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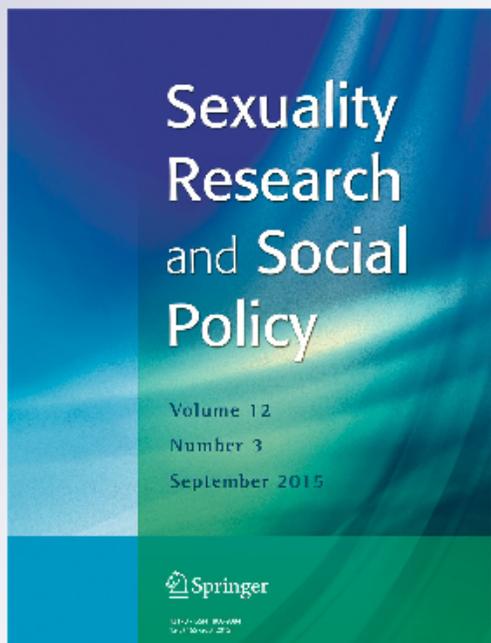
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Abstract Research on modern red-light districts is centered largely on street prostitution zones. Missing from most of the literature are studies that examine red-light districts consisting of clusters of visible indoor businesses that are legal and regulated by the authorities. This paper examines this kind of zone in Ghent, Belgium. A variety of data is used to document this red-light district's social and physical ecology, routine activities within it, and key characteristics of actors involved in the sector. The goal of the paper is to provide a fairly comprehensive analysis of both the zone's internal arrangements as well as ways in which it is shaped by external forces. The findings are then compared to previous research on red-light districts in two other Belgian cities, Antwerp and Brussels, which reveals significant differences between the three settings.

Keywords Prostitution · Legalization · Vice · Regulation · Public policy

Introduction

Brothels were historically labeled “disorderly houses” or “bawdy houses” in Europe and North America—equating them with public nuisance—and entire red-light districts (RLDs) have been associated with all kinds of maladies. The classic Chicago School of Sociology in the USA considered “vice areas” intrinsically dilapidated, anomic, and

criminogenic. In his study of Chicago in the 1920s, Walter Reckless concluded that “Vice resorts concentrated in those tracts of the city which showed the highest rate of community disorganization,” measured by rates of crime, poverty, disease, and divorce (Reckless 1933, p. 252). Vice such as prostitution, illegal gambling, and the drug trade “must hide in the disorganized neighborhoods in order to thrive” and “decaying neighborhoods have very little resistance to the invasions of vice” (Reckless 1926, pp. 171, 165). Decades later, Symanski (1981, p.3) echoed this view, stating that prostitution is typically concentrated in communities whose residents have “minimal social and political power.” It is thus *assumed* that RLDs emerge only in already disorganized neighborhoods and that the residents are uniformly opposed to vice but powerless to resist it.

Today, these traditional depictions of vice districts—as well as single, isolated erotic businesses (a strip club, porn store, brothel)—persist and are the basis for municipal ordinances that restrict or ban adult businesses. Policymakers assume that such enterprises generate negative environmental effects: “blight and urban deterioration (e.g., decline in property values), deleterious effects on environmental and personal health (e.g., noise), antisocial behavior and crime (e.g., drug dealing, public urination), and the erosion of community standards” (Prior and Crofts 2012, p.131; see also Lasker 2002; Papayanis 2000). There is also a symbolic dimension—the idea that such businesses disturb local moral sensibilities by their very presence, offensive signage, or by attracting disreputable individuals (Hubbard 1998). Weinstein and McCleary claim that all RLDs “attract predators” and argue that properly conducted studies “will always demonstrate an association between adult entertainment businesses and negative secondary effects” (Weinstein and McCleary 2011, pp. 586, 581). Studies of some cities, however, find few or no negative environmental effects of erotic businesses—thus challenging Weinstein and McCleary's sweeping generalization (Cramer

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2013; Künkel 2012; Linz 2004; Paul et al. 2001; Prior and Crofts 2012; Weitzer 2014). These studies suggest that social disorder, physical decay, and other social problems are not inherent in places where adult businesses operate and that, instead, the existence of such problems is a *variable* that depends on the ways in which internal actors organize their activities and the ways in which external stakeholders engage with the district.

The article examines a RLD in Ghent, Belgium, in the context of existing research on two other Belgian RLDs—in Antwerp and Brussels. Our research questions focus on *internal arrangements and actors* (i.e., physical conditions, social organization, and behavior patterns) and *external forces* (police, city government, nearby residents) that have, or seek to have, an impact on the physical and social conditions in this RLD. How do internal actors operate within this RLD; how is it managed by the authorities; what are the main issues or problems as perceived by key stakeholders; and to what extent does Ghent's RLD fit the conventional image of such zones as being dilapidated, anomic, and criminogenic?

In comparing the findings on Ghent's RLD with previous findings on Antwerp and Brussels, we situate each district within the political economy of each city. Differences between the RLDs are explained by the convergence of three factors: (1) internal features unique to each zone, (2) the amount and nature of local government engagement in the RLD, and (3) the socioeconomic status and political influence of the population residing adjacent to each district. The perceptions, status, and clout of local residents can influence the practices of state officials, but there is considerable variation in the degree to which residents accept or tolerate versus complain and mobilize against a RLD in their vicinity (Hubbard 1998; Kingston 2014; Künkel 2012; Larsen 1992; Mathieu 2011; Winchester and White 1988). In some cases, external intervention is driven more by the interests of the local state than by pressure from below, as seen recently in Amsterdam for example (Aalbers and Deinema 2012; Outshoorn 2012). We examine the role of the state, residents, and other forces in the course of our analysis of Ghent's RLD and our comparisons to Antwerp and Brussels.

Red-Light Districts

Most research on erotic red-light districts focuses on street prostitution. This literature examines an array of issues, including real or perceived crime correlates, public nuisances, and political struggles over such areas on the part of residents, merchants, the authorities, and prostitutes themselves (e.g., Hubbard 1998, 2009; Kingston 2014; Mathieu 2011; Tani 2002). The findings of this body of research form a useful backdrop for studies of RLDs that revolve around *indoor* sexually oriented premises. However, compared to the literature on street prostitution, much less research has been conducted

on such indoor red-light districts—distinct zones hosting a *cluster of visible indoor erotic businesses* (strip clubs, porn shops, erotic bars, peep shows, massage parlors, brothels). It is indeed remarkable that so little research, ethnographic or other, has been devoted to such contemporary indoor RLDs, given their visibility in major cities like Amsterdam, Bangkok, Frankfurt, The Hague, Hamburg, Hong Kong, and Tokyo (exceptions include Aalbers 2005; Boels 2014a; Katsulis 2008; Kelly 2008; Künkel 2012; Loopmans and van den Broeck 2011; Weitzer 2012, 2014). Little is known about the social organization of such districts, how they are managed by actors inside the zone and by the authorities, the work experiences of the sellers of sexual services in such districts, and the ways in which the locales can become politicized, including demands to reform them or to eliminate them. This article addresses each of these dimensions in the context of Ghent. We expected that some of our findings would overlap with the existing studies of street prostitution zones, whereas other findings would be more unique—associated with distinctive features of indoor red-light districts.

Red-light districts vary: Some are *single-use*—largely confined to erotic service. Such monolithic zones are usually remote from the city's central core and cater to local clients. Others are *multi-use* vice zones: Prostitution is mixed in with other businesses (bars, restaurants, hotels, gambling arcades, strip clubs, porn shops) (Ashworth et al. 1988). RLDs also vary in terms of the kinds of erotic businesses they contain. Some are confined to strip clubs or bar prostitution or brothels, whereas others, like the one examined in this study, are comprised of *window prostitution*: The sellers remain indoors yet are visible from outside through their windows or glass doors, where they attempt to attract the attention and solicit business from male visitors. Window workers typically are not employees; they or a middleman simply rents a room from a building owner (Weitzer 2012). The owner or middleman may exercise some control (e.g., screening out drug-dependent or underage sellers), but in general, the women operate independently of the owners. Our findings show that Ghent departs from this general pattern in some important ways.

The Belgian Regulatory Context

A 1948 law abolished existing municipal regulations and outlawed third-party involvement in prostitution in Belgium (e.g., pimping and operating a brothel), but not prostitution itself. The law was intended to abolish prostitution without criminalizing the conduct of prostitutes themselves. Local governments responded in different ways: Some prohibited all third-party involvement, while others imposed extralegal regulations on these actors. In the latter, the approach is one of *de facto legalization* (i.e., illegal but officially regulated). The

Belgian cities that have visible window prostitution districts allow them to operate in ingenious ways, recognizing that the regulations they impose may violate the 1948 law, much like cities in the Netherlands did prior to formal *de jure* legalization in 2000 (Brants 1998; Weitzer 2012). We will see that the authorities in Ghent have a unique way of regulating its RLD.

Belgium's two largest cities, Antwerp and Brussels, allow window prostitution in one specific geographical area of each city. Previous research shows that Brussels' RLD fits the classic vice-district model outlined above (Seinpost 2008; Sivri 2008; Weitzer 2014). Both physical and social disorder were documented in this RLD: Graffiti, litter, and building decay are quite prominent, as is a fair amount of social disorder and minimal level of police control of the area. In addition, illegal third parties are active in this RLD, where they exercise tight control over the sex workers: Madams dictate working conditions, deduct half of their earnings, time the sexual encounters, and work for pimps who reside in their home countries (mostly Bulgaria and Romania). The research literature shows, therefore, that Brussels fits the conventional image of red-light areas—characterized by physical decay, social disorder, involvement of parasitical actors, and limited involvement of the authorities. Residents of the surrounding neighborhood, most of whom are poor or working-class Middle-Eastern immigrants, lack political power and thus have been unable to influence local policies with regard to this RLD (Seinpost 2008).

In the past, Antwerp shared several features with contemporary Brussels, but its RLD underwent radical changes beginning in the late 1990s, when Antwerp's city government began to implement a reform plan, whose goals were to (1) restrict visible prostitution to a single red-light zone, (2) reduce public nuisances, (3) eliminate involvement of organized crime, and (4) improve working conditions for prostitutes (Willems 2009). Today, Antwerp has largely succeeded in achieving these goals. Window buildings in the RLD are well kept, with owners subject to penalties for code violations; public disorder is much less frequent than in Brussels; managers (e.g., madams) are absent; police maintain a visible presence on the street with foot patrols and a police station inside the RLD, and officers routinely visit window workers to monitor their situation; this proactive "community policing" stands in stark contrast to Brussels' intermittent, reactive policing approach (Loopmans and van den Broeck 2011; Weitzer 2014; Willems 2009). With Antwerp and Brussels as a backdrop, we examine Ghent's RLD in terms of a set of internal and external factors: its physical condition and social organization, official regulations pertaining to the RLD, the sex workers who work there and their managers, and the involvement of key actors from city government, the police, the health service, and local residents.

Research Methods and Data Sources

Several data sources were used in this study. First, observations were conducted in Ghent's RLD in 2014 in order to map the configuration and condition of businesses for an objective record of physical arrangements, record the conduct of people on the street and the presence or absence of the police, and note observed street interactions between the sex workers and visitors. Observations were conducted during the day and night and on weekdays and weekends (the first author lived in the RLD in May 2014). Fieldnotes consisted of diagrams and descriptions of physical arrangements and observations of individual behavior and social interactions. The RLD is open access: There are no entry restrictions.

The observations documented routine individual behavior and interactional patterns (as did Aalbers [2005] in Amsterdam) as well as indicators of physical and social disorder. *Physical disorder* has been measured by the presence of litter, garbage, syringes, cigarettes, condoms, empty alcohol bottles, graffiti, and abandoned cars (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). We include buildings that are vacant or in disrepair. *Social disorder* has been measured by persons loitering, consuming alcohol or drugs, being visibly intoxicated, selling drugs, arguing, or fighting (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). We include street harassment, begging, auto congestion (noise and air pollution), and the lack of a visible police presence.

Second, in-depth interviews were conducted between July 2013 and May 2014 with 25 key stakeholders: police officials, social workers, the local health service, and city government officials. Some of our respondents were interviewed in 2013 and again in 2014, which allowed us to document continuities and changes over time. The interviews were designed to gather information on the RLD and to explore the perceptions of and challenges faced by officials responsible for regulating or providing services within the zone. In addition, the second author interviewed 22 sex workers who work in various locations in Ghent, six of whom worked in the RLD at the time of the interviews. Initial access to the sex workers was facilitated by a staff member in the RLD's health center, and additional respondents were contacted via snowball sampling and by approaching some at their window rooms in the RLD.

Third, the authors had exclusive access to a survey of sex workers conducted by the city (Politie Gent 2013). The purpose of the survey was to identify RLD workers' perceptions of safety, experiences with nuisances and other problems, and views of the police who work in the area. The survey was conducted by interviewers who visited each RLD window in 2013. Of the 251 prostitute-waitresses registered at the time, 138 were contacted; 17 declined the interview, resulting in a final sample of 121—an 88 %

response rate.¹ The questionnaire was administered in Dutch, French, German, and Hungarian, and the nationality of the six largest groups of respondents was Hungarian (29 %), Albanian (12 %), Belgian (10 %), French (8 %), Nigerian (8 %), and Dutch (7 %). The results of the survey are presented below in conjunction with our other data.

Supplementary data were used to either confirm or expand on the data described above. These sources include clients' online postings regarding Ghent's RLD² and Ghent newspapers: using the search term "prostitutie Gent," a total of 169 newspaper articles were identified and reviewed for the period January 1, 2012 to July 1, 2014. Finally, on one occasion, the first author was invited to accompany social workers when they visited prostitutes at their workplaces and to observe a police stop-and-search operation in the RLD.

Data analysis involved (1) identification of key internal features of Ghent's RLD (i.e., physical arrangements, social organization, and routine behavior patterns), (2) examination of patterns of intervention by external actors, including the authorities and local residents, (3) documentation of similarities and differences between the Ghent study site and previous findings on Antwerp and Brussels, and (4) contextualization of the findings within the political economy of each city. The paper focuses almost entirely on Ghent, with Antwerp and Brussels serving as comparison cases.

Ghent's Red-Light District

General Characteristics

The first window prostitution building appeared in what would become Ghent's red-light district in 1948, a time when the area was filled with bars and cabarets. The area thus has a long history as an entertainment district. It is a 20-minute walk from the historic center of the city and is unknown to most tourists. Today, the RLD consists of three main streets and a glass-covered arcade, the Glazen Straatje. Some residents live on one of the RLD's streets (Belgradostraat), with others residing in the adjacent neighborhood. Most residents in the area are middle-class, white Belgians (Maesschalck 2014), and the area has experienced substantial gentrification in the past decade. Like Brussels and Antwerp, Ghent's RLD is mostly single-use, revolving around window prostitution. However, just outside the RLD, there are bars, restaurants, shops, a peep show, hotels, and apartments. This RLD is therefore single-

use internally but surrounded by a mixed-use and increasingly gentrifying neighborhood.

The RLD has 101 window units that are occupied in day and night shifts. Rent for a window unit ranges from €100 to €150 per 12-hour shift, and the standard charge for sex is €50 per transaction.³ The sex worker is not required to occupy the window for the entire 12-hour rental period, but she may do so (Boels 2014b). Each building contains one or more window units, and each has a distinctive name and sign—such as Vogue, Venus, Betty Boop, Crazy Cabaret, Bodega, Babylon, Salon de Cupido, and La Seduction.

Government Regulation and Service Provision

The authorities in Ghent circumvent the national law outlawing third-party involvement in prostitution in the following ways. Regulations pertaining to the hotel and catering industry (*horeca*) are applied to window prostitution. The buildings where window prostitution takes place are officially designated as *cafés* or *bars* and the women working in these premises are defined as *waitresses* and their managers as *barkeepers* (Boels 2014b). Visitors will see a list of prices for drinks on the windows and a small bar inside each window building. Few customers purchase a drink, however, instead proceeding directly to sexual activity.

Use of *horeca* regulations gives local authorities much more control over these businesses than their counterparts in Antwerp or Brussels. First, the prostitution *cafés* are licensed like other cafes. Second, in theory, all regulations concerning employment in the *horeca* are applicable. Third, window prostitution cafes are officially designated as "publicly accessible establishments of consumption and amusement," whose managers are required to declare the beginning and end of employment of their personnel within 48 hours, in addition to providing the authorities with other information on their employees. Prostitutes are officially registered as waitresses, not as prostitutes, although the authorities keep a separate list of prostitute-waitresses. Fourth, hygiene in the premises is supposed to conform to the rules governing all *cafés*.

Social workers from the city's Meprosch unit routinely visit the RLD and interview new waitresses in their workplaces. (Formed in 1993, Meprosch includes social workers and police officers and is responsible for prostitution, trafficking, and fake marriages.) During their site visits, the social workers question a new waitress about her motives for engaging in prostitution,⁴ whether she sold sex in her home country (if non-Belgian), her private life (e.g., residence, children, and partner), and whether she has any problems or complaints. The Meprosch team also provides information about safe

¹ The 17 "refusals" included waitresses who were excluded from the survey because they had worked in the RLD only a short time.

² Clients' postings regarding Ghent's RLD were analyzed on the *hookers.nl* website. We reviewed 125 threads containing multiple postings. Additional material was drawn from another discussion board: *ignatzmice.com*. The two sites include postings devoted to Ghent.

³ For a 12-hour shift, the rent for a window in Antwerp is €70–100, and €200 in Brussels.

⁴ In part, this is done to identify individuals who have been coerced.

sex and available services (e.g., the health center in the RLD), their rights and duties (e.g., code of conduct), and ways to avoid pimps and victimization.

Uniformed police officers occasionally drive through the area in cars and undercover officers monitor the area on foot. There is no police station in the RLD and, unlike many other RLDs, police do not conduct uniformed foot patrols, which could deter problems. Moreover, regular uniformed officers can enter a window building only in response to a call for assistance from a waitress or manager (Van Gaever and Lameyse 2013). The Meprosch team of police officers and social workers has responsibility for the RLD, and they are exclusively empowered to enter window premises for monitoring purposes.⁵

Unlike other window prostitution zones in Belgium and the Netherlands, in 2012 Ghent's authorities imposed a *code of conduct* for individuals who work in its RLD. One of the reasons for the introduction of this code was to reduce disorderly behavior in the RLD (see *infra*). The code mandates that the women wear clothing that is not revealing (banning lingerie, bikinis, transparent clothes) and avoid behaving aggressively by calling out to persons on the street, knocking on the window, dancing, or assuming a provocative pose. An official told us that “the only thing they can do is sit and wait.”⁶ Announcing the decree, Mayor Daniel Termont stated that he was not “anti-prostitutes. I'm not a puritan. Far from it! A city like Ghent needs prostitutes, but they have to respect certain rules” (quoted in *The Telegraph* 2012). Violators are subject to a €120 fine. Perceptions of and conformity to the code are discussed below.

Since 1990, the RLD has hosted a health center, Pasop, funded by the government but independently operated. Pasop offers advice regarding health, safe sex practices, health insurance, temporary housing, and psycho-social counseling, and staff members conduct regular outreach visits to women working in the sector. Pasop's presence in the district for more than two decades means that it has established a bedrock of trust within the sector: The women “know very well about our role. When we go to a window, they say ‘yes, you can come in’.”⁷ As a health-oriented organization, Pasop does not encourage women to leave prostitution, but if someone asks for help in exiting, Pasop will assist with this. A staff member pointed out that “a lot of women do not want to get out, and those who do sometimes don't need any help.”⁸ Pasop staff members do ask women questions about how free they are in doing this work, whether they are required to give their earnings to someone else, and their social relationships outside work, but they raise these issues only after they have established some degree of

trust. They make it clear to everyone that they are strictly independent of the police and other government authorities, because any association might jeopardize their capacity to build trust relationships with the women.

Internal Actors and Arrangements

The Unique Role of Managers

Ghent differs from Antwerp and Brussels in the relationship between RLD sex workers and third parties. In Antwerp, the sex workers rent window space directly from a building owner. In Brussels, madams rent a window unit from the building owner and supervise the prostitutes who work for them. In Ghent, prostitution café managers/barkeepers rent space from the building owner, and sex workers typically enter into written contracts with managers in order to occupy the space for a specific period of time. In other words, third parties are heavily involved with window workers in Brussels and Ghent but not in Antwerp.

Managers and building owners are responsible for the upkeep of their premises, although in Ghent they are much freer to do minimal maintenance than are building owners in Antwerp's RLD, who must abide by strict rules imposed and monitored by city officials. Managers are both male and female, and some of the female managers are current or former sex workers. According to information from the Meprosch unit, as of July 2014, there were 22 managers (14 women, 8 men) with a mean age of 42 years. Police conduct a criminal background check on new managers, who are then licensed by the city. Managers are required to make a written contract with each newly hired waitress and register her with both the national social security office and with the Meprosch unit within 48 hours of her employment (including presentation of the woman's identity papers). Failure to do so results in a €1000 fine; social workers who conduct field interviews with new waitresses almost never encounter a woman without a contract, and when they do, the woman is instructed to leave work immediately.⁹

Because of the contract system, waitresses are technically *employees* of the café, not independent operators as in Antwerp. However, managers do not pay a salary to sex workers: sex workers pay money to the manager (i.e., rent to occupy the premises) and then keep the money clients pay to them (insofar they do not have a pimp) (Boels 2014b). Thus, managers' income is primarily based on rent paid by the waitresses. In addition, they receive some profit from beverages clients can buy in the cafes. There are two advantages to Ghent's system: (1) being registered as a waitress shields them from the stigma of having to register as sex workers and (2) their registration entitles them to receive social security and health benefits.

⁵ The exception to this is a special prostitution unit of the federal police.

⁶ Interview with Meprosch official, May 12, 2014.

⁷ Interview with Pasop staff member, May 29, 2014.

⁸ Interview with Pasop staff member, May 29, 2014.

⁹ Interview with Meprosch official, May 23, 2014.

(Managers and waitresses are supposed to pay social security taxes.) The waitresses are not required to register in person; this is done by the café manager on their behalf. Subsequently, social workers visit each new waitress in situ to ensure that she is indeed the person who was registered by the manager. Our interviews with window workers found that they are satisfied with the anonymity provided by Ghent's registration system and the right to receive social security benefits.

Unlike the madams working in Brussels RLD, café managers in Ghent are rarely present in their window cafes. They visit their cafes periodically to pick up rent money, and they are also responsible for stocking the bar with drinks and arranging work schedules. Managers may instruct the waitresses on rules regarding hygiene or other practices, but they do not routinely monitor or supervise workers' behavior, unlike the controlling madams in Brussels (Seinpost 2008). Most of Ghent's managers take a minimalist role. Indeed, "manager" is a misnomer: Instead, they are *middlemen* who rent space from building owners and serve as intermediaries between the sex workers and the local state. Interviews with sex workers confirm that most managers provide little information to workers or instructions on behavior norms, although some do more of both. For instance, whereas one waitress was fully informed about the work by her manager (e.g., standard prices, dealing with clients), another received this information from a cleaning lady. Some, but not all, managers provide soap and tissues; waitresses provide their own bed sheets and condoms.

An official in the Meprosch unit highlighted the advantages of Ghent's system:

I prefer our system because we really have good control over who is working here, and she has rights. If you only rent a room [e.g., Antwerp, Brussels], you don't have any rights. If a girl in Antwerp rents a room and a customer beats her, it is her problem. In Ghent, if a customer beats her, it is a problem for the barkeeper because she is working for him. When a woman was stabbed with a knife and spent weeks in the hospital, the health insurance [paid by the manager] covered her hospital costs. If she worked in Antwerp, she could not have paid the hospital bills. . . . And women know there is a lot of control here by the police, and we know a lot of them. So it is safer for the girls who work in Ghent than in Antwerp or Brussels.¹⁰

Although perceived as superior to Antwerp, Ghent's model is not considered ideal by city authorities, as another official stated:

The situation as it is now, is it good? Not 100 percent. . . . To me, it's ambivalent. Sometimes it comes across as hypocritical [in treating window prostitutes as waitresses]. . . . But our way of working still might be the best because the women receive the possibility of falling back on the social security system due to their employment [as waitresses]. Otherwise they have nothing.¹¹

Sex Workers

Most studies of red-light districts hosting indoor prostitution premises lack data on the sex workers who work in these areas (exceptions include Katsulis 2008; Kelly 2008; Steinfatt 2002). It is important to document how these sex workers experience their work as well as how they perceive any external demands upon them. The present study includes data drawn from multiple sources: semi-structured interviews with a sample of sex workers, observation of social workers' conversations with women at their workplace, and a survey of prostitute-waitresses conducted by the city in 2013.

Official figures show that the four largest groups of registered prostitute-waitresses in 2013 were Hungarian, Belgian, French, and Dutch (see Table 1).¹² The proportion of Hungarians has grown tremendously in just 4 years: from 31 in 2010 to 283 in 2013, while the number of Belgians declined by half during the same period, from 187 to 91. The rapid increase in Hungarian migrant workers has posed challenges for the authorities (communication problems due to language, pimping) and for other sex workers, as discussed below.

The survey of prostitute-waitresses working in the RLD provides unique data on their backgrounds and perceptions and confirms that there has been considerable turnover: Almost half (45 %) had worked in this RLD less than 1 year, 80 % less than 5 years. About one third (30 %) reported that they had worked as a prostitute in another country prior to working in Ghent (Politie Gent 2013).

In the 1990s, there was more cohesion among workers in Ghent's red-light district than now: Most workers were Belgian or French, there was much less turnover over time, older workers explained behavior norms to new ones (how to work, what not to do), and some would socialize after work. Today, there is considerable turnover of workers and greater division

¹¹ Interview with Meprosch police officer, October 11, 2013.

¹² Unlike many other Western European RLDs, very few Bulgarians and Romanians work in Ghent: For the years 2010 through 2013, the number of registered Bulgarians ranged from 4 to 7 and the number of Romanians ranged from 5 to 7. This is due to the fact that individuals from those nations were not permitted to work as employees in Belgium until January 1, 2014—employee status being required of all prostitute-waitresses in Ghent. In other cities, women who work in RLDs are considered independent operators, not employees. As a result, Bulgarians and Romanians migrate to those cities. In Antwerp and Brussels, the vast majority of window prostitutes come from these two countries.

¹⁰ Interview with three Meprosch officials, May 12, 2014.

Table 1 Nationality of RLD workers, four largest groups

	HUNGARIAN	BELGIAN	FRENCH	DUTCH
2013	283	91	45	43
2012	141	146	62	47
2011	92	216	81	54
2010	31	187	80	31

Note: The figures are cumulative totals for each year, not for any particular point in time

Source: Meprosch unit, Ghent

by nationality, making communication and the development of stable relationships difficult. One of our interviewees from the health center, who has worked in the RLD for 20 years, described the current situation:

Over the years, cohesion among the women has decreased. Before, we could count on the women: they were the experts about their work and they organized it together. This is missing today. Now, the stable ones are the minority, and their view is “I mind my own business.” They don’t feel that they are part of a group.¹³

This trend is partly due to the rapid influx of Hungarians over the past 3 years—now comprising the majority of waitresses. It is not unusual for established sex workers to draw invidious distinctions between themselves and newcomers—“othering,” stigmatizing, and shunning the latter (Marttila 2008; Tani 2002). This has occurred in Ghent to some degree. The survey of prostitute-waitresses reported that 15 % had experienced nuisances from other waitresses,¹⁴ and the text accompanying the survey states that, while the survey was being administered, interviewers heard “a lot of complaints about other prostitutes, mainly those of Hungarian descent” (Politie Gent 2013, p. 21). When one of the authors accompanied the Meprosch team visiting women in their windows, the first thing one of them (a Belgian) said to us was, “When are the Hungarians going to leave?”¹⁵ Interviewees explained during our in-depth interviews why the Hungarians are disliked. A Polish waitress remarked:

The problem is that they [Hungarians] do a lot of things for less money. They don’t use a condom very often. Maybe I get fewer clients because of that. I open the door and I hear a lot of stupid questions about kissing, sucking without condom, and this kind of thing. It’s annoying. (SW9, 9/25/2013)

¹³ Interview with Pasop staff member, May 29, 2014.

¹⁴ Hungarians comprised 29 % of the survey sample, so it is possible that the number of waitresses who complain about Hungarians would be higher if the survey was restricted to non-Hungarians.

¹⁵ Fieldnotes, May 23, 2014.

One of the consequences of working under the customary price (€50) is that some clients will then try to negotiate low prices or unsafe sex with other women (Politie Gent 2013, p. 22). A Belgian waitress stated:

Are you going to bargain in the supermarket as well? If it’s €50, ah no, I have a full pushcart [of food] but I’m only going to pay €30! You see what I mean? Those are things I hate. I’ve had a blazing row [with clients asking for a reduced price] at least four times. (SW17, 10/10/2013)

Information from client postings, city officials, and the health service confirms that low prices and unprotected sex are indeed offered by *some* Hungarian workers, especially new arrivals, but also by some other workers. One of the main complaints the health service hears from the women it serves is about the Hungarians, and Pasop’s own discussions with Hungarian workers confirms that they are more likely than others to practice unsafe sex.¹⁶ The fact that some engage in these practices has a diffuse effect on perceptions of an entire group (Hungarians) and can also affect interactions among the sex workers. Indeed, fights occasionally occur over clients and prices. One interviewee took a fatalistic view, believing that nothing can be done about this and that prices are a matter of free choice:

There are girls who saw other girls work for €30 or €40. I’ve seen them getting into a physical fight, saying, “We lose clients because of you; you work under the price so the clients do not come to us.” One day I went to these girls and told them that each girl does what she wants, that they shouldn’t judge: “She came here, there’s an economic crisis, she does what she wants. If she wants to work without a condom, if she wants diseases, well that’s her business.” It’s not up to other girls to judge . . . and you don’t have to slap her; that will not change anything. That is not the way to solve things, everybody just does what she wants. (SW15, 10/11/2013)

Given the competition, jealousy, and lack of trust, the interviewed waitresses believe that the RLD is not the place to establish friendships. Still, when a woman has a publicly visible altercation with a client, most interviewed waitresses said that they would assist her. And some clients report, in online forums, having observed an instance of such intervention.

¹⁶ Regarding the Hungarians, Pasop staff remarked: “We know that some of them have more unsafe sex practices than others. Part of them, not all” (interview with Pasop staff member, May 29, 2014).

Physical and Social Disorder

Regarding physical conditions, our observations indicate that some buildings and walkways in the RLD are in disrepair and there is some litter, but graffiti is absent and the area generally has little physical disorder or decay as measured by the indicators listed earlier in the paper. Conditions inside the buildings vary: Some are clean and upscale but some others are lacking in hygiene or comfort (sinks but not showers, insufficient heating, broken floorboards, peeling paint). None have internal security in the form of alarm buttons, unlike other Belgian and Dutch window RLDs.

Social disorder is manifested in vehicle traffic that slowly cruises the area, creating noise, exhaust fumes, and encroaching on pedestrians who walk on the narrow streets. Disorderly behavior among visitors is rare during the day according to our observations, interviews with sex workers, and police assessments. Police are called approximately once a week, by a sex worker or a manager, to deal with a problem, although an unknown number of reportable violations go unreported to the police.¹⁷ The authors occasionally saw men arguing with a window woman, pushing at an opened door, or spitting on a window—but these incidents were rare during the daytime hours. A window worker who had previously worked in Amsterdam's RLD described it as filled with "drunks, drug users, and tourists," and said that she much preferred Ghent's RLD because "most people here are normal."

Nevertheless, the survey indicates that some women are troubled by various nuisances in the district. One question asks: "How often are you faced with these types of nuisance?" (The options are noise, public urination, litter, drugs, vehicle traffic, voyeurs, assault/violence, theft/burglary, and vandalism.) For none of the nuisances did a majority of respondents say they were frequently bothered. Combining their "often" and "very often" responses, waitresses are most concerned about litter (33 %), voyeurs (*nieuwsgierigen*, i.e., individuals wandering around the area and staring at sex workers) (28 %), noise (22 %), drugs (22 %), and public urination (21 %). (In an earlier government-sponsored survey (2010), the voyeur *nieuwsgierigen* was the main nuisance cited.) Note that for none of the types of nuisances did a *majority* of respondents say they were often or very often bothered.

Although car traffic in the area might bother visitors and residents, it is not a concern of the sex workers (only 12 % said this was often bothersome), and about the same percentage said they were often bothered by theft, violence, or vandalism. According to the sex workers, those responsible for most of the nuisance are drunks, French youth, and drug users/dealers

(Politie Gent 2013, p. 20). Overall, nuisance is more often experienced during the night shift and on weekends. Night shift workers were more likely to hide their valuables and more selective in accepting clients than the day shift workers.

Almost half (44 %) of the sex workers said that they had reported at least one of the nuisances to the police. Regarding the Meprosch unit, three quarters of respondents stated that they were satisfied with their contacts with this team and the same percentage said that they found the team "friendly and respectful," while just over half said they were satisfied with the information provided to them by the Meprosch unit. Our respondents in the Meprosch team corroborated this, "They appreciate that we go there and that we are interested in them. And there is no other organization they can go to in Ghent [except Pasop, the health center]. They don't mind if we talk to them for ten minutes or even half an hour."¹⁸ This was confirmed during the first author's site visits with the Meprosch team, when several waitresses thanked the team and added that they were grateful for the stop-and-search actions conducted by the police.¹⁹

The majority of survey respondents appear to feel safe working in the RLD. Only 16 % said they often or always avoid certain places in the RLD because they do not feel safe there, whereas 60 % said they seldom or never do this. And, 59 % of the respondents said they are seldom or never concerned about leaving the RLD when it is dark, because they are picked up at the workplace by a taxi or a friend—compared to 23 % who are often or always concerned about this. For those who feel unsafe, it is largely because of individuals and groups who loiter in the area. An official identified some reasons why people might feel more unsafe at night:

At night there are more groups, and such groups create more feelings of insecurity. Groups come across as more threatening than individuals. And at night it is less safe than during the day because the people who come at night are different. They don't always come only for the prostitutes but also for other things that can be bought and dealt there, such as drugs. They don't come for that during the day when it is more noticeable.²⁰

According to the survey, sex workers are selective in screening customers. Half will not open the door if the man appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and some have a policy of refusing individuals who appear to be foreigners (Politie Gent 2013, p. 11). Regarding other precautions, 55 % of the waitresses said they often or always avoid bringing valuables to work or hide them due to concern about theft. Some have been robbed of cash earned from their work, however.

¹⁷ Police are called much more often to deal with problems in the bars outside the RLD (interview with three city government officials, May 14, 2014).

¹⁸ Interview with Meprosch officials, May 12, 2014.

¹⁹ Fieldnotes, May 23, 2014.

²⁰ Interview with Meprosch official, July 16, 2013.

The survey findings on safety are consistent with our interview data. Although most interviewed waitresses say that they are not worried about their safety in the RLD, nearly all take precautions such as screening clients, relying on help from other waitresses, and having objects nearby that can serve as weapons (e.g., pepper spray, deodorant, hair spray). A French waitress described her screening methods:

I didn't take foreigners [in the past]. Being more mature, I take foreigners but only if they are not in a group. For those who come alone and are calm, I open my door to talk to them. But the ones who talk to me with gestures? I don't take them. I don't take the ones who are drunk. . . . I don't take blacks. I don't take the ones who are a bit dirty, because there is a limit of hygiene and respect for the girl, even if for them we are just a piece of meat. (SW15, 10/11/2013)

A Polish waitress stated:

If you're working a long time, you have some experience. You smell clients who can cause problems. And normally, if you don't want to take them, you just don't take them. . . . If they are too drunk or they are using drugs, you don't take them. (SW9, 9/25/2013)

Many of the women will not interact with the visiting French youths of Algerian and Tunisian descent—because they have had trouble with them in the past. The arrival of French youths is a recent phenomenon, beginning approximately 2 years ago (Ghent is a 40-minute drive from the French border). Most of these youths are of North African (Algerian, Tunisian) descent and many are intoxicated when they enter the RLD.²¹ We observed women refusing to even converse with these individuals. One window worker describes how these groups of youths annoy her:

They don't have window prostitution in France, so they [the youths] are happy and excited. . . . They see women in lingerie in windows and they totally lose it. So they come here and instead of asking how much, entering, and quickly leaving, they come in a group . . . and say "How much? No, lower your price." Then they linger in front of your window, annoy you all night, and make sure nobody else enters your window. (SW15, 10/11/2013)

Both the survey and interview data indicate that most window workers do not have strongly negative feelings about Ghent's RLD. Only a minority of survey respondents stated that they were often or very often bothered by any of the nuisances covered in the survey and most of them feel safe

working in the RLD. Among the waitresses interviewed, they focused less on Ghent's RLD and more on the advantages of window prostitution generally (e.g., freedom to choose clients and sexual acts, flexible working hours, and retaining earnings rather than sharing them with a manager). Sex workers who have strongly negative views of the RLD tend to work in bars or brothels outside the RLD.²²

Recent Efforts to Enhance Social Control

The characteristics of the RLD described above have impacted recent local policymaking in several ways. Partly as a result of nuisances, a code of conduct (mentioned earlier in the paper) was imposed on RLD waitresses by the authorities in 2012. When asked about the logic of the dress code, a police official stated that allowing women to dress scantily would be tantamount to a "free movie" for onlookers: "We say, if a client wants to see the body, he has to pay for it."²³ Another police official described inappropriate attire and behavior as both a nuisance in itself and as a catalyst of disorder among onlookers:

Some women play a negative role [creating nuisance], in the sense that they dress scantily, very scantily, and then they put on a show . . . dance or tap on the windows. . . . Putting on a show means four or five people in front of that window, then a car stopping, hooting, loud music. And then things get out of hand. Is that nuisance? Yes, of course. What is the cause? The woman putting on a show.²⁴

A member of the team of city government officials responsible for monitoring prostitution elaborated:

If we don't have the rules, maybe they will sit there naked. And it will create more nuisance, because more people will go there just to have a look and this [influx] may even increase the amount of aggression toward the ladies. So, the rule is a kind of protection for them.

Another member of that team argued that, since the area is so close to residents and not in a restricted area, the conduct and attire rules make sense: "This is a living place, not an isolated red-light district."²⁵

²² Interviewed sex workers who worked outside the RLD were critical of the behavior of RLD visitors:

I couldn't do it. And how many Moroccans and Turks pass there just out of curiosity, not even to come in? They see you and they laugh at you. (SW1, 8/9/2013)

When I went to the RLD, I saw people with bottles of vodka, doped people—no, no, no! People piss and spit everywhere. No, I couldn't work there. (SW19, 11/26/2013)

²³ Interview with Meprosch officials, May 12, 2014.

²⁴ Interview with Meprosch police officer, October 11, 2013.

²⁵ Interview with city government officials, May 14, 2014.

²¹ Interview with city official, November 29, 2013.

The survey of sex workers as well as our interviews indicate their strong dislike of the code of conduct. The survey found “much displeasure” about the clothing and behavior requirements in addition to complaints about waitresses who violate the rules with impunity (Politie Gent 2013, p. 22). Despite the fact that violators are subject to a €120 fine, many window women disregard the rules stipulating proper attire and some are quite assertive in trying to lure clients, according to both our observations and client postings in online discussion forums. We observed women disobeying the norms—wearing scanty attire, knocking on their windows and calling out to men, dancing and assuming provocative poses at their windows, and sometimes baring their breasts. Indeed, the *majority* were observed violating at least one of the conduct norms, especially regarding clothing. One of the women we interviewed explained why the rules are violated:

I find it ridiculous. In a convent, nuns wear nun-clothing. In a café, let us wear lingerie. I mean, nobody is obliged to walk here. And is it going to influence the behavior of people in the streets here? Little, I think. (SW6, 9/17/2013)

A similar view was expressed by another waitress, who finds it farcical for a worker in a window RLD, where public display is intrinsic to this type of prostitution, to be required cover up her body. A different kind of complaint comes from waitresses who obey the rules and believe that women who violate them get more customers because they are more animated or appear sexier. However, aggressive solicitation can be counterproductive: Our review of clients’ postings found that some clients dislike and avoid women who are hyperactive or perceived as desperate for clients.

A second innovation designed to increase social control in the RLD is a police crackdown on French youth and other visitors who are deemed responsible for much of the nuisances. To control the French visitors, local police work with their French counterparts in conducting periodic “actions” during which they block the main road entering the RLD and stop and search cars and pedestrians. They check identity cards and search for drugs and weapons (knives, pepper spray, guns). Anyone caught with the latter is given a €250 fine to be paid immediately, and they are then escorted out of Ghent by a police motorcycle. If more than one illegal item is found, the fine is increased (e.g., €500 for two items, €750 for three). Men lacking cash are taken to an ATM to withdraw money, and if they cannot do this, they are arrested and spend a night in jail. Our police interviewees stated that “most pay, because they are scared, and they often ask their friends to pool money to pay the fine.” The officers find drugs or weapons “a lot”—every time they stage a stop-and-search operation.²⁶ One of the authors

observed one such action, during which contraband was indeed found in some of the cars, and other cars were observed being escorted out of town by the police.²⁷

Police actions have been covered by the media. Here too, the focus is on young French visitors, who are portrayed as responsible for most problems in the RLD. The newspaper articles also mention the results of the police actions: the number of cars denied access to the RLD (e.g., 25 out of 30 searched cars in one night [Van Synghel 2013]), the number of persons stopped without an identity card, or the number of cars/persons with illegal items (e.g., 25 cars with a total of 80 occupants on another night [Eeckhout 2014]).

A third type of intervention in the RLD involves the authorities’ responses to local residents’ grievances. In 2012, the mayor of Ghent initiated some meetings with local residents in order to deal with their growing complaints about nuisances in the RLD. Residents had been complaining about a perceived spillover of problems onto their streets—e.g., litter, urination, traffic, and disorderly conduct. After the first meeting with the mayor, residents formed an association that lobbies for changes in the RLD.²⁸ In quarterly meetings, the residents’ group meets with the mayor, barkeepers, city officials, and other stakeholders. The mayor’s stated goal is to find ways of reducing problems, either by instituting changes within the RLD or by relocating the RLD to another area entirely.

Residents who live near the RLD are depicted in the newspapers as supportive of the police operations because they imply that the city takes seriously residents’ complaints about nuisances in the area. At the same time, the articles report that residents want a permanent solution to this problem, rather than periodic operations. While residents are described as grateful for the police actions and want them to continue, they are not regarded as sufficient (Luyten 2012). In a 2014 meeting, for example, the head of the residents’ association congratulated the police for their efforts and results but also argued that the actions are not sustainable given their high cost (Eeckhout 2014).

Ghent lacks a sex worker rights organization, but some sex workers have attended these meetings and one of the reasons the city recently surveyed RLD workers was to gather information about their perceptions and concerns. At meetings, the authorities and some residents have advocated on behalf of the sex workers:

²⁷ Fieldnotes, May 23, 2014.

²⁸ One newspaper article states that the residents’ association started as a pilot project called “government by the neighborhood” in 2012 (Oeyen 2012). Modelled on a Dutch experience, the project brought residents together with police and city officials to discuss local problems and seek solutions. The association has a designated representative who has appeared in the media. The influence of the residents is illustrated by the fact that nearly all of the newspaper articles mention their complaints regarding the RLD. The newspaper account of the association and the mayor’s involvement was confirmed in an interview with a city official, November 6, 2013.

²⁶ Interview with Meprosch officials, May 12, 2014.

Table 2 Characteristics of three red-light districts

	BRUSSELS	ANTWERP	GHENT
Physical disorder	High	Very low	Low
Social disorder	High	Very low	Low/moderate
Sex worker organization	Espace P	Payoke	None
Health agency	Espace P	Ghapro	Pasop
Sex worker nationality—two largest groups	1. Bulgarian 2. Romanian	1. Romanian 2. Bulgarian	1. Hungarian 2. Belgian
Local residents' class position	Working class	Middle class	Middle class
Local residents' ethnic background	Turkish/Moroccan	Mainly white/Belgian	Mainly white/Belgian
Local residents' political influence	Very low	High	Moderate
Local government intervention	Low	High	High
Police involvement	Low	High	Moderate/high

Some residents complain that they hear that some prostitutes are not treated well. They are concerned about the girls. . . . We [city government] want quality of life in this place, and also quality of life for the girls. We say this at every meeting: we are not working only for neighborhood residents, but also for the girls' quality of life.²⁹

The officials defined “quality of life” for sex workers as greater safety, improved working conditions, and the legal rights manifested in the contract they enter into with managers of their workplaces. There is a sense, among these city officials, that sex workers have the right to work in the city just as others have rights to the city.

Conclusion

One of our main research questions centered on the extent to which Ghent's red-light district fits the conventional image of such zones—as dilapidated, anomic, and criminogenic. To address this question, we collected data on both internal arrangements (physical and social) and interventions by external forces (city authorities, the police, and residents who live near the RLD). We find that, unlike Brussels where there is comparatively little external involvement in its RLD, Ghent has been subjected to a relatively high degree of this. Managers of window buildings are monitored, prostitute-waitresses must register with the authorities once they begin working, and the police and social workers are involved in both social control of the area as well as efforts to improve the conditions under which the sex workers conduct their business. Local residents have also increasingly mobilized to affect changes within the RLD.

²⁹ Interview with three city government officials, May 14, 2014. A similar statement was made by another city official in an interview in 2013.

Table 2 summarizes key characteristics of the three Belgian RLDs. The sites differ substantially in physical appearance and social organization. Antwerp's has been thoroughly modernized and cleansed of its former decay and disorder, both physical and social disorder are high in Brussels, and Ghent falls intermediate between the two other cities. Physical disorder is fairly low in Ghent but social disorder fluctuates between low to moderate depending on the day and time. Ghent is currently undergoing significant changes: the rapid growth of a new group of sex workers (Hungarian migrants), the influx of disorderly youths on weekend nights, complaints and pressure for changes from a residents' association reflecting the growing gentrification of the surrounding area, and the efforts of state officials to deal with these developments. Regarding the rapidly changing composition of the workforce, the stigmatization of Hungarians in Ghent has a parallel elsewhere in Western Europe, where the migration of Eastern Europeans to western cities has become controversial and resulted in the denigration of Eastern European prostitutes by native sex workers (Marttila 2008; Tani 2002).

Prior research on Antwerp and Brussels identified three factors that account for their RLDs' stark differences. The first is the radically different governance orientations of each local state and the second is a function of characteristics of the local population (Loopmans and van den Broeck 2011; Seinpost 2008; Sivri 2008; Weitzer 2014; Willems 2009). Brussels RLD is located in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods whose population is mostly Middle-Eastern. The socioeconomic marginalization and ethnic complexion of the community translate into a lack of influence over political authorities. The neighborhood surrounding Antwerp's RLD, by contrast, has been gentrified and now consists of trendy businesses and residences populated by white, middle-class residents. In the 1990s, local residents successfully pressured city officials to tackle problems they associated with the RLD. As a result of the reforms introduced in the early 2000's, residents'

“complaints related to prostitution have stopped almost completely,” according to a city government report (Willems 2009, p. 5).

In Ghent, a segment of the surrounding population has been vocal in the past few years in complaining that disorder is spilling over into their neighborhoods and degrading their quality of life. A residents’ association now meets with city officials regularly, during which they express grievances and offer suggestions for reform. The residents and local merchants are not unified, however: Some want the RLD closed and relocated to another area, while others oppose this and advocate more modest changes that would enhance social control and reduce disorder, while keeping the RLD intact in its traditional, six-decade location (Maesschalck 2014). For the past 2 years, the mayor and other authorities have met with the residents in regular quarterly meetings, intended to resolve problems.

The nature of local government engagement in each RLD is partly (but not entirely) a function of residents’ capacity to influence local authorities, which in turn depends on residents’ class status and ethnic background. As other research has demonstrated, the policies and practices of local government and law enforcement authorities are often influenced by the presence or absence of influential political and economic interests and/or collective mobilization by local, middle-class residents (e.g., Aalbers and Deinema 2012; Hubbard 1998; Kingston 2014; Larsen 1992; Mathieu 2011; Tani 2002; Weitzer 2012; Winchester and White 1988).

It should be noted, however, that neither popular pressure nor elite lobbying is a *necessary* condition for changes in prostitution policy at the national or local level. In Hamburg, for example, residents have played only a minor and intermittent role over the past 15 years vis-à-vis the city’s two red-light districts (Künkel 2012). In Britain, in the early 2000s, repressive national legislation emanated from within the state and was thus largely a top-down process (Hubbard 2004). Recent opinion polls in Britain and France suggest widespread opposition to repressive measures, with a sizeable majority of these populations favoring the legalization of prostitution—65 % in Britain in 2006 and 74 % in France in 2013—and five polls in France between 2011 and 2013 found that 70 to 82 % of respondents opposed a proposed law that would criminalize prostitutes’ clients. Yet the French Assembly passed a bill in 2014 to criminalize clients and impose hefty fines on them.

Similarly, recent changes in Amsterdam with respect to its historic RLD have been driven largely by political elites rather than local residents or merchants. Over the past few years, the mayor and some city councilors have claimed that the area is “out of control,” that crime is rampant, and that the visible vice gives Amsterdam a “bad image” (Municipal Council 2008). Assessments of these claims have concluded that they are gross exaggerations (Aalbers and Deinema 2012; Weitzer 2012), but they have had enough traction to result in closing one quarter of the window rooms, a ban on sexual commerce

between 4 a.m. and 8 a.m., mandatory registration of sex workers, and other changes designed to “cleanse” this RLD, gentrify parts of it, and assert greater control over those who work and visit it. This has been orchestrated by city officials, not driven by local residents. In fact, the latter have mobilized to *prevent* the proposed changes from being implemented (Aalbers and Deinema 2012). Upper-middle-class residents and business owners organized street protests and posted fliers declaring “Hands Off the RLD. Enough is Enough!!!” But they have had no success in resisting the city government’s plans. Their powerlessness is partly due to parallel developments at the national level: Over the past 5 years, the Dutch parliament has debated several measures that seek to assert greater control over prostitution nationwide (Outshoorn 2012). The national-level reforms are largely in sync with Amsterdam’s changes, which makes it especially difficult for local opponents to challenge them. In sum, neither the upper-middle-class status of residents nor the business background of local merchants who reject the “clean-up” agenda has influenced Amsterdam’s city officials. The larger point—with reference to the claims made by some writers (as presented at the beginning of the paper)—is that local residents are not necessarily opposed to “vice districts” in their communities, especially where such areas have a long pedigree and are viewed as contributing to, rather than detracting from, the local quality of life. The same conclusion applies to Antwerp, whose residents are largely content with the city’s red-light district (Weitzer 2014).

A third factor that can play a role in influencing RLD policy is a sex workers’ rights organization. Such an organization, Payoke, played a key role in Antwerp: After its creation in 1988, it “rapidly gained political strength and leverage, and was integrated into local policy networks” (Loopmans and van den Broeck 2011, p. 554). One of Payoke’s two founders was elected to the city council and played a direct role in the reform process in the early 2000s. The counterpart organization in Brussels (Espace P) has a long and respected history but has been much less politically involved than Payoke. And, the formerly influential Dutch prostitutes’ organization, Red Thread, was ignored by Amsterdam’s political elites during the past decade and has now ceased to exist. Ghent lacks a sex workers’ organization entirely, with the result that there is no non-governmental group that can advocate for their interests. The vacuum is filled by other external forces, described in this study.

During the past 2 years in Ghent, city authorities have been assessing conditions in the RLD and considering options for reform. The outcome of this process remains to be seen, but it may result in reforms designed to improve physical conditions, new rules regarding internal amenities and hygiene, increased site visits by government officials, installing CCTV cameras for video monitoring, or conducting more undercover and uniformed police foot patrols to deter misconduct and enhance social control in the zone.

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