Second release of the Interdisciplinary Studies in Sex for Sale series, *Prostitution Research in Context* edited by Marlen Spranger and May-Len Skilbrei is a timely and interdisciplinary collection of essays that explores the specific challenges of doing research about women selling sex. It stems from the joint work that both authors and editors did within the working group *Sex, Money and Society* in the COST Action “Comparing European Prostitution Policies: Understanding Scales and Cultures of Governance” that gathered the most renowned European scholars in the scholarship on sex for sale from different disciplinary and theoretical perspective. This genealogy gives solidity to the ambitious aim of the book: as well explained by the editors in the introductory chapter, in fact, it is not a methodology book that gives tools on how to conduct research in the field, but it aims at promoting a critical reflection on the intersections between the ontology of sex for sale, its epistemology – or the way it can be known and represented – and how the knowledge produced by researchers has implications for policy-making in the field.

A feminist perspective permeates the whole text. However, it doesn’t position itself within the dichotomous debate on abolitionist versus pro-sex work feminism that distinguishes many of the scholarship on sex for sale; throughout the chapters feminism acts rather as an epistemological backdrop that helps framing critically and reflexively the complexities of doing research on sex for sale and highlighting how different epistemologies affect both the research process and its results.

The book develops into three sections that address as many areas of the research process: the politicized feature of the field, the role of the voice of the studied subject and the one of emotions and intimacy. The first section consists of three chapters written by Judith Walkowitz, May-Len Skilbrei and Isabel Crowhurst that analyze from different points of view the relationships between politics and prostitution.
As historians, Judith Walkowitz analyzes the politics of prostitution in the late nineteenth century in Great Britain and discusses the rise of the paradigm of the ‘makeshift economy’ as a frame to interpret the experience of prostitutes beyond the narratives of victimization and degradation. By applying to women prostitutes the critical tool elaborated by Olwen Hufton to describe the survivalist strategies of the laboring poor in the 18th century France, feminist historians were able to describe their experiences beyond the dichotomy forced vs voluntary prostitution, but as historical subjects with specific gender and class constraints and “willful agents, embedded in working class communities, possessing cultural resources and capable of resisting and negotiating with power” (p.24) at the same time. Wolowitz underlines how this theoretical tool allowed historians to grasp the effects of politics on and against prostitution through a more complex and effective lens, but at the same time tended to pay not enough attention to the “motivations and imaginative lives of historical actors” (p.26) leaving the intimate voices of women unheard.

Skilbrei and Crowhurst lead the reader to the 20th century to discuss the nexus between research and policy making in Norway and Italy. By discussing the Norwegian political debate on prostitution and its connection with research over the last 40 years, Skilbrei puts into questions the presumption of scholars to “truly” define what prostitution is, as either work or violence. Drawing upon Foucault’s notion of ‘truth regimes’ Skilbrei analyses how different understandings of prostitution affect both research findings and policy making giving voice to some claims as the truth on prostitution and silencing others; and reminds the readers of the “heterogeneity of what counts as prostitution in the contemporary world” (p.44) claiming for a critical and reflexive attitude of prostitution scholarship in “how we see, ask, think and write” (ibidem).

Crowhurst takes over from Skilbrei and moves forward the analysis of the nexus between the knowledge of and the politics on prostitution. Through the analysis of the prostitution bills presented at the Italian Parliament from 2008 on, she discusses how, in policy making, the lack of knowledge on prostitution does not translate into the acknowledgment of not knowing, but rather in a proliferation of three typologies of absolute knowledge claims: common sense claims – or
prostitution is “the world oldest profession”; self evident absolutes or unfounded statements on the prostitution experiences – for instance “prostitutes always work under slavery conditions”; and number-based claims that quantify – without any reliable data – the numbers of the sex industry in terms of individuals selling or buying or in terms of profits. The chapter displays how these typologies of claims create the frame of intelligibility of prostitution in public and political debate “denying and disavowing the claims and critical voices of whose who point out their limitations and who strive to present an alternative, more nuanced, but also less certain picture of the phenomenon” (p.58).

The second section of the book turns the attention to the role of the people studied in the research process putting into question if researches should be carried out for, about or with sex workers. It is a crucial issue within the sex work research debate and the three chapters that constitute the section allow discussing not only the methodological features of this kind of research but also its political implication. Lorraine Nencel opens the section critically discussing the epistemological principle that privileges sex workers voices in research on sex work, or the involvement of sex workers in the whole research process from data gathering to data analysis. While acknowledging the crucial importance of this principle, the author highlights how it shouldn’t be considered as the only ethical and effective way to produce knowledge on the sex industry and how some well-known assumptions within the pro-sex work scholars, as ‘nothing on us without us’, should be addressed more critically. Rather than only with sex workers, Nencel suggests that critical and effective research can be conducted also for sex workers or acknowledging the differences – both in terms of goals and expertise – between researchers and sex workers.

In the following chapters Carol Harrington and Sealing Cheng carry on the discussion on the involvement of sex workers in the research process from a different perspective. For both authors researching with sex workers is crucial not only in terms of ethical and political positioning, but also in terms of the quality, effectiveness and complexity of knowledge that can be produced. Harrington discusses the transformation of New Zealand research culture by analyzing the
intersections between the standards developed by academic ethics committee to carry on research on Maori together with (and not on) Maori people as well as the fruitful alliance of feminist and sex workers scholars and activists to give voice primarily to women working in the industry. She highlights how these transformations set the collaborative and participatory framework as the hegemonic standard to produce reliable knowledge on the sex industry and to implement policy in the field. Chang discusses the photo-voice methodology as a way to allow self-expression of sex workers in the context of South Korea where the selling of sexual services is highly stigmatized. Drawing extensively on the results of the Pandora Photo collaborative project carried out in the red-light district of Seoul, Chang highlights how the visual method helps both sex workers to take control over the representation of their lives, relationships, and daily challenges beyond stereotyped narratives and researchers to learn to go beyond verbal and written language.

The final section of the book shifts the focus from sex workers to scholars doing research on sex work and discuss the positionality of the researchers during fieldwork. All three chapters reflect upon how class, gender, race, profession shape both researchers’ positioning in fieldwork and the power relationships that can be established between the various actors in the field. Drawing upon her study on Thai migrants selling sex in Denmark, Marlene Spanger discusses the role of emotions in establishing fieldwork relationships both with sex workers and social workers. She discusses how emotions - annoyance, hostility, empathy, and shame – functioned as affective logics that create both proximity and distance between the researchers, the migrant sex workers and social workers and established hierarchies among these three subjects. Emotions are not conceived as merely private feelings, but as the results of the feminist-abolitionist and social policy discourses that act as framework that allows different knowledge to be produced. Jeannet Bjonness discusses how her classed and gendered experiences affects her research on sex work in Denmark. She first highlights how dominant discourses on prostitution in Denmark – like the trope of the ‘victim’ or of ‘male violence’ – initially influenced her relationships with the informants and afterwards how turning to autobiographical method helps her reflecting on how her class background and her moral doxa
influenced the ways she interpreted and represented her informants. Finally, Christian Groes discusses the role of intimacy, race, sexuality, and power drawing upon his study on sex for sale in Mozambique. He discusses the role of ‘seduction’ in fieldwork as a strategy to gain access to the field and as a slippery territory that can position the researcher himself as an object of desire. Critically discussing the unbalance of power between himself – as a middle class white man – and his informants, Groes highlights the structural inequalities of desire – in terms of gender, race and class - and the importance to take on these inequalities in order to do critical and ethical research on sex work.

On the whole Prostitution Research in Context is a high valuable contribution both to feminist and sex work scholarship. For those interested in feminist scholarship it demonstrates once again what fruitful and complex lens feminism can be to understand the social world and the role of researcher within it. To those interested in research in sex work, it offers a mosaic of perspectives of relatively unexplored issues in the scholarship. It helps understanding how different epistemologies on the selling of sex translate into different methodological approaches and affect research findings. This offers both to early career and experienced researcher valuable insights on how to deal with the specific challenges of the studying of sex for sale poses as well as a model to develop academic and political reflexivity in this research field. However, the book focuses only on women selling sex and considers mainly street-based and indoor sexual services. Although women are still the great majority in the industry, and street-based and indoor services are still predominant, the reader would have benefit from some reflections on which specific challenges of knowledge production come into play when sex workers are transgender people or men, and when sex is sold through technologies.