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RESEARCH

Justice with Rather Than Justice for: Sex Workers, Epistemic Justice and Creative Research

Larissa Sandy[1] · **Daisy Matthews**[2]

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Abstract

Introduction In the UK, sex work stigma and partial criminalisation shapes both structural and epistemological violence. This can result in sex workers facing epistemic injustices, with their knowledge, experiences and perspectives dismissed or undervalued due to dominant narratives shaped around victimisation, deviance and vulnerability. In this paper, we use the concept of epistemic justice to explore the possibilities for creating justice with sex workers in research and consider how community-based participatory methods can challenge and transform epistemic harms.

Methods In this paper, we analyse our recent experiences of using creative methods (photo-elicitation and arts-based workshops) in two UK-based projects to explore what doing justice with sex workers looked like in our projects.

Results Our analysis shows how epistemic justice for sex workers can be applied in research and reflects on the opportunities creative methods presented for creating justice with sex workers. We argue that without understanding the social power in operation in epistemic interactions, research practices can produce epistemic disadvantage and highlight the ethical and emotional aspects to epistemic practices in sex work research.

Conclusion and policy implications Creative methods offer a way to meaningfully involve sex workers in research design and delivery and ensure they have space to freely explore their experiences. They also encourage researchers to take responsibility for accurately representing lived experiences, which is essential in countering epistemic injustice. Creative methods can also inform the design of sex worker-centred policies and programs, leading to more inclusive and informed criminal justice and violence prevention policies and health and social services. By including people directly affected by policies, creative and participatory methods can improve understanding, increase legitimacy and successful implementation.

Keywords Sex work · Epistemic justice · Epistemic injustice · Creative methods · Co-production · Community-based participatory research · Policy development · Co-design

Introduction

Sex work remains one of the most contested areas of social policy, public debate and academic inquiry. Across the United Kingdom (UK) and beyond, discussions about sex work are frequently shaped by competing ideological, legal and moral frameworks that influence how sex workers are understood and represented. While growing evidence highlights the harmful effects of stigma, criminalisation and social exclusion on sex workers' health, safety and wellbeing (Platt et al., 2018), less attention has been paid to the ways in which these processes shape knowledge production itself. Yet, as we explore in this paper, who is authorised to speak about sex work, whose experiences are treated as credible, and understandings are incorporated into research, policy and practice are questions of power (O'Neill & Campbell, 2021).

Recent scholarship has increasingly identified sex workers as experiencing forms of epistemic injustice, whereby their knowledge, experiences and perspectives are dismissed, marginalised or rendered unintelligible within dominant social, political and academic discourses

✉ Larissa Sandy
larissa.sandy@nottingham.ac.uk

Daisy Matthews
daisy.matthews@york.ac.uk

[1] School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

[2] School for Business and Society, University of York, York, United Kingdom

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(Gonzalez-Recio et al., 2025; Matos & Woods, 2022; Matthews & Sandy, 2026). Drawing on Fricker (2007), epistemic injustice occurs when individuals are wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers. Sex workers may experience testimonial injustice when their accounts are disbelieved, discounted or viewed as less credible than those of researchers, practitioners, policymakers or campaigners. They may also experience hermeneutical injustice when dominant conceptual frameworks fail to adequately capture the complexity of their lived realities, leaving their experiences misunderstood, oversimplified or absent from public discourse. These injustices are significant in traditional sex work research, where historically, sex workers have been positioned as objects of study rather than contributors to knowledge production. This dynamic raises important questions about the relationship between research and justice: if knowledge production is shaped by unequal distributions of epistemic authority, then research itself can either reproduce or challenge epistemic harms. For sex workers, whose lives have often been represented through narratives of deviance, victimisation, criminality or vulnerability, there is a pressing need to employ research approaches that recognise and value lived experience as a form of expertise (NSWP, 2020). Community-based participatory research (CBPR), co-design and creative methodologies offer possible pathways for creating opportunities for sex workers to shape research agendas, generate data and contribute to interpretation and dissemination (O'Neill & Campbell, 2021). The purpose of our paper, then, is to explore the potential for creative methods to redistribute epistemic authority and support collaborative forms of knowledge production. We do this by drawing on Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic justice, together with subsequent developments in critical scholarship, to explore what it might mean to create justice with sex workers through research. Rather than understanding justice solely as a legal, regulatory or policy outcome, we focus on justice as a process of recognition, participation and collaborative meaning-making (Fraser, 2005). This leads us to examine the ways in which creative and participatory methods create opportunities for sex workers to contribute to the production, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge about their lives and communities.

Our analysis brings together findings from two UK-based projects that employed creative and participatory methodologies with sex workers. The first explored the everyday lives of sex workers who identified as religious or spiritual using participant-generated photography, diaries and interviews. The second involved the co-design of a community-based reporting pathway for sex workers affected by violence and incorporated arts-based workshops focused on sex workers' understandings of justice. Although the projects addressed different substantive questions, both were underpinned by a commitment to recognising sex workers as knowledge producers and concern with challenging traditional hierarchies of expertise within research. By bringing these projects into dialogue, we examine how creative methods can contribute to epistemic justice through supporting self-representation, collective meaning-making, the development of counter-narratives and the recognition of sex workers' expertise. We argue that creative and participatory approaches have significance beyond methodological innovation as, by creating conditions under which sex workers can exercise greater authority over how their experiences are understood and represented, they offer a practical mechanism for challenging epistemic injustice (Hall et al., 2020; O'Neill & Campbell, 2021). In doing so, they provide important lessons not only for research but also policy and practice, demonstrating the value of involving sex workers directly in the production of knowledge that shapes services, interventions and regulatory responses.

Our paper proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the framework of epistemic injustice and related concepts through the lens of sex work policy development, leading into a discussion of epistemic justice and CBPR. Next, we provide details on two recent experiences using creative methods in research with sex workers and present key findings from our analysis. Ultimately, we argue that epistemic justice is as a central concern for sex work research because, if we do not pay attention to the operation of social power within knowledge production, then research risks reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to understand (Gonzalez-Recio et al., 2025; Sandy et al., 2025). Although creative and participatory approaches do not eliminate these inequalities, we contend that they can create opportunities for more democratic, reflexive and collaborative forms of knowledge production where sex workers are recognised not merely as subjects of research but as knowers, experts and partners in the pursuit of social justice (FitzGerald et al., 2020).

Epistemic Injustice, Epistemic Authority and the Politics of Knowledge

In *Epistemic Injustice* Miranda Fricker (2007) provides a critical framework for understanding how knowledge practices are shaped by relations of power. Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice as a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower, drawing attention to the ways in which social inequalities influence whose knowledge is recognised, trusted and incorporated into collective understandings of the world. Fricker's (2007) perspective does not view knowledge as a neutral resource, it conceptualises knowledge production as a social and political process through which authority, legitimacy and credibility are

unevenly distributed (Pohlhaus, 2017). Epistemic injustice, then, occurs when individuals or groups are prevented from participating on equal terms in the production, communication or interpretation of knowledge and results in forms of exclusion that are simultaneously epistemological, ethical and political (Pohlhaus, 2017).

Central to this framework is the concept of epistemic authority, understood as the socially conferred legitimacy to define reality, make knowledge claims and interpret experience (Jäger, 2025). Medina (2013) notes that epistemic authority is not distributed naturally or evenly, rather it is structured through broader systems of power that include gender, race, class, sexuality, disability and coloniality. This means that individuals and institutions occupying socially privileged positions are more likely to be recognised as legitimate knowers, while marginalised groups are frequently required to justify or defend their knowledge claims (Pohlhaus, 2017). Feminist standpoint theorists like Patricia Hill Collins (2019) have long argued that these asymmetries are integral to the production of knowledge itself as dominant groups possess greater authority not only to speak but also determine whose knowledge counts and under what conditions.

The implications of this unequal distribution of epistemic authority are visible in the development of sex work policy. One such example is the debate surrounding criminalisation and neo-abolitionist approaches, including attempts to introduce the Swedish or Nordic Model in England and Wales and Scotland, despite substantial opposition from sex worker-led organisations (Scotland for Decrim, 2025; Scoular & O'Neill, 2007). Emerging from neo-abolitionist traditions, the Swedish Model conceptualises sex work as a form of violence against women and positions sex workers primarily as victims requiring protection through the criminalisation of clients and third parties. Globally, sex workers face high levels of violence; however, as Broad et al. document this is "due in part to the criminalisation of the sex industries and restricted access to services, labour rights, and other protections" (2026, pg. 1). The evidence shows that violence in sex work is not inevitable as neo-abolitionist discourse constructs it to be (Broad et al., 2026; Platt et al., 2018). As Sanders (2016) argues, this violence is related to three interconnecting factors: the spaces in which sex work takes place shapes worker safety; sex work regulation and policing and legal responses not only dictate the organisation of sex work but also worker health and safety; and stigma and the social status accorded to sex workers have a significant impact on societal attitudes and how workers are treated.

Critics argue that the Swedish Model is underpinned by policy processes that prioritise abolitionist and anti-trafficking perspectives while marginalising the voices of current sex workers, resulting in legislation developed about sex workers rather than through meaningful consultation with them (Matthews & Sandy, 2026; Scotland for Decrim, 2025; Scoular & O'Neill, 2007). Contrasting with the approach taken to develop the Swedish Model, decriminalisation reforms in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia, were characterised by extensive consultation with sex workers and sex worker-led organisations (Aroney & Crofts, 2019; Vixen, 2022). As such they provide an example of sex workers being placed at the centre of policy development. In the Victorian reforms, sex workers influenced policy development in three important ways: formal consultation; peer-led advocacy; and ongoing involvement in implementation (Vixen, 2022). This approach was part of an explicit attempt to address epistemic injustice and treat sex workers as legitimate contributors to knowledge about the regulation of their lives and labour rather than passive objects of intervention.

Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice

Fricker (2007) identifies two primary forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice leads a hearer to assign a speaker a lower degree of credibility than they deserve (Fricker, 2007). The resulting harm extends beyond simple disbelief because it undermines a person's standing as a knower. Testimonial injustice is commonly associated with stereotypes that shape perceptions of sex workers' competence, rationality and trustworthiness leading to credibility deficits whereby their lived experiences and expertise are discounted (Gonzalez-Recio et al., 2025; Matos & Woods, 2022). Within sex work research and policy, testimonial injustice frequently manifests in the routine questioning of sex workers' credibility. Historically, neo-abolitionist discourse constructed sex workers through the figure of the "prostitute-victim", with sex workers' experiences defined by exploitation, trauma and patriarchal oppression (Scoular & O'Neill, 2007). In this discourse, sex workers who challenged these assumptions or described sex work as labour were labelled as unreliable commentators on their own experiences with neo-abolitionists deploying the false consciousness thesis, which further intensified this dynamic (Matthews & Sandy, 2026). This is one example where sex workers' rights activists who emphasise agency, consent, labour rights or occupational identities are frequently dismissed as unable to recognise their own exploitation. As Fricker (2007) suggests, these responses constitute an *identity-prejudicial credibility deficit*, whereby prejudice systematically diminishes the credibility afforded to sex workers.

Hermeneutical injustice refers to a related but distinct form of epistemic marginalisation and discrimination. It occurs when gaps in collective interpretive resources prevent people from making sense of, communicating or having others understand important aspects of their experiences

(Fricker, 2007). These injustices arise because dominant groups exert disproportionate influence over the concepts, categories and frameworks through which social reality is interpreted (Pohlhaus, 2017). In the context of sex work, hermeneutical injustice emerges when our theoretical frameworks are incapable of capturing the diversity and complexity of sex workers' lives. Dominant discourses organised around victimisation, criminality, trafficking, public health or violence may obscure experiences of labour, care, pleasure, autonomy, spirituality, community, resistance and political organising (Bowen, 2021; Broad et al., 2026; Matthews, 2026; Sanders, 2016; Sandy, 2014). In addition, mainstream understandings of sex work often view sex workers exclusively as women and assume a heteronormative script where sexual services are provided by women to men. These assumptions shape policy, law, service provision and public debate, despite growing evidence of the diversity of contemporary sex work, including the experiences of men, trans, non-binary, queer, migrant and online workers (Bowen, 2021; Gonzalez-Reico et al., 2025; NSWP, 2022). This means that many sex workers are forced to speak about their experiences using conceptual frameworks that inadequately represent their realities (Sandy, 2014). Taken together, testimonial and hermeneutical injustice demonstrate how sex workers may be disadvantaged not only because they are not heard, but also as dominant systems of meaning fail to adequately recognise the complexity of their experiences.

Beyond Fricker: Epistemic Violence, Silencing and Resistance

While Fricker's (2007) work provides an important foundation for understanding the relationship between knowledge and injustice, subsequent scholarship has expanded the framework by drawing out the structural, historical and colonial dimensions of knowledge production. A particularly influential contribution is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1994) concept of epistemic violence. In the context of sex work, epistemic violence occurs when dominant institutions, researchers, policymakers or activists erase, distort, appropriate, undermine or delegitimise sex workers' own knowledges and experiences (Dotson, 2011; Spivak, 1994). Drawing on Spivak's (1994) concept of epistemic violence, sex workers can be understood as being harmed by knowledge systems that construct them as objects of intervention rather than as legitimate knowers, a dynamic evident in some of the examples of sex work policy development discussed above. Epistemic violence is enacted when sex workers' accounts are dismissed as unreliable, when others claim authority to speak on their behalf or when their diverse experiences are reduced to dominant narratives that obscure their agency and expertise (Gonzalez-Recio, 2025; Matos & Woods, 2022; Matthews & Sandy, 2026). These dynamics are particularly significant for migrant, racialised, trans, disabled and Indigenous sex workers whose experiences are often marginalised in discussions of sex work. Epistemic violence and harm also occur when researchers, policymakers, advocacy organisations or criminal justice institutions determine the meaning of sex work while excluding sex workers from processes of interpretation and representation, thereby selectively representing their diverse experiences, privileging particular narratives and mobilising sex workers' experiences in support of political projects that do not reflect their own priorities (Matthews & Sandy, 2026). In the EU anti-trafficking context, Ferčiková Konečná (2024) shows how sex workers' testimonies are appropriated, filtered or excluded in ways that fail to reflect their own priorities, expertise and political concerns. Nevertheless, Ferčiková Konečná (2024) demonstrates that sex workers are not passive recipients of epistemic violence. Through sex worker-led unions, advocacy and networks, they contest dominant representations, produce important counter-narratives and alternative knowledges and demand a central role in shaping policies and discourse concerning their work.

Kristie Dotson's (2011) work on epistemic oppression further advances this analysis by focusing on the mechanisms through which marginalised groups are silenced. Her concepts of testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering illuminate how sex workers' knowledge and experience are frequently constrained by stigma, criminalisation and the anticipation of being misunderstood, dismissed or ignored. Testimonial quieting takes place when sex workers are denied credibility as knowers because of prejudicial assumptions about sex work, while testimonial smothering occurs when they withhold or modify information in anticipation of being judged, discriminated against, subject to surveillance or legal repercussions. Thus, some sex workers may be both silenced by others or compelled to self-censor and this can limit their ability to communicate their experiences and priorities on their own terms (Dotson, 2011; Gonzalez-Recio et al., 2025; Matos & Woods, 2022). These dynamics are particularly likely to affect sex workers who experience multiple forms of marginalisation, including trans sex workers, migrant sex workers, street-based sex workers, sex workers of colour and those who use drugs as intersecting stigmas can further undermine their credibility and increase risks associated with disclosure (Gonzalez-Recio et al., 2025; Macioti et al., 2026; Matos & Woods, 2022; NSWP, 2022).

At the same time, scholars such as José Medina (2013) have shifted attention towards forms of epistemic resistance, highlighting the ways in which marginalised communities

challenge dominant knowledge systems through collective action, alternative narratives and the development of new interpretive resources. From this perspective, sex workers are not merely subjects of epistemic injustice but active participants in contesting and transforming knowledge about sex work.

Epistemic Justice and Community-Based Participatory Research

Epistemic injustice draws attention to inequalities in the distribution of credibility, authority and interpretive power; by contrast, epistemic justice is concerned with creating conditions that enable the meaningful participation of diverse knowers in producing and interpreting knowledge (Medina, 2013). From a sex work perspective, epistemic justice involves creating contexts in which sex workers are recognised as legitimate knowers who can participate meaningfully in research, policymaking and public debates about their lives and work. Rather than simply addressing credibility deficits and exclusion, it stipulates the inclusion of sex workers' experiential knowledge as a valued and authoritative form of expertise, capable of shaping both knowledge production and social change (Aroney & Crofts, 2019; Ferčiková Konečná, 2024). This is because epistemic justice seeks to establish more equitable relations of knowing where diverse forms of knowledge are recognised and valued.

In sex work research, CBPR and other co-produced approaches are particularly well positioned to advance epistemic justice by redistributing epistemic authority and valuing sex workers' experiential expertise. These approaches challenge traditional hierarchies of expertise by involving community members in defining research questions, shaping study design, generating data, interpreting findings and disseminating knowledge (Jobe et al., 2022; O'Neill & Campbell, 2021). From an epistemic justice perspective, the significance of participatory research extends beyond participation alone as involving sex workers as peer researchers, advisors, co-designers, collaborators and knowledge producers directly challenges testimonial injustice. It does this by affirming the credibility of sex workers' accounts and recognising their expertise regarding their own lives and communities (Arika & NUM, 2022; Pearson et al., 2025; Luke, 2022). At the same time, participatory approaches can address hermeneutical injustice by generating concepts, categories and interpretive frameworks grounded in lived experience rather than externally imposed assumptions (Arika & NUM, 2022; Flower, 2023; O'Neill & Campbell, 2021; Pearson et al., 2025). By centring sex workers' experiences and priorities, participatory approaches also create opportunities to challenge dominant narratives and produce alternative forms of understanding grounded in community knowledge, thus working to address epistemic violence, and, as a form of epistemic resistance, creating pluralistic knowledge landscapes. Ultimately, this leads us to argue that CBPR is more than a methodological preference; rather, it presents a model for an epistemological, ethical and political commitment to epistemic justice in research. By repositioning sex workers as experts, collaborators and co-producers of knowledge, participatory approaches offer a way to challenge epistemic authority and create possibilities for more inclusive, reflexive and socially accountable forms of knowledge production. Indeed, our paper explores how CBPR offers a means of addressing the testimonial and hermeneutical injustice and epistemic violence shaping dominant understandings of sex work, while simultaneously contributing to the broader project of recognition, participation and social justice.

An example of this in practice is *Our Hustle*, *Our Struggle*, *Our Art*, a five-year arts-based CBPR project in Vancouver, in which sex workers created and collectively analysed artwork on criminalisation, stigma and drug toxicity (Pearson et al., 2025). Co-designed with a Community Advisory Team, the project centred sex workers' own interpretations, addressed hermeneutical marginalisation and generated community-owned knowledge through outputs that included a documentary and art exhibition (Pearson et al., 2025). At the same time, the project highlighted the ethical challenges of arts-based research, particularly the risks of discrimination, surveillance and being outed. To balance artistic autonomy and safety, participants retained control over whether they appeared identifiably and how their artwork was shared (Pearson et al., 2025). As such, the project demonstrates how CBPR can promote epistemic justice by centring sex workers' knowledge, interpretations and decision-making throughout the research process.

Arts-Based Sex Work Activism

> When you think 'sex worker', a picture immediately comes to mind.
>
> A picture oplease indent this corrected text, too as it is part of the same quoteCommentf a lithe, oiled doll in a strip club writhing above a sad, sweaty little creep; a picture of raggedy overly made-up women in fishnets gathered on a corner looking to fund their next fix; a picture of a girl with no prospects or work ethic joining OnlyFans and becoming a baller overnight.

> These pictures are bullshit. (Lobberson cited in Arika & NUM, 2022, p. 7)

The emphasis on epistemic justice and participatory knowledge production helps explain the growing use of arts-based approaches in sex work activism and research. This is because creative methods can provide important opportunities for epistemic resistance. In the above quote, Lobberson argues that distorted portrayals of sex work produce false accounts of sex workers' experiences, skills, interests and lives. Arts-based sex work activism and research can challenge these depictions through performance, theatre, visual art and film, enabling sex workers and allies to assert labour rights, resist stigma and communicate lived experience.

Flower's (2023) study of the *Sex Workers' Opera* demonstrates how art can function as a form of epistemic resistance and activism. Through a collaboratively designed performance led by sex workers and allies, the project centred sex workers' narratives, challenged dominant representations and presented counter-narratives that reflected the complexity of sex workers' lives. By prioritising participants as authoritative narrators of their own experiences and treating artistic expression as a legitimate form of knowledge, the project addressed hermeneutical injustice and enacted principles of epistemic justice. Through participant-led methods and careful approaches to anonymity, the project illustrates how creative and participatory practices can redistribute epistemic authority, while simultaneously protecting those involved (Flower, 2023).

Another example is TØS, a sex worker-led journal and multi-media platform that uses creative and participatory methods to centre sex workers' own narratives and challenge dominant representations of sex work (TØS, n.d.). Through projects such as *Sex Worker Diaries* and *TØS Journal*, sex workers produce and disseminate knowledge grounded in lived experience and have created counter-narratives resisting testimonial quieting and epistemic violence. In doing so, TØS exemplifies the principles of epistemic justice by positioning sex workers as credible knowers and active producers of knowledge; however, its anonymous collective editorial model highlights the ongoing stigma and structural inequalities that continue to shape the conditions under which sex workers' knowledge can be produced and shared.

Arts-based research and activism can be powerful tools for advancing epistemic justice, but they also face significant barriers in contexts shaped by stigma and criminalisation. The suspension of the *Fuck You Pay Me* Instagram account, despite containing no nudity, alongside broader patterns of social media censorship documented by Are (2022), illustrates how digital platforms can silence sex workers' voices, restrict the circulation of their knowledge and limit their participation in public discourse. This censorship is closely linked with legislative frameworks such as the US *Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex-Trafficking Act* and the *Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (FOSTA-SESTA)*, which have increased pressure on digital platforms to remove sex work-related content, often resulting in the censorship of sex workers' online presence and the displacement of activities into more precarious and dangerous environments (Blunt & Wolf, 2020). Such practices produce forms of testimonial and epistemic injustice by delegitimising sex workers' accounts, constraining opportunities for collective advocacy and limiting access to vital information and community networks (Blunt & Wolf, 2020). Nevertheless, the continued use of arts-based activism and digital platforms by sex workers and their allies demonstrates an ongoing commitment to epistemic resistance, creating alternative spaces for storytelling, knowledge production and the amplification of sex workers' voices despite these constraints.

Whorephobia, Academic Exclusion and Epistemic Injustice

The barriers to epistemic justice discussed above are not confined to policy, media or digital environments but are also evident within academic institutions. Are (2026) argues that whorephobia within academia can restrict meaningful engagement with sex workers, undermine the quality of research and enable forms of scholarship that reproduce stigma and support criminalisation. These dynamics raise important questions about who is recognised as a legitimate knower within research and whose expertise is granted credibility (O'Neill & Campbell, 2021). Ethics review processes, for example, may contribute to epistemic injustice when decisions are shaped by misconceptions about sex work or when the expertise of sex worker-researchers or community partners is overlooked, particularly in relation to participatory, creative or non-traditional methods (Huysamen & Sanders, 2021; Testa, 2014). Such practices can limit opportunities for sex workers to participate in shaping knowledge about their own lives and work, thereby reinforcing the credibility deficits and exclusions discussed earlier. Moreover, as Bee (2020) argues, through the concept of epistemic exploitation, sex workers are often expected to share their experiences and expertise without receiving meaningful benefits or influence in return. From the perspective of epistemic justice, these concerns highlight the need for research approaches that recognise sex workers as legitimate knowledge producers, attend carefully to power relations and ensure the knowledge production is both accountable and beneficial to the communities involved (Are, 2026; Gonzalez-Recio

et al., 2025). This provides a further rationale for CBPR, which seek to challenge academic exclusion by redistributing epistemic authority and creating more equitable conditions for knowledge production (Martinez-Vargas, 2020; Pearson et al., 2025; Peralta, 2017).

Doing Justice in Practice

Our overarching aim is to explore ideas about creating justice with sex workers by drawing on data generated through two independent UK-based qualitative research projects with sex workers between 2021 and 2025. Although the projects were developed separately and addressed different substantive concerns (religiosity and spirituality among sex workers and the co-design of a community-based crime reporting pathway), they were united by a shared commitment to participatory, collaborative and creative approaches to knowledge production and considered what different forms of 'doing justice' with sex workers might look like. Both projects received approval from our university ethical review boards, and rather than treating the projects as discrete case studies, we have adopted an integrative cross-project analysis focused on a key theme that emerged across both datasets: the relationship between sex workers, knowledge production and justice. By bringing these projects into dialogue, this paper enables us to examine how sex workers negotiated credibility, expertise, voice, participation and representation across different research contexts. In doing so, we conceptualise the projects as complementary sites through which processes of epistemic in/justice became visible.

The analysis presented here is informed by CBPR principles and a commitment to co-produced knowledge. Across both projects, methodological decisions were guided by a commitment to creating meaningful opportunities for participation and resisting extractive research practices that position sex workers as subjects of research rather than contributors to knowledge (O'Neill & Campbell, 2021; Pearson et al., 2025). This orientation reflects a broader commitment to recognising sex workers as experts in their own lives and developing research practices that value lived experience as a form of expertise (NSWP, 2020).

Participatory and Creative Research Contexts

The first project explored the everyday lives of sex workers who identified as religious or spiritual in the United Kingdom and United States. Conducted between September 2020 and January 2023, the study sought to address the limited attention given to their lived experiences and challenge dominant assumptions about the relationship between sex work and religiosity (Matthews, 2024). Eleven current and former sex workers participated in the study, representing a range of religious, spiritual and work identities. Participants engaged with different forms of online and indoor-based sex work including escorting, online content creation, stripping, telephone-based sex work and webcamming. Data were generated through participant-selected methods, including photo-elicitation, diaries and semi-structured interviews. Participants were invited to choose how they wished to engage with the study, with creative methods designed to support reflection, self-representation and the exploration of dimensions of participants' lives often overlooked in research.

The second project, conducted between April 2023 and May 2025, sought to co-design a community-based reporting pathway for serious violent crime and sexual assault with sex workers in a city in the Midlands region of England. Developed in partnership with a local sex worker support organisation, the project was informed by principles of co-design and the ethos of "nothing about us, without us" (SWAN, 2021, p. 6; Lobo et al., 2021). Sex workers were involved throughout all stages, including its design and governance, with the aim of addressing power imbalances and recognising and valuing diverse forms of knowledge. The project set out to design a system with sex workers rather than for them. As the work was carried out in collaboration with a sex worker support organisation, this also required a shift in perspective for the charity partner, from viewing sex workers as service recipients to recognising them as experts whose knowledge and experiences could meaningfully inform the design and delivery of services. While the wider project focused on community-based reporting systems, this paper draws specifically on a series of arts-based workshops conducted between October and November 2024 as part of the project's dissemination and knowledge-sharing activities (Sexton et al., 2024). Facilitated by an art therapist, the workshops explored participants' understandings of justice through a range of creative activities including collage, painting, rubber stamping and mixed-media art. The workshops ran alongside weekly drop-in sessions, and participants reflected a diversity of gender identities and sex work experiences, including those working in both street-based and indoor settings. Participants were free to come and go as they pleased, with some attending multiple workshops. The workshops were designed to create opportunities for collaborative meaning-making and support forms of expression that extended beyond conventional interview-based approaches. In addressing concerns surrounding participation and potential legal and socio-economic risks, we protected participant safety by ensuring names were completely unrecorded during the drop-in clinic workshops. Rather than imposing traditional research pseudonyms, we

prioritised artistic autonomy by mutually agreeing upon artist names during the workshops. These steps balanced artistic autonomy and participant safety, with participants retaining absolute control over whether they appeared identifiably and how their artwork was shared.

Although these projects differed in scope and focus, both utilised creative and participatory methods to facilitate engagement, reflection and knowledge sharing. In each project, participants were encouraged to shape the research process and contribute to the interpretation and representation of their experiences. As such, both projects provided opportunities to examine how collaborative approaches to research might challenge conventional distributions of epistemic authority.

Creative and Participatory Methods as Epistemic Practice

A key point of connection between the two projects was the use of creative and participatory methods as mechanisms for supporting participant-led knowledge production. Across both studies, creative approaches were employed not simply as data collection techniques but as ways of creating space for participants to represent themselves, reflect on their experiences and contribute to meaning-making processes.

In the religiosity project, photo-elicitation and diaries enabled participants to document aspects of their lives that were personally meaningful while allowing them greater control over how their experiences were represented (Smith, 2015). Subsequent interviews centred participants' interpretations of these materials, ensuring that analysis was grounded in their own understandings rather than researcher assumptions. This approach was particularly important given the potential for both sex work and religious identities to be misunderstood or interpreted through dominant social narratives (Matthews, 2026). Similarly, in the co-design project, co-design and arts-based methods sought to redistribute authority and centre sex workers' expertise (Lobo et al., 2021). Participants were involved not only in generating ideas but also shaping project direction, evaluating emerging designs and producing dissemination materials. The arts-based workshops created opportunities for collaborative reflection on justice, allowing participants to communicate experiences, aspirations and critiques through visual and creative forms. Like the creative methods used in the religiosity project, these workshops supported multiple forms of expression and challenged assumptions that knowledge is most valid when communicated through traditional verbal or textual formats (Flower, 2023).

Across both projects, creative and participatory methods functioned as practical attempts to create more democratic forms of knowledge production. In this sense, our methods represented not only a methodological approach but also an ethical and epistemological commitment to recognising participants as active knowledge producers whose lived experiences constitute valuable forms of expertise (Harding, 1991; Peralta, 2017).

Data Analysis

For the purposes of this paper, we undertook a cross-project thematic analysis focused on questions of justice, knowledge, expertise, participation and representation. We revisited interview transcripts, diaries, photographs, workshop outputs, fieldnotes, project reflections and co-produced materials from both projects. While the original studies addressed different research questions, a shared concern with knowledge production and participation emerged across the datasets.

Our analysis was informed by scholarship on epistemic injustice, epistemic authority, epistemic violence and epistemic justice (Dotson, 2011; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Spivak, 1994). We identified instances where participants discussed experiences of being disbelieved, misrepresented, spoken for, excluded from decision-making processes or denied opportunities to contribute their expertise. We also examined examples of resistance, collaboration, collective meaning-making and participant-led knowledge production. Through an iterative process of moving between empirical data and theoretical literature, we developed themes relating to credibility, voice, expertise, representation, participation and justice (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Instead of comparing findings across projects, the analysis set out to identify common epistemic processes operating across different contexts. This analytical approach enabled us to explore how participatory and creative research practices can contribute to forms of epistemic justice by creating contexts where sex workers could meaningfully participate in the production, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Given our paper's focus on epistemic in/justice, reflexive engagement with our own positions within the research process is essential. As Fricker's (2007) work reminds us, knowledge production is always embedded within relationships of power, and researchers occupy positions that can both reinforce and challenge existing distributions of epistemic authority through the choices we make about whose knowledge is recognised, validated and represented (Ferris et al., 2021; Matos & Woods, 2022; Medina, 2013). As such, we approach positionality not simply as an account of personal identity but as an examination of how our social locations, lived experiences and institutional positions shaped the research and our relationships with participants.

We are both White, female academics based in the UK and recognise that, as university researchers working with sex workers, we are in positions associated with educational, professional and institutional privilege, granting us epistemic authority and facilitating access to policy, research and public audiences (Ferris et al., 2021). We recognise that such authority is unevenly distributed and often unavailable to most sex workers, whose experiential knowledge is marginalised in dominant systems of knowledge production (Dotson, 2011; Matos & Woods, 2022). Because of this, we were mindful throughout both projects that conventional research practices can reproduce unequal relationships where academics are positioned as legitimate producers of knowledge while participants are treated primarily as sources of data. As discussed, these dynamics are particularly apparent within some traditions in sex work research, where sex workers have historically been represented and theorised by others, with few opportunities to influence how this is understood or communicated.

At the same time, our biographies have informed longstanding interests in social justice, inequality, social exclusion and marginalisation. Sandy brings experiences as a first-generation Hungarian Australian, the daughter of a Second World War refugee, a first-in-family university graduate and a queer migrant woman working within UK higher education. Matthews similarly comes from a working-class background and was the first in her family to attend university. While we do not claim that these experiences provide equivalence with the lives of the sex workers who participated in our studies, they have shaped our sensitivity to questions of exclusion, representation, legitimacy and belonging. These experiences also informed our commitment to approaches that recognise diverse forms of knowledge and seek to challenge dominant assumptions about who is authorised to produce knowledge. Because of this, we did not adopt a position of detached objectivity and approached both projects from the understanding that knowledge is relational and co-produced. We viewed reflexivity as an ongoing practice rather than a procedural requirement, regularly reflecting on how our assumptions, interpretations, institutional affiliations and social positions shaped interactions with participants and influenced analytical decisions (Massoud, 2022). Building trust often involved sharing aspects of our own backgrounds, acknowledging our assumptions and creating reciprocal spaces in which participants could discuss not only their experiences of sex work but also the multiple identities, relationships, aspirations and everyday realities that shaped their lives (Bukamal, 2022).

Importantly, we recognise our status as outsiders to sex worker communities. While we may have shared some social identities with participants, including experiences relating to gender, sexuality, class, migration or marginalisation we do not have lived experience of sex work. We therefore remained conscious of the limits of our understanding and the risk of reproducing forms of epistemic injustice through interpretation and representation (Gonzales-Reico et al., 2025; Matos & Woods, 2022). This awareness informed our attraction to creative, participatory and co-produced methods, which offered opportunities to open aspects of interpretive authority to participants and challenge assumptions about whose knowledge counts within research (Peralta, 2017). The use of these methods went beyond data collection: we explicitly attempted to create conditions where sex workers could contribute to meaning-making on their own terms.

We also recognise that participatory and creative methods do not eliminate power differentials, and indeed, if used uncritically, can reproduce existing inequalities despite the emancipatory potential (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Kothari, 2001; Peralta, 2017). However, we saw these methodologies as creating opportunities to negotiate power more openly and explicitly foreground sex workers' expertise in ways that challenge traditional researcher-participant hierarchies.

Ultimately, we view questions of insider and outsider status as central to understanding epistemic in/justice within sex work research (Ferris et al., 2021; Lobo et al., 2021). We have shown how the production of knowledge about sex work is characterised by asymmetries of authority in which researchers, policymakers, practitioners and advocates possess greater power to define social reality than sex workers themselves (Fricker, 2007; Ferčíková Konečná, 2024; Ferris et al., 2021; Gonzales-Recio et al., 2025). Our aim was not to overcome these asymmetries entirely, but to engage with them reflexively and develop research practices that supported more collaborative, inclusive and epistemically just forms of knowledge production.

Results and Discussion

We now explore how creative and participatory methods created opportunities for meaningful engagement across both projects. Four themes emerged from our analysis: reclaiming epistemic authority through everyday knowledge; creative methods as spaces for reflection and meaning-making; challenging dominant narratives about sex work; and the value of collective knowledge production, solidarity and mutual aid. Each of these themes are discussed below, after which we consider some of the challenges we faced and the limitations of our projects.

Reclaiming Epistemic Authority Through Everyday Knowledge

Across both projects, creative and participatory methods provided opportunities for sex workers to assert epistemic authority over how their lives, experiences and identities were represented. Participants frequently moved away from dominant narratives that positioned them primarily as 'victims', 'criminals' or 'deviants' and instead foregrounded the ordinary realities of everyday life.

In the religiosity project, participant-generated photographs documented mundane routines and spaces including journeys to work, temporary accommodation used for escorting, domestic workspaces used for online sex work, leisure activities and practices of religious and spiritual reflection. For example, LRE's photographs of short-term lease properties (see Fig. 1), travel to work and online content creation spaces challenged assumptions that sex work was inherently exceptional or disconnected from everyday life. Similarly, one of Moon's photographs was taken while out walking (Fig. 2), and during our interview she reflected on how connecting her spiritual practice to daily routines helped with managing work pressures: "…I'm [New Age] spiritual because… I like being around nature… I think it gives me a lot of calm and patience. Especially during meditation, you know, living the moment, being in the present and a feeling of calm. And like I said, I don't take anything personally" (Matthews, 2024, p. 97). For Moon's spirituality, walking in nature functioned as a meditative practice, offering her moments of presence and a way to de-stress, which she also translated into her working practices, particularly when managing difficult clients by not "tak[ing] anything personally".

In the co-design project, arts-based workshops generated similar insights. Participants repeatedly resisted narrow framings of sex workers as passive recipients of services or victims of violence, instead highlighting expertise, resilience, agency and everyday strategies for navigating complex social worlds, as seen in *Finding strength* by One Love (Fig. 3). One Love joined the project mid-way through, and recognising shared experiences seeking justice fostered both solidarity and desire for change. As a racialised sex worker, the stamp in her artwork represented the struggle for Black rights. While creating the piece, One Love reflected on the barriers she faced in seeking justice and the ways her experiences were compounded by racialisation and discrimination while engaged in street-based sex work. Through visual expression, participants articulated understandings of justice grounded in lived experience rather than institutional definitions.

Taken together, these examples illustrate the significance of everyday knowledge as a site of epistemic resistance (Medina, 2013). Participants did not simply provide information about their lives; they actively shaped how their lives should be understood. In Fricker's (2007) terms, creative methods created opportunities to challenge testimonial injustice by positioning sex workers as credible knowers of their own experiences. They also disrupted traditional researcher-participant hierarches by enabling participants to identify, represent and prioritise the aspects of their lives they considered most meaningful, thereby fostering more equitable forms of knowledge production (Wang & Burris, 1997). Importantly, what emerged across both projects was not merely a richer account of sex workers' lives but a challenge to the broader epistemic conditions that often render their lives invisible, stereotyped or unintelligible.

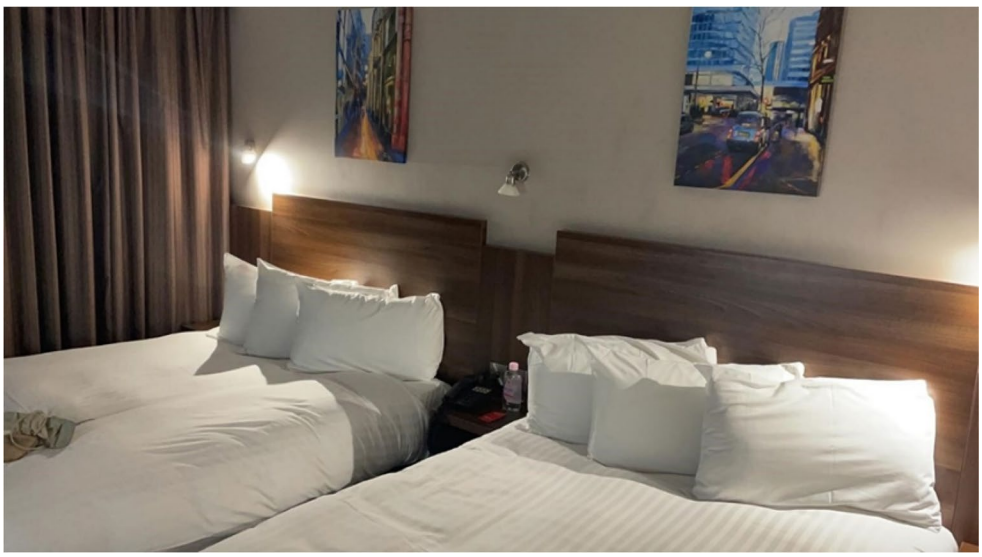


Fig. 1 LRE at a short-term lease property



Fig. 2 Moon walking down a road connecting with her spiritual identity

Creative Methods as Spaces of Reflection, Meaning-Making and Voice

A second theme concerned the role of creative methods in facilitating reflection, meaning-making and participant-led interpretation. Across both projects, creative methods were not simply tools for generating data but presented opportunities to pause, reflect and make sense of participants' experiences. For participants who engaged in photography and diary keeping, the process of documenting daily life often generated insights that extended beyond the aims of the research itself. For example,

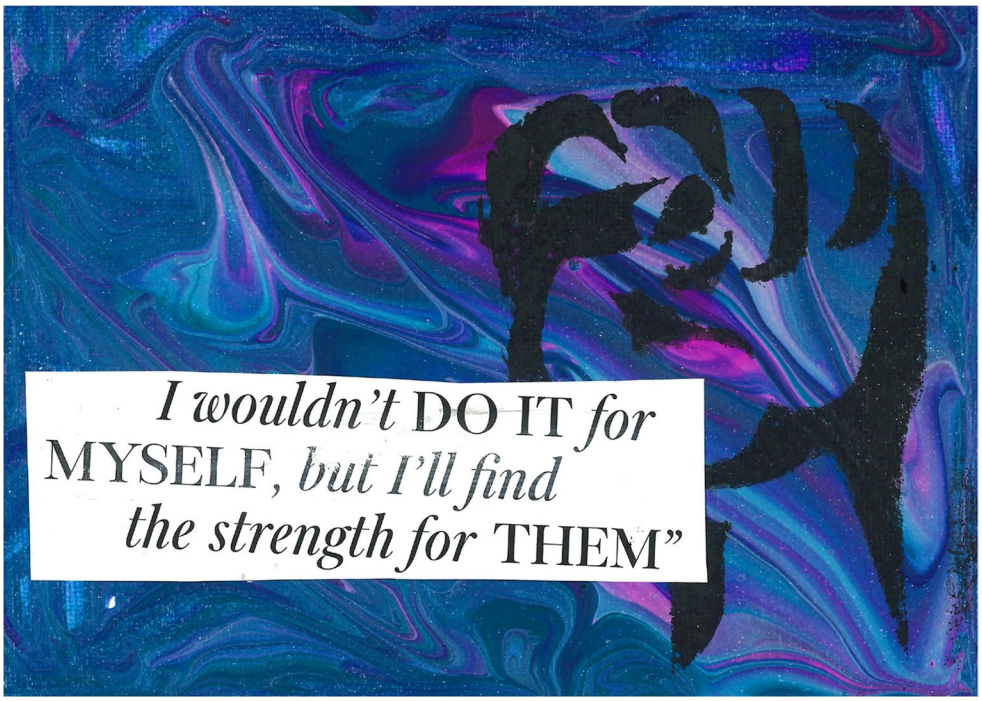


Fig. 3 Finding strength, artwork by One Love

Maya described how photographing and documenting her yoga practice, which she performed on webcam for work, allowed her to reflect on the relationship between spirituality, embodiment and work. Figure 4 shows Maya practicing yoga. Her accompanying diary entry was: "This is actually really helpful [because] I can test my symmetry" (Matthews, 2024, p. 103). Similarly, Moon explained that the process of creating photographs and diary entries encouraged her to become more aware of the present moment and engage more consciously with her spiritual life.

Comparable processes emerged during the arts-based workshops. Instead of providing direct responses to interview questions, participants explored themes of justice, safety, violence, community and identity through art, which became a medium where they could express ideas that may be difficult to communicate through words (see, for example, *Affairs of* by Taz (Fig. 5) and *Sex work has no gender* by Fox (Fig. 6)). These examples suggest that creative and participatory methods can create epistemic spaces where participants are supported to explore and communicate their own ways of knowing, which enables them to contribute to knowledge production on their own terms (Martinez-Vargas, 2020; Phillips et al., 2022). The value of creative methods, then, extends beyond improving data quality. These methods can support participants' own engagement in meaning-making and self-representation, thus redistributing interpretive authority away from researchers and towards participants.

Generating Alternative Understandings and Challenging Dominant Narratives

Across both projects, participants used creative methods to challenge dominant assumptions about sex work and generate alternative understandings grounded in lived experience. One example of this is Fox's artwork, *Sex work has no gender* (Fig. 6). Drawing on discussions of violence, victimisation and access to justice, Fox challenged the persistence of gendered assumptions that position cisgender women as the primary or only victims of violence. Her artwork emerged in response to discussions about male sex workers' experiences of violent crime and the limited recognition received from services, policymakers and wider society.

Fox's artwork illustrates Fricker's (2007) concept of hermeneutical injustice by demonstrating how dominant understandings of sex work often overlook or inadequately represent the experiences of male sex workers, trans sex workers, non-binary sex workers and queer sex workers. When dominant interpretive frameworks surrounding sex work fail to account for workers' diverse experiences, their experiences may become difficult to recognise or articulate, resulting in inadequate responses. Fox was involved in the project from its inception, and while helping to compile the community magazine in which the artworks were featured, reflected on how participation had increased her awareness of the diverse ways in which sex workers experience and seek justice (Sexton et al., 2024). Participants in the

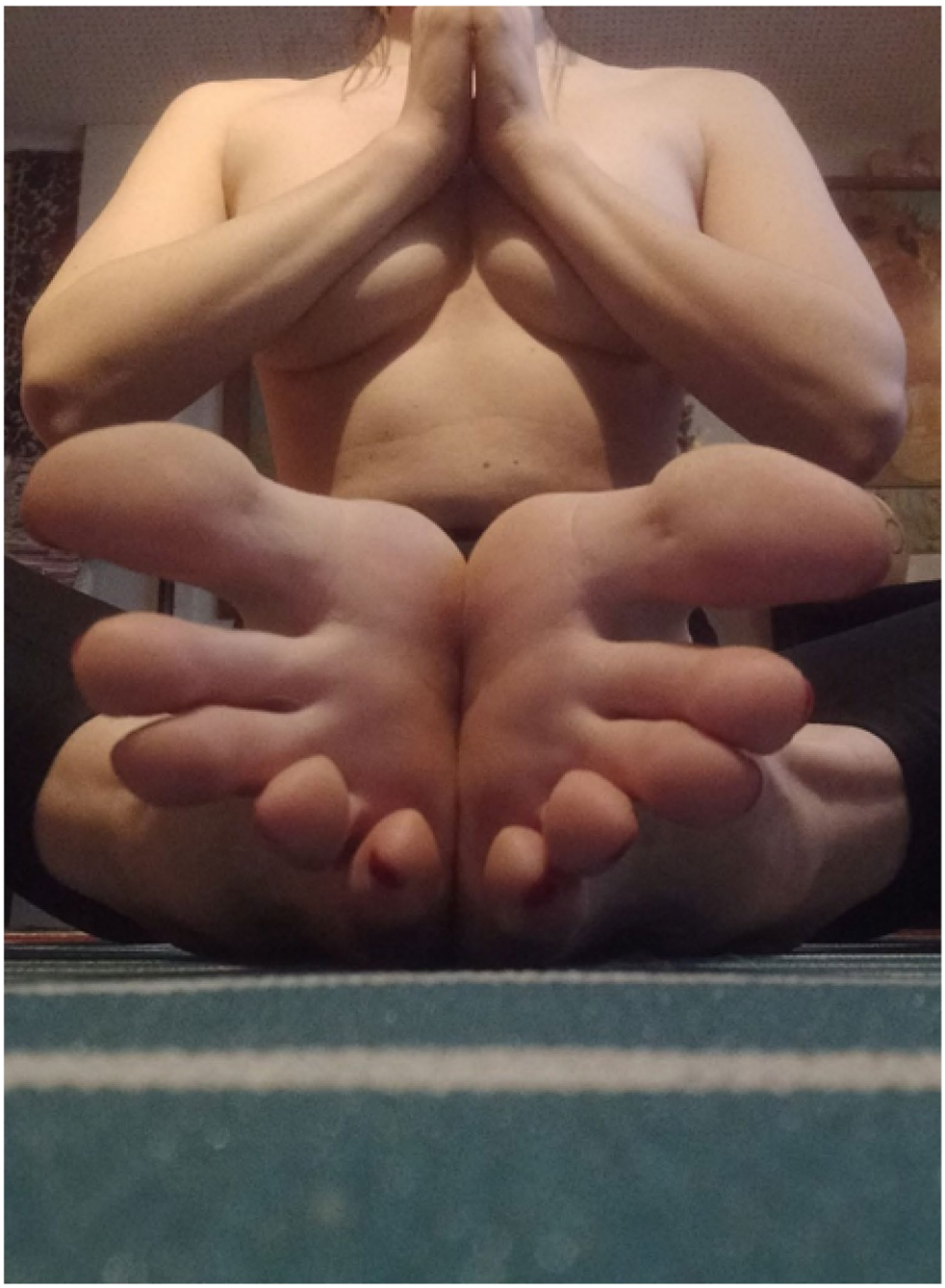


Fig. 4 Maya practicing yoga

co-design process highlighted that male sex workers were often not recognised as victims of crime or sexual assault, resulting in their needs being overlooked by service providers and the wider community. Indeed, in the Midlands region where the co-design project was based, persistent underreporting and misrepresentation of violence against male sex workers have contributed to the absence of specialist services tailored to their experiences. However, creative methods enabled participants to generate alternative understandings that reflected the diversity of their experiences and plugged interpretative gaps.

Similarly, within the religiosity project, participants challenged assumptions that sex work and religious or spiritual identities are necessarily contradictory. Through photographs, diaries and interviews, participants articulated complex relationships between faith, spirituality, work, identity and morality that were largely absent from dominant public narratives. They showed how through the diversification of religiosity, religious or spiritual identities and sex work can exist harmoniously and religiosity can serve as a source of empowerment, belonging and meaning-making (Matthews, 2026). At the same time, they showed how intersectional



Fig. 5 Affairs of, artwork by Taz

stigma created challenges across their lives, emphasising the need for greater acceptance and understanding of their experiences.

Viewed collectively, these examples demonstrate how creative methods can facilitate forms of epistemic justice by enabling participants to create alternative frameworks for understanding their lives and experiences. This, however, went beyond correcting misconceptions as creative methods engaged research participants in the production of new knowledge, thereby presenting the ability to expand the interpretive resources available for understanding sex work.

Collective Knowledge, Solidarity and Epistemic Justice

Perhaps the most significant theme emerging across both projects was the importance of collective knowledge production and community connection. While individual experiences were important, participants repeatedly emphasised the value of hearing, sharing and learning from the experiences of other sex workers. In the co-design project, One Love's artwork, *Finding strength* (Fig. 3), highlighted the central role of peer relationships, solidarity and mutual aid in promoting safety, belonging and resilience. When discussing the artwork, One Love emphasised how support from other sex workers often filled gaps left by formal institutions and services, with mutual aid emerging not only as a practical strategy for survival but also as an epistemic practice through which knowledge, understanding and support were shared within the community (Hall et al., 2020; Pearson et al., 2025). In their relationships with peers, participants exchanged knowledge, developed collective understandings of in/justice and generated alternative responses to violence, exclusion and marginalisation. *Finding strength* highlights the significance of sex workers' social relationships and community networks and how these connections shape knowledge production. It also underscores the value sex workers place on mutual aid and collective forms of care, which can, and should, inform the development of support services (Lobo et al., 2021). One Love's artwork challenges non-peer-led service models shaping support services that often overlook the contribution of peer support to safety, wellbeing and access to resources. Drawing on peer-led support systems, sex workers frequently share resources, safety information and emotional support, which illustrates the central role of mutual aid and solidarity in promoting wellbeing and resilience within their communities (Pearson et al., 2025).

These findings suggest that epistemic justice is not solely achieved through ensuring that individual voices are heard. Epistemic justice also involves creating conditions in which collective knowledge can emerge, circulate and inform research and practice. The creative and participatory approaches used across both projects created opportunities for participants to contribute knowledge while also engaging in collaborative processes of meaning-making that strengthened connections between individuals and communities. These findings suggest that creative and participatory methods hold considerable potential for advancing epistemic justice in sex work research by recognising sex

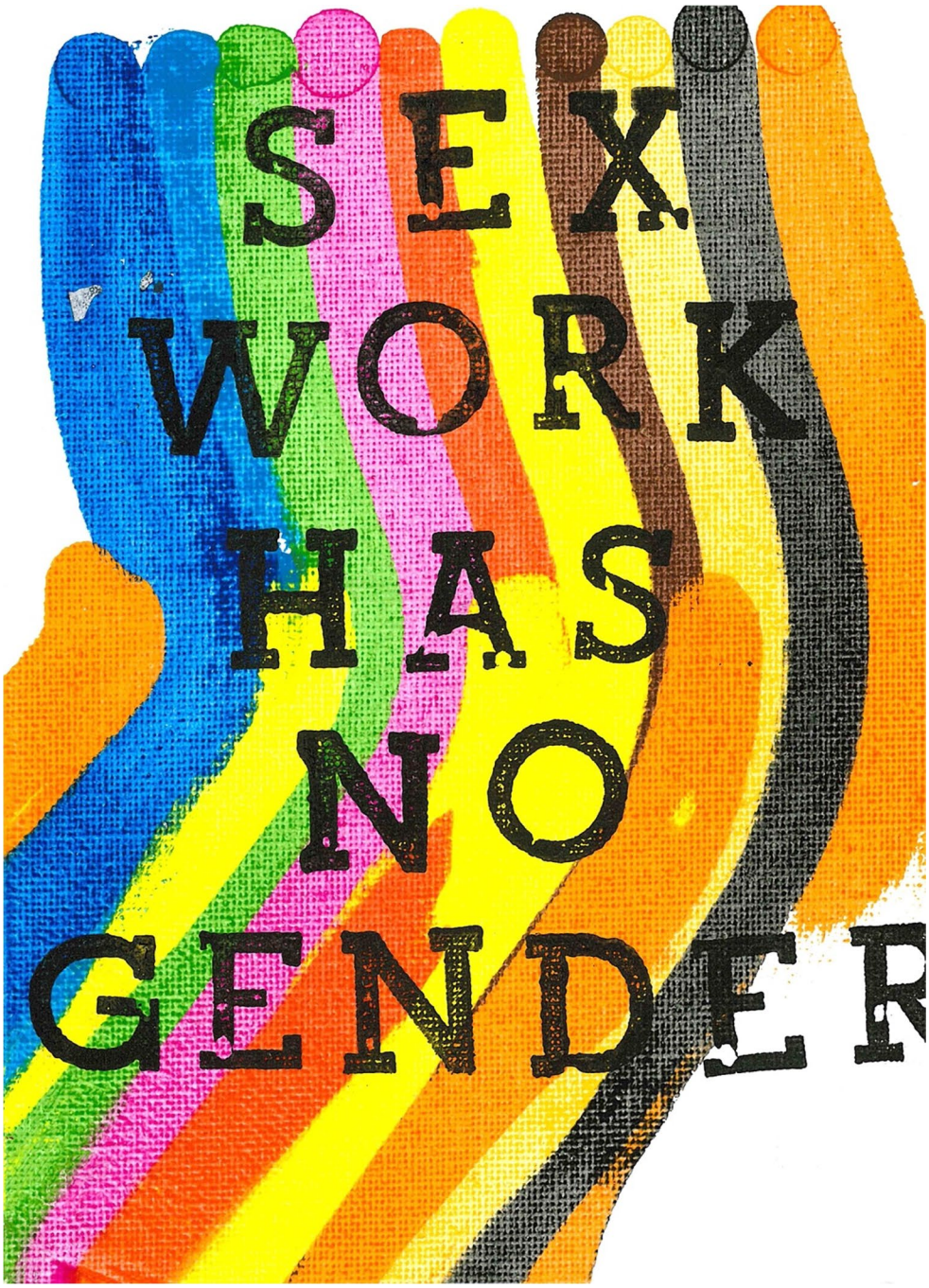


Fig. 6 Sex work has no gender, artwork by Fox

workers as knowledge producers, interpreters and collaborators as well as members of a wider community of shared experience and expertise.

Challenges and Limits of Pursuing Epistemic Justice

While creative and participatory approaches created opportunities for more collaborative forms of knowledge production, our experiences across both projects also revealed the challenges of pursuing epistemic justice within institutional research environments. These challenges were not simply methodological or logistical as they were also connected to broader tensions surrounding power, legitimacy, representation and the value attached to different forms of knowledge.

Institutional Constraints and the Politics of Knowledge Production

A recurring challenge concerned the difficulty of sustaining genuinely participatory forms of research within institutions

that remain largely organised around conventional research paradigms. Across both projects, we encountered organisational, ethical and funding structures that were not always well aligned with community-led and collaborative approaches. For example, the co-design project was undertaken in partnership with a small community organisation operating within a highly constrained funding environment. Although sex workers themselves demonstrated substantial commitment to the project and invested significant emotional and practical labour in its development, organisational instability, staff turnover, competing priorities and safeguarding concerns created substantial barriers to implementation. These difficulties highlighted the extent to which community-based justice initiatives depend upon organisations working in precarious conditions while simultaneously responding to the immediate needs of marginalised communities. More broadly, our experiences pointed to a persistent mismatch between the long-term relationship-building required for participatory research and the short-term funding cycles through which research is often supported. Projects grounded in co-design, collaboration and community participation require significant investments of time, trust and collective labour. Yet these forms of work frequently remain undervalued within academic and funding environments that prioritise measurable outputs and predefined outcomes (Pearson et al., 2025). As such, attempts to produce epistemically just forms of knowledge are often constrained by university and research funding structures that privilege measurable outputs, impact metrics and efficiency over 'slow scholarship' and the time-intensive work of relationship and trust building and community engagement (Mountz et al., 2015).

Epistemic Stigma and Research Expectations

A second challenge concerned the continued influence of dominant assumptions about sex work on research processes themselves. Despite efforts to create participant-led approaches, broader cultural narratives about sex work shaped how some participants initially understood the purpose of the research. For example, in the religiosity project, one participant initially submitted promotional images used in advertising her services rather than the everyday life photographs requested in the photo guidelines. Although clear guidance had been provided regarding the focus on daily life, subsequent discussions revealed that she had assumed that researchers would primarily be interested in the sexualised dimensions of her work. As Bowen (2021) notes, people framed as 'victims' or 'deviants' often tailor disclosures to outsider expectations, and after further conversation LRE began documenting a broader range of everyday experiences. This example illustrates how epistemic injustices surrounding sex work can influence research encounters long before analysis begins. Dominant representations of sex workers as sexualised, deviant or exceptional subjects shape expectations about what is considered relevant, interesting or valuable knowledge. As a result, both researchers and participants may find themselves navigating assumptions produced by wider social and political discourses. The incident serves as a reminder that creating opportunities for epistemic justice requires more than providing space for participation; we also need to continually challenge the assumptions that determine what kinds of stories are expected, encouraged and legitimised.

The Emotional and Relational Labour of Collaborative Research

Both projects also highlighted the emotional dimensions of pursuing participatory and justice-oriented research. Building collaborative relationships requires substantial investments of care, trust and emotional labour from researchers, participants, community organisations and peer collaborators. Across both projects, participants shared difficult experiences of stigma, exclusion, violence and marginalisation. Listening to, engaging with and working alongside these experiences inevitably carried emotional consequences. Likewise, attempts to create meaningful partnerships required ongoing negotiation of relationships, expectations, responsibilities and boundaries.

Importantly, this labour was not borne equally. Sex workers involved in the projects frequently contributed expertise, personal experiences, emotional energy and community knowledge that extended far beyond the formal requirements of participation. Their contributions were central to the research process, yet traditional academic structures do not always adequately recognise or reward this labour. These observations point to an important tension within participatory research. While collaborative approaches seek to redistribute epistemic authority, they also depend upon forms of relational labour that can be difficult to sustain, particularly in contexts characterised by limited resources and ongoing structural inequalities.

Compensation, Recognition and Epistemic Value

Questions of participant compensation also highlighted tensions regarding the recognition of expertise. Within the religiosity project, institutional concerns about undue influence limited the use of direct financial payments and required reliance on gift vouchers as tokens of appreciation, which reflects how institutional ethics around payment can be shaped by sex work stigma. This contrasted

with the co-design project, where direct payments to participants received ethical approval for the first time, precisely because of the research collaboration. This not only set an important precedent but also shows how creative approaches like working in collaboration with a community partner offer opportunities for dialogue and change in ethics committees originally established for other research paradigms and that adopt a risk-adverse, paternalistic approach towards research with marginalised communities (Hannes & Parylo, 2014; Sandy et al., 2025).

Although often framed as procedural ethical questions, decisions regarding participant payment are also epistemic questions. As discussed in the literature review, participant payment raises broader issues concerning how sex workers' expertise and labour are valued within research processes. Reflecting a broader pattern of epistemic exploitation, sex workers are often expected to share their experiences and expertise while receiving little recognition, influence or material benefit in return, despite the centrality of their contributions to knowledge production (Are, 2026; Bee, 2020). If participatory approaches are grounded in recognising community members as contributors to knowledge production, then questions emerge regarding how this expertise is materially recognised. From an epistemic justice perspective, compensation is not simply a matter of recruitment ethics: it concerns the broader recognition of community knowledge as valuable labour contributing directly to research outcomes. While there are legitimate ethical considerations surrounding payment, our experiences suggest the need for continued dialogue regarding how institutional ethics processes understand expertise, participation and contribution within community-based research.

Participation Does Not Eliminate Power

Finally, both projects reminded us that participatory and creative approaches do not eliminate power differentials. While these methods may create opportunities to redistribute epistemic authority, researchers continue to occupy positions of institutional privilege and retain significant influence over funding applications, ethics procedures, analysis, publication and dissemination. This means an epistemic justice framework needs ongoing reflexivity about the limits of participation in academic research. The goal here is not to assume that co-production automatically resolves inequalities but to remain attentive to the ways that power operates throughout the academic research process. Participatory and creative methods can create important opportunities for collaboration, shared meaning-making and participant-led knowledge production. However, they exist within broader social, institutional and political structures that continue to shape whose knowledge is recognised, valued and acted upon.

These challenges highlight how epistemic justice is not simply something that we can achieve through the adoption of research methods. Epistemic justice is an ongoing process of negotiating power, representation, authority and recognition. The tensions encountered in both projects demonstrate that, while creative and participatory approaches can create meaningful opportunities for more equitable knowledge production, they must continually contend with institutional constraints, social stigma and persisting inequalities in whose knowledge counts (Collins, 2019; Harding, 1991).

Limitations

While our findings demonstrate the potential of creative and participatory methodologies to advance epistemic justice, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, although both projects sought to redistribute epistemic authority and centre sex workers' expertise, neither fully escaped the institutional structures in which academic research is conducted. As researchers, we retained responsibility for project design, funding applications, ethical approvals, data analysis, writing and publication. Despite our efforts to create collaborative and participant-led spaces, power remained unevenly distributed throughout the research process. This reflects a broader tension within community-based participatory and co-produced research whereby participation may challenge, but cannot eliminate, existing hierarchies of knowledge production (Kothari, 2001). Claims about epistemic justice need to be attentive to the limits of participation within academic institutions.

Second, our projects engaged specific groups of sex workers within particular contexts and should not be understood as representative of all sex workers' experiences. The religiosity project focused on a relatively small group of sex workers who identified as religious or spiritual, while the co-design project was embedded within a local support organisation in one city in the Midlands region of England. Although the projects captured diverse experiences, identities and occupational settings, some sex workers' voices are underrepresented or absent. This includes sex workers who are not connected to support services, workers operating in highly hidden contexts, people who have limited trust in researchers and those unable or unwilling to engage with participatory research activities. As such, the findings should be understood as contextually situated rather than generalisable.

Third, participation in creative and collaborative research is also shaped by unequal access to time, resources, confidence and personal circumstances (Farr et al., 2021). Creative methods are often presented as inherently empowering; however, not all participants wish to engage through photography, artmaking, diaries or other creative activities

(Kothari, 2001). In the religiosity project, just over half of participants chose not to engage in the creative elements of the study. However, rather than viewing this solely as a limitation, we interpreted it as an important expression of participant choice. Nevertheless, it highlights the need to recognise that participant-led research may involve diverse forms of engagement and that some individuals may feel more comfortable contributing through conventional methods such as interviews.

Finally, our analysis brings together data generated through two independent projects with distinct aims, participant groups and methodological designs. Although this cross-project approach enabled us to explore epistemic justice across diverse contexts and identify common themes relating to expertise, participation, representation and knowledge production, it inevitably prioritises points of convergence over difference. Future research might explore in greater detail how epistemic injustices manifest differently across sex work sectors, identities, communities and geographical locations, as well as how participatory approaches may be experienced differently by sex workers occupying different social positions.

Taken together, these limitations reinforce the central argument of this paper: epistemic justice should be understood as an ongoing, imperfect and sometimes messy process rather than a methodological endpoint. Creative and participatory research approaches can create important opportunities for redistributing authority, recognising diverse knowledges and challenging dominant narratives, but they remain embedded within wider structures of power that shape whose knowledge is heard, valued and acted upon.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

In this paper, we have argued that epistemic justice should not be seen exclusively as a theoretical concern: it is also a practical and political challenge for sex work research, policy and service provision. By combining insights from two UK-based participatory projects, we have demonstrated how creative and collaborative methods can create spaces where sex workers are recognised as knowers, experts and contributors to knowledge production rather than subjects of research. Through photographs, diaries, co-design and arts-based workshops, participants generated alternative understandings of sex work that challenged dominant narratives shaped around victimisation, deviance and vulnerability. In doing so, sex worker participants were able to exercise epistemic authority over the representation of their own lives, thus contributing to the development of richer and more nuanced understandings of justice, identity, community, safety, spirituality and care.

Our findings, however, clearly show that epistemic injustice remains embedded within many of the systems that shape sex workers' lives and experiences. Participants' accounts demonstrated how sex workers continue to encounter testimonial injustices when their experiences are dismissed, questioned or framed through pre-existing assumptions, and hermeneutical injustices when dominant frameworks fail to capture the complexity and diversity of their lived realities. At the same time, our projects illustrate that creative and participatory methodologies can operate as sites of epistemic justice. This is because creative methods can be about more than generating data; they present the opportunity to redistribute interpretive authority, support collective meaning-making and create conditions where sex workers can articulate experiences, priorities and forms of knowledge often marginalised within academic, legal, policy and service contexts (Pain et al., 2008; Peralta, 2017).

More importantly, the implications of our work extend beyond research methods and methodologies. If policymakers are serious about developing effective and equitable responses to issues affecting sex workers, then our findings show that greater attention must be paid to who is involved in defining problems and developing solutions. Currently, most policies are developed through consultation processes that seek sex workers' views only after key decisions have already been made, or through reliance on professional and institutional forms of expertise that are treated as proxy for sex workers' perspectives and inherently more authoritative than lived experience. The analyses we have presented suggest that epistemically just policy development requires moving beyond consultation towards meaningful co-production in which sex workers are involved throughout the policy cycle, including agenda-setting, policy design, implementation and evaluation, and here policymakers can look to sex work decriminalisation in Victoria as an example of best practice (Aroney & Crofts, 2019; Wagenaar, 2017).

Additionally, our findings have implications for several policy and practice domains. First, criminal justice agencies and violence prevention initiatives should adopt co-designed approaches to reporting, safeguarding and victim support. The findings from the community-based co-design project demonstrated the value of involving sex workers in designing systems intended to support them (Sexton et al., 2024). As Broad et al. (2026) argue, policies addressing violence against sex workers are likely to be more effective when sex workers participate directly in defining safety needs, identifying barriers to reporting, developing service responses and providing peer-led services and support. More broadly, the principles underpinning these approaches should extend to sex work policy and regulation itself. At present, laws and regulatory frameworks affecting sex workers are mostly developed without meaningful input from

those most directly impacted by them (Ferčíková Konečná, 2024; Garofalo Geymonat & Macioti, 2016; Wagenaar, 2017). Adopting an epistemic justice approach, sex workers are seen as policy stakeholders and experts-by-experience whose knowledge is central in informing legislative reform, regulatory decision-making, implementation processes and policy evaluation (Fricker, 2007; NSWP, 2020). We have a model for this in practice with the decriminalisation of sex work in Victoria, Australia in 2022, and while it may not be perfect, it does provide foundational evidence for the meaningful involvement of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations on advisory boards, consultation panels, policy working groups and review bodies, ensuring that policies are developed *with* those directly affected rather than imposed *on* them (SWAN, 2021; Vixen, 2022). Such approaches have the potential to increase policy legitimacy, improve responsiveness to the realities of sex workers' lives and reduce unintended harms created by policies grounded in assumptions and morality politics rather than lived experience (Wagenaar, 2017).

Second, our findings have implications for healthcare and social care services. The accounts generated through creative methods revealed the importance of recognising sex workers as people with diverse identities, relationships, beliefs, communities and support needs. Services designed around narrow assumptions about sex workers' circumstances risk reproducing epistemic harms by reducing individuals to a single aspect of their identity and can result in a lack of services and specialist support (Molloy et al., 2025). Co-produced service development, peer-led initiatives and mechanisms for incorporating experiential expertise into service design may therefore contribute to more responsive and inclusive forms of care (Broad et al., 2026; Lobo et al., 2021).

Third, our findings highlight the importance of sex worker representation in research governance, advisory structures and funding decisions. If epistemic justice is to move beyond rhetoric, sex workers must be recognised not only as participants but also as collaborators, peer researchers, advisors and knowledge producers and paid for their time and expertise (Gonzales-Reico et al., 2025; Lobo et al., 2021; TØS, n.d.). This includes supporting sex worker-led organisations, funding CBPR, creating opportunities for sex workers to shape research priorities and dissemination strategies and, above all, materially recognising their expertise. Adopting these measures can help to address longstanding inequalities in who is recognised as an authority and whose expertise is considered legitimate and challenge epistemic exploitation in research.

Our paper also raises important issues for ethics governance. Our experiences suggest that conventional research ethics processes do not always align with participatory and community-led approaches. Questions surrounding participant compensation, collaborative analysis, power sharing and community engagement sit uneasily within frameworks designed primarily for traditional research paradigms. Universities, ethics committees and funders should therefore consider how ethical review processes might better accommodate participatory methodologies and recognise the value of lived experience as a form of expertise.

Overall, we argue that creative and participatory approaches offer opportunities to rethink what justice with sex workers might look like. In our paper, we have made a conscious effort not to position justice exclusively as a matter of legal intervention, regulation or protection. Instead, influenced by Nancy Fraser (2005), our findings point towards a broader conception of justice grounded in recognition, participation, voice, collective knowledge production and community connection (FitzGerald et al., 2020). In this sense, epistemic justice is a way of doing research that is committed to ensuring sex workers' knowledge, experiences and perspectives are meaningfully included in the decisions that affect their lives (Gonzales-Reico et al., 2025). As researchers committed to epistemic justice, we must create conditions that enable sex workers to participate, not merely as subjects of research or the objects of researchers' decisions, but as authentically community-based and participatory, active contributors who help shape the knowledge produced through collaborative research processes (Peralta, 2017; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). This observation also applies to policy development. Policies that aspire to epistemic justice must create opportunities for sex workers to contribute actively to policy design and decision-making, rather than positioning them solely as subjects of governance (Aroney & Crofts, 2019; Wagenaar, 2017).

Ultimately, our paper contributes not only by demonstrating the value of creative methods in sex work research, but also by illustrating how such approaches can challenge established distributions of epistemic authority, enabling sex workers to participate as knowledge producers, interpreters and collaborators in the research process. We have shown how creative and participatory methods can contribute to more democratic forms of knowledge production and, in turn, more responsive research, policy and practice by centring sex workers' expertise and creating opportunities for collaborative meaning-making. If justice for sex workers is to be realised, their knowledge, experiences and perspectives must move from the margins to the centre of debates surrounding law, policy, services and social change.

Author Contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Larissa Sandy and Daisy Matthews. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Larissa Sandy and Daisy Matthews and both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability No new datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declaration

Informed consent The studies were performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Nottingham (12/07/23/REIC Number 95302) and Nottingham Trent University (14/09/2021/REC Number 2021/282). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The authors affirm that research participants provided informed consent for publication of the images in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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