Reframing Research Participation as Labour: Lessons from Sex Work Research

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Abstract

This article reframes research participation as a form of task-based labour, drawing on qualitative fieldwork with sex workers in Malta. Through 17 in-depth interviews with adults with lived experience of sex work, we explore the ethical and methodological implications of compensating participants, focusing on the design and justification of a flat-rate financial incentive. In doing so, we position this discussion in dialogue with wider debates on precarious work and the politics of recognition. Grounded in labour-centred perspectives, our approach aligns research methods with the theoretical framing of sex work as labour, challenging extractive practices and reinforcing participants' autonomy and expertise. We argue that compensation is not merely a practical recruitment tool but an ethical and epistemological commitment to equitable participation, especially, though not exclusively, when engaging socially marginalised groups. By reflecting on recruitment, trust, and data quality, as well as challenges around eligibility, coercion, and participant vulnerability, we offer practical insights for ethically attuned qualitative research. We propose that participant compensation, when transparently and contextually implemented, can foster trust, enhance methodological consistency, and mitigate power imbalances. This article contributes to ongoing debates in qualitative methodology by offering a reflexive account of research practice that centres marginalised voices, supports inclusive knowledge production, and models fairer engagement with so-called 'hidden' or structurally disadvantaged groups, especially if engaged in informal or marginalised forms of work. We call for broader recognition of participation as labour in research design, ethics, and practice.

Keywords: qualitative research; research ethics; participant compensation; labour; sex work; reflexive methods; marginalised populations

1 Introduction

Researching sex work can be a conceptual and methodological minefield, eliciting a range of ethical, political and social dilemmas, from issues around terminology (Raymond, 2013; Jeffreys, 2015; Bernstein, 2017) to questions on the nature of free will within the context of structural influences (Weitzer, 2012). Sex work is often fiercely debated as either inherently exploitative or

a valid locus for labour rights (Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher, 2018), and is repeatedly framed through simplistic binaries of empowerment versus victimhood (Sanders, 2004; Smith and Mac, 2018). Beyond these debates, there are serious practical and ethical concerns linked to studying a population that is simultaneously diverse (Weitzer, 2012; Wagenaar, Amesberger and Altink, 2017) and "hidden or hard to reach" for (most) researchers (Bungay, Oliffe and Atchison, 2016, p. 966; Elgabry and Camilleri, 2021).

These challenges resonate acutely in Malta, a small, Catholic-majority country in the Mediterranean with strong historical ties to the sex trade (Bland, 1994; Knepper, 2009). While the industry remains visible in harbour areas and tourism hotspots (Calafato, 2017), there is little scholarly literature on sex work in Malta, despite it intersecting with broader health issues, migration and gender (Rossoni *et al.*, 2022). Motivated by this gap, the first author conducted in-depth interviews with 17 individuals who had lived experience of sex work in Malta (2022–2023), drawing on discussions with co-authors during the research process. The research aimed to understand how participants navigated the social, legal and cultural structures surrounding their work (Camilleri, 2025). All interviews were conducted by the first author, a cisgender male researcher, and in interviews involving cis- or trans-female participants, a trained female psychotherapist was present to help foster a supportive environment and to provide additional emotional support if needed. The research design employed diverse recruitment strategies – including personal networks, chain referrals, gatekeepers, social media, and offline advertisements – each of which posed distinct challenges to accessing participants.

This paper critically examines one key methodological choice: providing participants with a flat-rate €30.00 (approx. £26.50) for interviews lasting around 90 minutes. In this article, we examine research participation through the lens of task-based labour, exploring how compensating participants – particularly sex workers – aligns with ethical and theoretical commitments to fair pay and labour recognition. We emphasize the necessity of methodological consistency, especially when working with marginalised communities, where financial incentives can reinforce or disrupt existing power dynamics. Central to this discussion is the recognition that compensation can serve both as a moral obligation and as a pragmatic tool: payment may uphold ethical standards while also supporting participation and enhancing data quality. Drawing on existing literature and insights from this project's fieldwork, we analyse how financial incentives shaped participants' engagement, trust, and the integrity of our findings.

More broadly, it is worth noting that our discussion both reflects and intersects with wider debates about how labour is being transformed under neoliberalism, where flexibility and self-responsibilization have become defining features of work. As Harvey (2005, p. 3) observes,

neoliberalism "has become hegemonic as a mode of discourse," reshaping "the ways many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world." From this perspective, market logics extend beyond the economy to organise social relations and ethical expectations. Framing research participation as labour situates ethical questions within these structural conditions, highlighting the ways value, autonomy, and fairness are negotiated in economies where precarious work is widespread (see Fraser, 2000; Harvey, 2005; Standing, 2011; Pósch *et al.*, 2024). We suggest that these dynamics are particularly visible in sex-work research, where sex workers' struggles over recognition and compensation echo broader concerns over the valuation of precarious and marginalised labour.[1]

Our experiences in Malta highlight the complexities of conducting research on sensitive topics in conservative and stigmatised settings, where concerns about privacy, coercion, and fairness are paramount. By critically reflecting on our approach, we aim to contribute to ongoing discussions about ethical and effective methodologies for engaging "hard-to-reach" populations in research.

2 Aligning Practice with Theory

Compensating human participants in research is a relatively "common and longstanding practice", particularly in clinical or medical research (Grady, 2005, p. 1681). Despite its prevalence in these fields, it remains more controversial in the social sciences (Dickert and Grady, 1999; Head, 2009), where structural complexities – like power relations – often lead to caution about adopting novel approaches. For many social researchers, these considerations are central to their work, in contrast with typical practice in STEM fields. As a result, some hesitate to offer financial incentives, concerned that payment could conflict with efforts to mitigate power imbalances or could unintentionally reinforce them.

Alongside valid concerns about power dynamics – both within researcher-participant relationships and in relation to broader issues in the sex industry – it is also crucial that the chosen methodology aligns with researchers' theoretical commitments, particularly when research is conceived as a form of praxis. After all, questions of labour, exploitation, and fair pay lie at the heart of the sex workers' rights movement (Smith and Mac, 2018; Simpson and Smith, 2019). Recognising these parallels prompted us to consider how best to align our methods with our broader conceptual and theoretical framing of sex work as labour. Importantly, this article

[1] Precarious work is widely theorized but rarely measured, and its definition remains contested (Pósch *et al.*, 2021). Sex work is similarly heterogeneous, yet core features of the sector – job insecurity, irregular or informal employment relations, and systematic exclusion from labour protections – clearly mark much sex work as precarious (see Weitzer, 2010; Smith and Mac, 2018). These dynamics are further entrenched in jurisdictions with criminalised or partly criminalised regulatory regimes, which heighten risks and restrict access to redress (Krüsi *et al.*, 2014; Platt *et al.*, 2018; Armstrong, 2021).

also has relevance for other contexts – whether small, conservative, or otherwise – in which the lives of marginalised populations are heavily scrutinised and stigmatised.

2.1 Sex Workers as Subject-Matter Experts

This research project examined in part how sex workers negotiate their labour conditions and make decisions about their work. This inevitably includes an in-depth understanding of the economic, social, and emotional dimensions of sex work. Although, as Petro (2010, p. 160) notes as "sex work becomes routine, [they] become skilled at their jobs", it is their ongoing navigation of the social realities of sex work that constitutes their expertise. Smith and Mac (2018, p. 43) similarly highlight the "emotional labour and hustle" required in the sex industry, pointing out that it is easy for outsiders to undervalue these efforts. This approach resonated with the notion that sex work shares features with the "gig economy", with participants describing experiences of "short-term, on-demand, occasional, and typically task-based labour" (Tan *et al.*, 2021, p. 2) and characteristically "move from one job (or gig) to another" (Simpson and Smith, 2019, p. 711). In this sense, participation in our study was a "gig" only open to sex workers.

Viewing participation as labour reflects our broader conceptual starting point: recognising sex work as a legitimate economic pursuit, while also acknowledging that experiences within the industry can be marked by force, exploitation, and unfair compensation. We paid participants for their time and expertise as an ethical choice intended to reduce the risk of exploitation in the research relationship (Russell, Moralejo and Burgess, 2000). If sex work is labour, discussing it – sharing knowledge and experiences – should be recognised as labour too. By treating participation in our study as paid labour, we sought to respect and compensate their unique expertise. After all, participants were intentionally recruited to speak in their capacity as sex workers, sharing their stories and perspectives. However, while payment is an important step, it does not, on its own, eliminate concerns about extractive practices, particularly where rates are low or fail to reflect the value of participants' contributions.

This reflection reaffirmed our decision to pay all participants equally for their contributions – a choice grounded in both our ethical and theoretical commitments. While research participation is voluntary, we argue that it constitutes a form of labour, especially when participants share expert insights based on lived experience and this experience is centred around their labour. Moreover, this research work involves opportunity costs, particularly for those who depend on flexible, time-based income. As Smith and Mac (2018, pp. 40, 43) point out, many people endure "shit jobs [and] falling wages" and "would not, as a rule, do their jobs for free" – so it would be unfair to expect them to contribute unpaid labour to our research.

2.2 Ethical Necessity or Pragmatic Tool?

Debates on whether or not to pay research participants often revolve around the distinction between moral imperatives and pragmatic concerns (Bentley and Thacker, 2004; Singer and Couper, 2008). Morally, the question is whether participants should be paid for their time and effort. Practically, the question is whether compensation improves (or hinders) data collection, for example by increasing the number or diversity of participants, enhancing their engagement, or leading to richer insights. From a strictly moral perspective, compensating participants might be considered a moral obligation, regardless of outcomes. As Różyńska (2022, p. 456) argues in detail, paying participants is not only "justified" but also "required by social beneficence, not by justice or fairness", provided these incentives do "not reinforce wider social injustices and inequalities", are not exploitative and are "not overly attractive" (2022, p. 449). Incentives should not be so high as to unduly influence or pressure individuals into participating against their better judgement. In this view, people should be paid for sharing their experiences and knowledge. Recognising sex work as labour, we treated research participation similarly. While all contributions were valuable, we paid sex working participants to reflect both opportunity costs and the framing of their participation as labour, unlike salaried stakeholders we interviewed in parallel whose earnings while being interviewed were unaffected. If a study's aim is to understand the lived experiences of sex work or precarious labour, then failing to recognise the nature of exploitation – and potentially contributing to exploitative dynamics by not paying participants – seems counterproductive.

From a practical standpoint, compensation may enhance participation, engagement, and data quality. However, its effects are uncertain, particularly among under-researched groups where participants' attitudes towards payment are not well understood. Conventional wisdom suggests that financial compensation attracts participation (Grady, 2005; Ripley, 2006; Carrera *et al.*, 2014). However, we recognise that the effects of "incentives depend on how they are designed", whether they are monetary or not, and "how they interact with intrinsic motivations and social motivations" (Gneezy, Meier and Rey-Biel, 2011, p. 206). In any case, if paying participants encourages more forthcoming responses and facilitates recruitment through word-of-mouth within participant communities, it may be seen as an effective research tool. Conversely, if payment is deemed unnecessary because it does not enhance data quality, this risks framing participants merely as a means to an end. Such reasoning can perpetuate extractivist practices already critiqued in research ethics scholarship (Pittaway, Bartolomei and Hugman, 2010). In particular, failing to fairly compensate participants raises uncomfortable parallels with practices of "stealing stories" for research gain without reciprocal benefit – an outcome our study explicitly sought to avoid by recognising participants' expertise and respecting their agency.

2.3 Paralleling Sex Work and Participation

In the course of their work, sex workers often engage in simple conversations with clients, highlighting the diversity of their work and the emotional labour involved (Davina, 2017; Grönvall, Holmström and Plantin, 2020). During recruitment, one potential participant attempted to negotiate a higher fee, remarking via WhatsApp, "A client pays €150 an hour, and sometimes they just want to talk." This exchange underscored how some sex workers equated interviews with their professional labour – requiring emotional and conversational effort – and affirmed that the idea that if both clients and researchers benefit from their engagement, both should provide compensation. It illustrates how moral and pragmatic logics of payment converge, positioning compensation as both an ethical obligation and a practical means of enabling participation. This encounter reinforced our view that payment was not only fair but also integral to the study's ethical and theoretical coherence.

Balancing ethical and practical concerns, we thus prioritised fair compensation, regardless of its impact on participation or data quality. In this case, we declined the interview after the participant requested a higher fee, prioritising equity by ensuring all participants were engaged under the same conditions. Renegotiating rates midway would not only have risked inconsistency but, crucially, would have required re-contacting individual participants, many of whom might not have appreciated further outreach after completing their involvement. We also sought to avoid creating undue pressure to participate through higher, selectively negotiated payments.

3 Concerns and Quandaries

Compensating participants invites a range of objections, often rooted in concerns about undue influence or corrupted data (Dickert and Grady, 1999; Grady, 2005). These dilemmas illustrate how ethical ideals of trust and protection can collide with the pragmatic realities of recruitment and verification in hidden or criminalised contexts. Ripley (2006), for example, notes that financial incentives in research may lead some participants to misrepresent their eligibility or fabricate responses for payment. Pre-screening – such as confirming individuals understood the advert – helped minimize misunderstandings and protect data quality. For example, some inquiries immediately revealed ineligibility, such as individuals looking to enter the sex industry rather than having prior experience ("No, but I'd like to!") or those seeking unrelated opportunities (e.g., submitting unsolicited CVs). Others took longer to disclose their background, creating initial uncertainty. One individual was evasive over WhatsApp, a typical behaviour among those wary of law enforcement, and therefore did not present out of the ordinary in this field. In-person, however, it became clear he was a third party in sex work – someone "involved in the sex work transaction who are neither the worker nor the client" (Bruckert *et al.*, 2013, p. 4). A self-styled "protector" who worked in the sex industry (so "sex" and "work"), he had

operated abroad as a bouncer and facilitator abroad, and was scoping opportunities locally. While his insights were relatively limited, at least in relation to the study's scope, and the interview somewhat confusing, he was compensated for his time but excluded from the final sample. His interview data was retained, with consent, for possible future use. The decision to compensate him and retain his data reflects a commitment to valuing participants' time, labour, and risk – even when their roles in the sex industry are more morally or legally ambiguous – and prompts broader reflection on whose contributions are respected, remunerated, or erased in research and society.

3.1 Vulnerability and Deception

Critics also highlight concerns that individuals experiencing economic hardship or other structural disadvantages may feel pressured to enrol in studies they might otherwise avoid. While these are legitimate concerns, they can be mitigated through careful study design and transparency about payment structures, including setting rates that are fair, consistent, and proportionate to participants' time and expertise (Grant and Sugarman, 2004). Moreover, explaining consent and conditions clearly also functions as a screening tool, particularly by reminding participants that they can withdraw at any time and that compensation is unconditional rather than "performance"-based. Here, "performance" refers both to external measures of output and to any perceived need to present exaggerated or performative narratives during interviews. This approach helps discourage fabrication by reinforcing that there is no additional benefit from such behaviours. Dealing with some degree of self-report bias or deception is expected in qualitative research, particularly where participants may perceive incentives to exaggerate or withhold information. However, compassion and empathy remain paramount in addressing such challenges.

For example, one participant, who snowballed through a previous interviewee, repeatedly emphasized in hushed tones that she used to "whore about" – likely coached to say so to meet our criteria. At the time, interviews had been temporarily paused due to the first author's scheduling conflicts. Upon learning of a delay, she disclosed financial hardship due to an accident that left her temporarily immobile. Though offered referrals to support services, she declined, stating that she trusted only us because of her friend's endorsement. Over the following days, she and her friend followed up – one providing personal updates, the other continuing to vouch for her. When the interview was finally scheduled, compensation was mentioned only in the context of informed consent. Unable to read or write, she was guided through the process but hesitated before agreeing. When asked if she was all right, she admitted she had never engaged in sex work but had only been pressured to do so in the past, meaning she did not actually meet the study's criteria. It became clear that her well-intentioned friend had convinced her we could help and

framed participation as an easy way to earn money. However, when faced with constructing a narrative around this, she could not do so. Given her need – and the fact that she had still engaged with us – we provided compensation and offered connections to professionals willing to assist pro bono. Despite this, she never followed up with them, and we (of course) did not include her in our final sample.

This case underscored the importance of refining pre-screening processes to better identify ineligible participants early on. However, given the risk of creating an environment of mistrust, it may be more ethical to err on the side of caution and accept participants even if this occasionally results in a false positive. Ensuring that eligibility checks are framed as supportive rather than exclusionary can help maintain trust and encourage genuine engagement.

3.2 Incentivisation as Communication

Some concerns about paying participants tend to stem from the assumption that financial incentives boost participation (Deci, Ryan and Koestner, 1999), but this claim needs nuancing. For instance, increased participation depends on the amount or kind of incentives offered (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000) – hence the careful consideration required during implementation. For example, *appropriate* financial incentives can increase participation without impacting data quality (Yu *et al.*, 2017) or resulting in undue pressure (Largent *et al.*, 2022). Excessive incentives can have negative effects (Ariely *et al.*, 2009). As argued by Gneezy, Meier and Rey-Biel (2011, p. 193), "incentives contain information", and participants will "draw inferences from both the[ir] existence and size". They further draw on Frey and Oberholzer-Gee (1997) to suggest that high incentives could also communicate high risk to potential participants, which can lower participation rates.

These issues are particularly relevant to accessing participants with serious concerns about their "stigmatised or illegal behaviour" (Heckathorn, 1997, p. 174). If research participation is recognized as labour, there is no basis to assume that greater extrinsic motivation diminishes 'performance' or undermines a participant's desire to contribute to society via research – provided the incentive is appropriate to the context. In many other professions, particularly in healthcare, the motivation to help others is closely aligned with the financial compensation professionals receive for their work. Payment can even reinforce and enhance commitment (Galizzi *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2023), suggesting that the assumption this would not apply to research participation merits reconsideration.

4 Handling Incentives

Paying participants poses ethical and logistical challenges, requiring precise eligibility, timing, and safeguards. Transparency about the payment process helps prevent misunderstandings, but maintaining cautious flexibility is equally important in complex field conditions.

4.1 Incentive Type

Bunay *et al.* (2022, p. 948) argue that offering non-cash incentives can appear "disrespectful" or "infantilizing", reinforcing stereotypes that sex workers lack financial autonomy. In general, cash is "convenient", inherently valuable and generally "convertible" into other commodities, as required (Felson and Clarke, 1998, p. 19). Moreover, direct cash payments to each participant, rather than vouchers or prize draws, carried the added benefit of minimizing logistical hurdles and avoiding assumptions about participants' access to specific platforms. For instance, an Amazon voucher presupposes a stable mailing address – something not all participants had or would have. Moreover, we opted for a fixed rate, rather than a flexible one based on interview length to avoid excessively long interviews, or linking payment explicitly to time or 'performance'. We preferred offering physical cash payments over digital transactions that leave a record, although some requested digital payments regardless, in which case we obliged.

4.2 Incentive Value

At the design stage, we set out to establish prudent upper and lower limits on financial incentives. However, there is no straightforward formula to determine an appropriate amount to compensate participants with or, indeed, to gauge what a participant may feel is attractive. For instance, the idea that "a small payment is better than nothing" may be counterproductive and lead to poorer performance (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000, p. 806). In some cases, low incentives may even be insulting, although the exact reasons for potentially poorer outcomes generally depend on context and target group. Similarly, attractiveness of an incentive depends on a potential participant's "personal assessment of the inconvenience, risk and payment benefit" (Ripley, 2006, p. 10) relative to their own financial needs, the very way they may value or conceive of their time, and the information the offer of incentives carries with it. For example, one participant hesitated to "take money from a student", suggesting that she would have been more willing from someone who she perceived as being more financially stable or well-funded. In fact, with some reassurance of the lead author's financial stability, she accepted payment.

Compensation decisions often involve some arbitrariness but can be refined with data. We based payments on Malta's then minimum wage (approx. €4.57 per hour) adjusting for inflation over the two years in which the interviews would take place. This amount was multiplied over four hours to set the lower limit, anticipating 90 minutes per interview and an extra 30 minutes if an

interview ran longer, travel time and costs, and costs incurred while setting up an interview. The final amount came to around €20.00 at the time. There was less data to inform our decision when considering the upper limit. However, questions arose around amounts which would exert undue pressure, given that "nobody could identify a specific dollar value that would compromise voluntariness" (Bungay *et al.*, 2022, p. 949). On this issue, Largent and Lynch (2019, p. 43) note that investigators may be prone to "overprotection [of participants], and possibly distractions from" more important matters, such as "the possibility that offers of payment are too low" and not too high. Online ads for sex work in Malta showed hourly rates ranging from double to triple digits (€), depending on factors like service type (e.g., contact vs. no contact, in-call vs. out-call). However, many sex workers were not necessarily visible online and likely charged lower rates, making these figures unrepresentative. This reinforced our understanding that the value of compensation could carry different weight for different participants – being reasonable for some while potentially creating undue pressure for others. We therefore decided to limit our upper limit to double digits – i.e. €99.00.

We also factored in another aspect: funding. Although the lead author's doctoral studies were broadly funded, this funding did not include a research budget, meaning fieldwork costs were incurred at the lead author's expense. Moreover, as noted earlier, for interviews with cis- and trans-female participants, a trusted female psychotherapist accompanied the first author. Following the same reasoning, it was fair for her to be compensated equally to all participants. Therefore, factoring in a higher-end estimate of participants we hoped to recruit (c. 20 participants) and doubling this amount to account for the research support, we ultimately adopted a fund-maximisation strategy guided by the upper and lower limits just described – more than €20 but less than €99. This pragmatic decision allowed us to "meet [our] sample target within [our] research budget" (Head, 2009, p. 341). Participants were finally offered a flat rate of €30 per interview – an expense of €60 per interview once equivalent payment of the psychotherapist was also factored in. We also decided that the interviewer would cover any food or beverage costs incurred during an interview, as travel costs had already been included in estimates for participant compensation.

4.3 Incentive Delivery

We adopted an opt-out model: participants were automatically entitled to compensation unless explicitly declined. This tacit agreement helped normalize the idea that participants deserved to be paid for their time and contribution. If an interview ended prematurely or the participant's intentions were unclear (e.g., answering only one question and then demanding money), payment would be assessed on a case-by-case basis but defaulted to compensation unless clear evidence of the system being exploited. Thankfully, this did not come to pass.

The payment handling was approached in varied ways – some participants preferred receiving it upfront as a goodwill gesture, fostering trust between researcher and participant, although of course risking that they participant could leave mid-interview – a risk we were willing to take so as not to be coercive. Similarly, one participant requested partial payment in advance as a precaution against wasted time or potential deception. Consistent with findings in Slomka et al. (2007), who explored economically disadvantaged African-American drug users' perceptions of financial compensation for participating in HIV research, some participants in our study viewed the payment as an additional source of income. This reinforced our position that participation should itself be treated as a form of labour. Others preferred to delay discussion of payment until the interview concluded, considering it a practical matter best handled discreetly. Overall, payment processes required considerable flexibility, with participants' responses to compensation shaped by their personal experiences and concerns. Drawing on participants' advice, we adapted our payment practices to individual preferences, acknowledging the diversity of trust levels and perceptions of risk.

Although payment was generally well-received, one participant firmly declined it. She explained that, having previously experienced sexual exploitation, the offer of financial compensation evoked distressing memories of her time in the sex industry. She indicated that she had not initially registered that a payment would be offered until we reminded her at the consent stage. Following her disclosure, we consciously adopted a more supportive and sensitive approach during the interview, which shaped its tone and focus. This experience provided a stark reminder of the sensitivity required in this research area and underscored the importance of recognising participants' subjective experiences. In keeping with our commitment to respecting participants' preferences, she was offered the option to redirect the payment to a charity. However, she expressed no particular preference and suggested that it be retained for the study. This moment illustrates how participants' autonomy and lived histories can come into tension with the standardised ethics procedures designed to protect them, revealing the limits of procedural ethics in navigating vulnerability (see Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

It is worth noting that we recognised in advance that providing financial compensation could raise ethical concerns about payments being used to fund potentially harmful activities, such as purchasing drugs. Concerns about how participants might use compensation often rest on moral assumptions that portray "sex workers as unable to make 'good' decisions" (Smith and Mac, 2018, p. 47). While some sex workers do use drugs, stereotypes that conflate sex work with substance use obscure the structural and material conditions shaping both. Smith and Mac (2018, p. 94) note, after all, "drugs can be expensive", and "dependency dictates the amount they will need to work." To respect participants' autonomy, we therefore made a conscious decision not to monitor

or regulate how compensation was used. Payment was offered unconditionally as recognition of participants' time and contributions, rather than being contingent on assumptions about how it might be spent.

Taken together, these examples show that compensating participants in sex-work research entails a continual negotiation between fairness, autonomy, and institutional constraint – ethics enacted rather than prescribed.

4.4 Motivations for Participating

Echoing Head's (2009) exploration of the ethics and effects of paying participants in qualitative research, we did not explicitly ask participants why they chose to take part in the study. However, in many cases, this issue arose organically during the small talk before or after the official interview. Field notes were taken on these conversations and participants' unsolicited comments. Some participants initially saw participation as "easy money" but said they then found the experience more meaningful, while some also noted that their participation was not conditional on the promise of compensation, although they appreciated the gesture. Consistent with previous findings that highlight altruism as a motivation for research participation (e.g. Carrera *et al.*, 2014) most participants in our study reported at least partially altruistic reasons for taking part.

Our experiences also echoed findings by McCann et al. (2010, p. 4), who, in the context of medical research, described "conditional altruism" as a "willingness to help others and to contribute towards [further] knowledge", premised on the prospect of receiving some direct benefit to the participant. One participant described his participation as a form of activism, using their voice to share his experience and challenge stereotypes. Others expressed hope that their insights might help others avoid the mistakes they felt they had made while selling sex. This included discouraging people from doing sex work altogether, or (more often) to encourage newcomers to take fewer risks, for example. Given that the "potential benefits of any proposed research project are uncertain" (Williams *et al.*, 2008, p. 1453), we made it clear both verbally and in the participant information sheet that financial compensation was the sole guaranteed benefit of participating in this study. This approach aimed to avoid overpromising potential outcomes, such as policy change or social impact, which could not be assured. During the informed consent process, we explained that participants' insights would contribute to addressing the currently non-existent local evidence base on sex work. However, following institutional ethics requirements – which includes a designated section for outlining participant benefits – we made it clear that this contribution was not presented as a personal benefit, but rather as a factual description of the study's aims.

While some participants might experience a sense of "therapeutic benefit", we aimed to highlight the "nontherapeutic benefit, such as monetary compensation" (Jansen, 2009, p. 28) to avoid creating false expectations. Some participants still reported experiencing a therapeutic effect – such as "getting things off their chest" or "feeling lighter". One participant, for instance, described the experience as healing and later contacted the lead author to express gratitude for being treated with respect and dignity during the interview. While this was a positive outcome, it was incidental and beyond the scope or aims of the project.

5 Takeaways

This article examined the ethical and practical considerations of compensating participants in our research on sex work in Malta, with broader relevance for research involving other marginalised communities, such as people experiencing homelessness, undocumented migrants, or precarious workers. By conceptualising research participation as task-based labour, we underscored within our own framework the necessity of fair compensation to maintain ethical and theoretical coherence. We recognise, however, that approaches to compensation may need to be sensitive to participants' individual circumstances, particularly where issues such as benefits entitlements or immigration status could arise (see Bracaj *et al.*, 2024).

Recognising sex work as labour requires, we argue, an approach that values participants' time, expertise, and lived experiences while safeguarding against undue influence and coercion. We therefore view paying participants to share their expertise as both a moral obligation and a practical tool. Ethically, it respects and fairly compensates contributions, particularly from those facing structural inequalities and stigma. Pragmatically, it can aid recruitment and data quality but should not be its primary justification. We suggest that researchers working with human participants – especially those working with groups routinely classified by research ethics committees as "vulnerable" – consider carefully designing compensation models that prioritise fairness, transparency, and participant autonomy while maintaining data integrity. We are mindful that concepts of vulnerability are shaped by social and institutional contexts, and that in some cases, such as research involving children, additional ethical considerations around compensation may arise. These complexities, however, fall beyond the scope of the present discussion, but represent an important area for further reflection and research.

While our reflections are grounded in the Maltese context – with its distinct legal frameworks, social stigma, and small-scale research environment – we recognise that local conditions shape how compensation is negotiated. Even so, the ethical tensions identified here are likely to resonate across qualitative research with marginalised or criminalised groups, precarious workers at large, and those with lived experience of stigmatised issues. Paying such participants

for their research labour is fundamentally important, we argue, and across contexts, the guiding question should be how to do so ethically and coherently. Payment should always be structured to reinforce trust, uphold research ethics, and challenge exploitative norms, contributing to more equitable and ethical research practices. In doing so, researchers can also attend to the ethical challenges of knowledge production within shifting labour landscapes, where notions of value, autonomy, and recognition are continually renegotiated.

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Author Contributions

Jonathan Camilleri conducted the research, including the design, fieldwork, analysis, writing, and funding acquisition. Ella Cockbain and Jyoti Belur provided guidance and supervision during the research process, and contributed to the writing and revision of the manuscript.

Statements and Declarations

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

UCL's Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 13063/002) approved the study. To ensure cultural sensitivity to the Maltese context, additional approval was obtained from the University of Malta, the local data controller, through the Faculty of Social Wellbeing's Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 3988_09012020).

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Depending on the context, consent was either written or verbal and audio-recorded. This was necessary where participants were unable to write, or where an interview took place online.

Consent for publication

All participants were informed that their anonymized data would be used in published research findings.

Declaration of conflicting interest

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