



Prostitution in the neighbourhood: Impact on residents and implications for municipal regulation



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ABSTRACT

Red-light districts (RLD's) are still assumed to be associated with nuisance, deterioration and criminality. However, little empirical research deals with the experienced impacts of RLD's on the local neighbourhood. This paper adds to this skinny body of literature, by investigating residents' perceptions on the impact of window prostitution in a RLD situated in a residential area in Western-Europe. Although not all residents experience negative impacts of prostitution, the municipal regulation still incorporates certain residents' concerns regarding nuisance, which is conform the ongoing regeneration and gentrification of the broader area, which can be framed within the 'urban renaissance' discourse. At the same time, the city approach is also characterised by elements to maintain prostitution in the area and to improve sex workers' safety and working conditions.

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1. Introduction

The sex industry has become more visible, accessible and partially more socially acceptable in the community in recent years, under a neoliberal influence (Brents and Sanders, 2010). At the same time, prostitution often remains stigmatised and 'othered': those who are involved are considered 'others' or 'outsiders' (Kingston, 2014, 14; Matthews, 2008). In addition, it is still assumed that red-light districts (RLDs) – areas characterised by a concentration of sexual businesses (Weitzer, 2012, 2014) – are associated with nuisance or public disorder, deterioration and criminality (Bellis et al., 2007; Hubbard and Whowell, 2008; Kantola and Squires, 2004; Prior et al., 2013; Vermeulen, 2014; Weitzer, 2014). This 'othering', and the persistent association of RLDs with nuisance, not only provokes neighbours of sex premises to oppose prostitution and its associated problems¹ (Bellis et al., 2007; Hubbard, 1998; Hubbard et al., 2013; Matthews, 2008), but is also a reason for local governments to geographically define RLDs through urban planning and a system of licences (Hubbard, 1998; Hubbard and Colosi, 2012; Hubbard et al., 2013; Vermeulen, 2008, 2014; Weitzer, 2014). According to Vermeulen (2008), local regulation of public (dis)order should be based on actual, material disruption of public order (nuisance). However, only little empirical scientific research has addressed the experienced impacts of prostitution, such as nuisance, on the local neighbourhood

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¹ An interesting body of literature exists on neighbourhood actions against (mainly street) prostitution: Hubbard (1998) Community action and the displacement of street prostitution: evidence from British cities. *Geoforum* 29: 269–286, Kingston (2014) *Prostitution in the community. Attitudes, action and resistance*, Oxon/New York: Routledge, Mathieu (2011) Neighbors' anxieties against prostitutes' fears: ambivalence and repression in the policing of street prostitution in France. *Emotion, Space and Society* 4: 113–120.

(Hubbard et al., 2013). The present paper adds to the scant body of literature on the impact of indoor prostitution on the local neighbourhood, by investigating residents' perceptions of window prostitution in an RLD situated in a residential area of Ghent, Belgium. More specifically, we wanted to identify the way in which residents experience living in/near an RLD, and thereby investigated the extent to which they experience prostitution-related nuisance. As many scholars have previously contended, the definition of nuisance is problematic and controversial (Cooper, 2002; Di Ronco and Persak, 2014; De Wree and Van Malderen, 2008; Verfaillie, 2008). Nuisance is not a fixed phenomenon, but it varies over time, space and person. It cannot be determined on the basis of objective standards, as the description of nuisance depends on subjective interpretations and the level of (in)tolerance of a society (De Wree and Van Malderen, 2008). However, behaviour that is often depicted as nuisance is generally that which offends, alarms or upsets individuals or communities (Di Ronco and Persak, 2014). It can include a broad range of disturbing conduct, such as littering, noise, public urinating and hanging around. In this paper, we have used a pragmatic, descriptive approach to nuisance, by identifying several types of behaviour that residents and local policymakers perceived as disruptive, but not criminal. The primary focus was thus on public and amenity nuisance, rather than on stigma nuisance (Cooper, 2002; Hubbard, 2015).

An additional aim was to explore how the presence of window prostitution in a residential area impacts on local regulation with regard to prostitution. More specifically, we have explored how residents' perceptions and experiences are reflected in, and influence, municipal regulation,² amongst other socioeconomic factors mentioned in the literature, such as regeneration and gentrification. These two concepts can be framed within the 'urban renaissance' discourse (Hubbard et al., 2007). Simply put, the term urban renaissance refers to a series of policies created with the intention of bringing people back to the cities (Hubbard et al., 2007: 203). Examples of such processes are repressive, targeted policing of marginalised groups, such as squatters (Hubbard, 2004), and the exchanging of empty factories and warehouses for new apartments and housing blocks (Hubbard et al., 2007). A possible outcome of these policies is gentrification, which can be defined as:

"A physical, economic, social and cultural phenomenon. Gentrification commonly involves the invasion by middle-class or higher-income groups of previously working-class neighbourhoods or multi-occupied 'twilight areas' and the replacement or displacement of many original occupants. It involves the physical renovation or rehabilitation of what was frequently a highly deteriorated housing stock and it is upgrading to meet the requirements of its new owners." (Hamnett, 1984, 284, in Kingston, 2014).

Residents have taken a proactive position with regard to policy on prostitution in Ghent in recent years, via the establishment of a neighbourhood committee in 2012. As a result of a survey on prostitution-related nuisance – administered to residents, bar managers and sex workers by the local police – and a petition by some residents, the mayor took the initiative to initiate periodic consultations with different stakeholders, mainly residents, bar managers and city officials. During these consultations, several issues regarding window prostitution are discussed, such as experienced nuisance and potential solutions. It is thus possible that residents attending the committee meetings may have more potential to influence local policymaking than those not attending. In accordance with Prior and Crofts (2012), we have hypothesised that residents involved in the neighbourhood committee have stronger negative feelings regarding prostitution in their neighbourhood. Therefore, we aimed to identify the perceptions of the wider community concerning their experienced impact of window prostitution, and to analyse how these perceptions are reflected in local policymaking.

The outline of the paper is as follows. Firstly, we provide a brief overview of previous studies of residents' experienced impacts of indoor prostitution in the neighbourhood. We then describe the methods on which the empirical results are based. An overview of the local regulation concerning prostitution-related nuisance is given, before describing residents' perspectives. The paper ends with a discussion and brief conclusion.

2. Prostitution-related nuisance

The inherent association between prostitution and amenity nuisance was acknowledged in one of the major discourses on prostitution (Kantola and Squires, 2004), and it has been assumed that such nuisance primarily stems from street (Bellis et al., 2007; Kantola and Squires, 2004), window and brothel prostitution (Vermeulen, 2008, 2014), and can be explained by their higher visibility and their use of the public sphere (Kantola and Squires, 2004). Given the private character of escort and private prostitution, these types of prostitution are assumed to cause less public disorder (Vermeulen, 2008). Vermeulen (2008) identified three 'sources' of nuisance regarding street, window and brothel prostitution: clients, prostitutes and the neighbourhood. Firstly, clients can disturb public order by littering, urinating in public, producing noise (shouting, honking car horns) or driving in circles in the area, for example. Prostitutes can induce nuisance by soliciting in a (excessively) visible manner by tapping on the window (in the case of window prostitution), for instance. Finally, Vermeulen (2008) mentioned that the dilapidated nature of the neighbourhoods in which window and brothel prostitution are often housed should not be underestimated as a general cause of nuisance. The poor condition of the premises (humidity, no running water, pollution), he writes, paves the way for degeneration and pauperisation of the neighbourhood and can attract nuisance. This claim is however not explained or substantiated further.

² The extent to which residents and their actions effectively impact on the local prostitution policy is not a new research topic (for an overview, see Hubbard (1998) Community action and the displacement of street prostitution: evidence from British cities. *Geoforum* 29: 269–286).

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