent, especially in western Europe. I hope this research will be a positive example of the research that should be conducted before any urban planning that involves sex worker relocation.

I couldn't have done it without your generous support.

As a first generation student from a working class background, this research would have been impossible without bursary support. The Netherlands is an expensive country with a housing crisis, so the funds given allowed me rent housing outside of the city and pay my utility and food bills while working on a voluntary placement. The lack of stress I had by having housing and bills partially paid for greatly improved the quality of my work and writing.

Thanks in part to the Turing Scheme Award. I am now the coordinator of the PIC, organising events, meetings between staff and board members, and actively addressing the stigma towards sex workers in the Netherlands. I am grateful for this experience and would advise anyone who plans to do a placement to apply to the Turing Scheme Award.

Thanks to you and all your donors.

