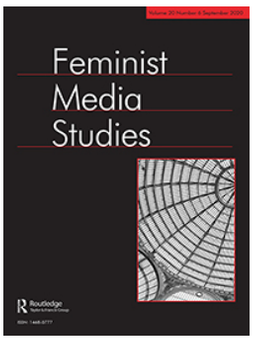

Feminist Media Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfms20

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To cite this article: Yeela Lahav-Raz (2020) Narrative struggles in online arenas: the Facebook feminist sex wars on the Israeli sex industry, Feminist Media Studies, 20:6, 784-800, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2019.1642227

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1642227

FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES
2020, VOL. 20, NO. 6, 784–800
https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1642227

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Narrative struggles in online arenas: the Facebook feminist sex wars on the Israeli sex industry

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze the role of the Israeli online arena in attempts to challenge attitudes toward sex work and the sex industry. By exploring the short history of the "feminist sex wars" that are being conducted on public feminist Facebook pages, I ask whether online activism can really avoid being drawn into the realm of conventional offline politics. The article argues that while the various Facebook pages aimed to alter the landscape of political and public discourse around sex work and the sex industry, they were in fact sucked into the vortex of the existing public discourse surrounding sex work in Israel, forcing them to choose sides in the dialectic sex wars. I conclude that they nonetheless succeeded in establishing a "narrative of influence" which should be analyzed beyond the disappointment of specific policy outcomes. Online activism thus becomes a key platform for both the construction and contestation between different narratives within the sex industry.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 November 2018
Revised 22 May 2019
Accepted 8 July 2019

KEYWORDS
Feminist sex wars; sex work policy; social media; feminist activism

Introduction

On December 31 2018, the Israeli parliament passed the Prohibition on Consumption of Prostitution Law and became the eighth country in the world to join the controversial regulatory experiment of incriminating the clients of the sex industry. The Israeli law reflects a watered-down version of the Nordic Model (i.e., administrative fines with a voluntary alternative of participating in a preventive training course and no criminal record). There is no doubt that the growing international legislation to outlaw prostitution, the significant shift toward criminalization as the preferred strategy for governing commercial sex, and the use of punitive law enforcement to achieve this (Natalie Hammond 2015; Teela Sanders and Rosie Campbell 2014) have had an impact on the political regulation of the Israeli sex market.

The dramatic change that Israel has undergone in its policy toward sex work is the result of an extensive struggle against the country's booming sex industry that began during the late 1990s and early 2000s which was backed by international anti-trafficking organizations. The law to incriminate the clients of the sex industry can be viewed as the success of 12 years of determined efforts led by state actors, NGOs, and journalists, who have spoken

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"on behalf of" women in the sex industry in their attempts to advance a neo-abolitionist[1] perspective and put an end to commercial sex. A relatively new player in this field is the online arena, especially social media networks such as Facebook.

Since 2014, various Israeli feminist activists have opened public Facebook pages on the issue of the Israeli sex industry.[2] The "feminist sex wars" being conducted on these pages became a battleground between conflicting and contradictory narratives. As I go on to show, while state actors and NGOs have maintained the dichotomous paradigm of the sex wars in their view of sex workers as vulnerable subjects in need of protection, the non-state individuals, as manifested on the various Facebook pages, have been trying to move beyond this sex war dialectic. Their purpose was (and still is) to amplify different public voices, to shape and impact policy, and, above all, to offer a nuanced and less polarized view of sex work.

Using mixed methods analysis, I examined the role that the online arena has played in attempts to challenge attitudes toward sex work and the sex industry. While there is no doubt that the online activity had a significant role in building new collective identities for both neo-abolitionist activists and pro-sex work activists, I aim to challenge their ambition to move beyond the sex war dialectic according to which sex workers are either oppressed or empowered. Instead, I argue that while the various Facebook pages were aiming to alter the landscape of political and public discourse around sex work and the sex industry, these feminist activists were sucked into the vortex of the existing public discourse surrounding sex work in Israel, forcing them to do what they were initially trying to avoid doing, namely, choosing sides in the sex-work-as-harm versus sex-work-as-freedom debate. This raises the question of whether online activism can really avoid being drawn into the realm of conventional offline politics which cannot contain such intricacy of voices.

This article concludes that while the feminist sex wars on the Israeli sex industry can be viewed as a failure since they were unsuccessful in achieving their goal of moving beyond the ongoing dichotomy, their impact should be analyzed beyond the disappointment of specific policy outcomes. The Israeli narrative struggles on Facebook are part of a larger story about the ability of feminist activists to build a collective identity based on solidarity and to contribute to the public discourse around the legislative progress. In so doing, online activism becomes a key platform for both the construction and the contestation between different narratives among sex work/prostitution-related activisms, establishing what Eurydice Aroney (2018) has called a "narrative of influence" which, due to its short history, has yet to be fully defined.

I begin with a brief overview of the literature dealing with the ways in which social media and new forms of feminist activism are being integrated. I then present a background on Israel's sex industry regulations, followed by an analysis of the (short) history of the Israeli online feminist sex wars, drawing from different feminist Facebook campaigns.

Social media and feminist activism

Social media seems set to become an ever-growing foundation for everyday relationships (Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razyan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, et al. 2016) and has given us the potential to communicate in a participatory and nonhierarchical fashion and to present new public spheres

(Meyran Boniel-Nissim and Azy Barak 2013). I adopt Miller et al.'s (2016) perception that technology creates potentials and Aristea Fotopoulou's (2016) view of the digital networked culture as a space of tensions and contradictions. These potentials create new opportunities for political struggle among excluded groups, and it has thus been argued that social media may be the ideal setting for collective action (Paolo Gerbaudo and Emiliano Treré 2015; Azi Lev-On and Nili Steinfeld 2018; Sebastián Valenzuela 2013).

Since social media is a platform in which new identities are forged and challenged (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015), it has become a focal point for subordinated groups to create subaltern counterpublics that permit them to formulate opposing interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (William K. Carroll and Robert A. Hackett 2006). For instance, during the past few decades, cyberspace has allowed various possibilities for sex commerce (Chris Ashford 2008; Mojca Pajnik, Nelli Kambouri, Matthieu Renault, and Iztok Sori 2016) such as the creation of online communities of both sex industry clients (Thomas J. Holt and Kristie R. Blevins 2007; Teela Sanders 2008) and sex workers, with the latter offering peer support and professional networking as well as online activism in public and private social media groups (Teela Sanders, Jane Scoular, Rosie Campbell, Jane Pitcher, and Stewart Cunningham 2018). We should, however, be critical of this optimistic notion of cyberspace. Scholars (Monique Huysamen and Floretta Boonzaier 2018; Yeela Lahav-Raz 2017) has shown how clients may use online spaces to post negative, racist and degrading reviews of sex workers, or for instance in the US, how the wake of SESTA/FOSTA,[3] online resources such as "Bad Date Lists" used by sex workers to share information on bad or dangerous clients, are being censored or vanishing entirely, leaving them vulnerable to abuse.

By adopting the framework of the post-feminist digital culture in which social media provides new tools for self-presentation while also often emerging as highly conservative due to the ongoing gendered aspect, I believe that technology, in and of itself, is neither patriarchal nor liberating. The very form of cyberspace interactions inflected by and thus reflective of hegemonic norms of patriarchy as well as transphobia, whorephobia, racism, and other intersecting hegemonic oppression. Thus, Cyberculture has far from achieved freedom from gender constraints and oppressions, and conventional power relations work their way into online interactions, particularly in the case of the Israeli online feminist sex wars.

The term "feminist sex wars" first emerged at the controversial 1982 conference "Towards a Politics of Sexuality" at Barnard College. The term refers to the debate between different and contradictory feminist perceptions on several issues broadly relating to sexuality, sexual activity, and sexual agency (Ann Ferguson 1984). According to Bernadette Barton (2002), the feminist sex wars on the issue of sex work were being waged most fiercely between two equally extreme and reductionist positions: (1) radical feminists,[4] who find any kind of sex work, and often even sexuality itself, inherently and irrevocably exploitative within patriarchy; and (2) sex radical feminists,[5] who see sex work as subverting patriarchy's definition of conventional femininity and who therefore strongly support the right of sex workers to perform erotic labor. This framework created a polarized discussion according to which sex work is either oppressive or liberating; sex workers are either striving for pleasure or subject to danger. Alison Phipps (2017) thus argued that within the framework of the sex wars, sex workers become either helpless victims or privileged promoters of the industry, which leaves little room for discussions about their multilayered and diverse human experiences.

The framework for the feminist sex wars was established more than 40 years ago. However, the debate seems to be heating up again due to the global clout of dynamic sex work policy, carried along by either the Nordic infiltration of incriminating the clients of the sex industry or, on the contrary, the flourishing global network of sex work projects, as well as the positions, advanced by NGOs such as the World Health Organization and Amnesty International who support the decriminalization model. The reenergized debate has had a huge influence on the Israeli online feminist sex wars which derive from both global and local efforts to change sex work policy and the emergence of new social media activism among non-state actors.

Despite global sex work movement (Theresa Anasti 2017), Israel has, until recently, lacked any traditions of sex worker organizations, thus explaining why Facebook, the most popular SNS in Israel[6] (Nicholas A. John and Shira Dvir-Gvirsman 2015) has become an alternative "organization" for different and often opposing voices in this field and a bourgeoning arena for feminist sex wars. Since involvement in the sex industry involves stigmatization, online platforms where one can remain anonymous can assist both the online and offline worlds of activism. However, as Shawna Ferris and Danielle Allard (2016) showed, sex work debates are conducted in a sociopolitical climate that is largely hostile to sex work and sex workers. This is especially true in the online arena where, even though many sex workers and sex worker activists are women, feminist communities are not always safe spaces for them. As I will show, the Israeli online feminist sex wars reveal the interplay between global and local activism and sex work/prostitution-related policies.

Sex industry regulations in Israel

The efforts to change Israel's sex work policy began in the early 2000s when human rights and women's organizations lobbied the government to crack down on sex trafficking. Since their entreaties fell on deaf ears, they decided to take their campaign global and brought the issue before the United Nations and a US Congressional Committee (Rebecca Hughes 2018). Thus, due to political lobbying by Israeli parliament members and pressure by the US State Department, what started as a prohibition on the sex trafficking of migrant women, mainly from the FSU and pursuit of global sex trafficking organizations soon extended to local sex industry regulations.

Shulamit Almog (2016) stated that Israel, like many other countries, was dealing with two main conflicting ideas: the sex work narrative and the prostitution-as-harm narrative. Until 2011, Israeli law supported a softened version of the sex work narrative. The sex industry existed in a legal gray area: while pimping, owning a brothel, and advertising were illegal, purchasing sex and being a sex worker were legal. Since 2011, various laws supporting the prostitution-as-harm narrative have been in different stages of legislation.[7] These laws have earned overwhelming support in the Knesset from both the coalition government and the opposition. The legislative change is not only the result of efforts by both coalition and opposition MKs, but it is also due to collaboration between feminist MKs from both ends of the political and ideological map: right-wing national-religious and ultra-orthodox Jewish feminists on the one hand and left-wing secular radical feminists on the other.

There is no doubt that this collaboration contributed to the endorsement of the various legislations. However, to understand the whole story, attention must be paid to

the growing online arena that enabled new activists to make visible the once highly private experiences of women's lives. While I cannot conclusively determine that Facebook campaigns had a direct impact on policymakers, I will show that the growing cyberspace arena was the spark that ignited the feminist sex wars in Israeli public discussion. These campaigns played a role in intensifying different voices both within and outside of the sex industry. These are the voices of non-state actors—some are sex worker activists, and some are neo-abolitionist activists—who created Facebook campaigns to promote and sometimes alter policy decisions. While not all of their actions can be viewed as successful, their impact on policymaking should be analyzed under Aroney's (2018) "narrative of influence." By focusing on the 1975 French sex workers' strike which was judged by scholars as a failure, Aroney (2018) showed that by defining and amplifying a set of shared grievances recognizable across borders, the strike was, in fact, a significant cultural achievement for the French sex workers' movement. Despite the differences between the French and Israeli cases and it being too soon to determine which kind of influence the Israeli online sex wars will have, their activities should be analyzed beyond the disappointment of specific policy outcomes.

Following a brief explanation of data collection and method, I will return to the analysis of the online feminist sex wars that Israel's cyberspace arena is now facing.

Method

In order to discover the ways in which social media activism integrated with and influenced sex industry regulations, I combined mixed methods including (1) contact analysis of six different public Facebook pages, all conducted in Hebrew. (2) Four in-depth interviews with feminist activists who are the admins of those pages, and (3) ethnographic observations conducted between 2016–2018 that encompassed gatherings, protests, and lectures run by the admins of those pages. These combined methods aimed to assess the consequences of the ways in which feminist activists use social media and to question whether they construct cultural alignment. In other words, I was looking to examine mechanisms through which the use of social media, such as Facebook, translates into increased protest activity both offline and online and thus leads to political action and influences sex work policy. My analysis was based on J. Corbin and A. Strauss' (2008) Grounded Theory with its three-stage process of open, axial, and selective coding, which progressively identifies and integrates categories of meaning from the text data sample.

The (short) history of the Israeli online feminist sex wars

On September 27 2014, a feminist activist called Tali Koral started a Facebook campaign called "When He Pays" (WHP),[8] based on quotes written by men reviewing their experiences with women in prostitution. Koral, then a volunteer in TODAA,[9] felt that the legislative process toward the criminalization of buyers of sex was stuck. She was not mistaken. While the legislation had been initiated in 2007 in the 17th Knesset by a left-wing and radical feminist MK Zehava Galon, it was only in 2012 that another MK, Orit Zuarets, succeeded in passing the Prohibition of Consumption of Prostitution and

Community Treatment bill in a preliminary reading. It then remained orphaned for the next five years.

This procrastination in the legislative processes motivated Koral to act creatively. After her exposure to a British Tumblr campaign called "The Invisible Men,"[10] she decided to create an Israeli version. The page was a success from the very start. In an interview I conducted with her she expressed the belief that the various neo-abolitionist NGOs operating in the field until then had been promoting what she considered to be an extreme narrative—the prostitution-as-harm narrative:

> I was interested in the gray areas of the johns' experiences … I wanted to present them without the extreme narratives that the NGOs promote. I didn't want to start with a data campaign about prostitution, because I knew that if I wrote it like that, people would stigmatize it as just another feminist project, another NGO project, another project about victimizing prostitution, and I wanted to get away from that. I deliberately wanted something neutral. The thing itself. By the way, it was so successful that at first, some people thought it was a page on behalf of the johns.

The extensive exposure of her WHP Facebook page inspired a new public discourse that had, until then, ignored the clients' perspectives. The evolution of democratic media activism that enables clients of the sex industry sharing their sexual experiences also allows activists like Koral to criticize them and expose their activities and actions. It also enabled her to promote greater awareness among various activists and to move beyond the sex war dichotomy paradigm. This led her to open another Facebook page in 2015, "When He Pays. Me" (WHP.M),[11] which aimed to present the narratives of the women actually involved in the industry. She said that many sex workers she knew from volunteering in TODAA were angry at her for opening WHP, because they did not like the demonization of buyers of sex in the public arena. She, therefore, started WHP.M in an attempt to reflect both sides, namely, the clients and the sex workers.

Content analysis of the various testimonies written by women on WHP.M revealed that while Koral wanted to promote a complex and alternative narrative to the NGOs hegemonic narrative, most of the testimonies, in fact, support the prostitution-as-harm narrative. This is clear from the following anonymous testimony which was uploaded on October 25 2015:

> Why aren't you shaved? Why don't you moan? Why don't you cry? Why aren't you smiling? They remind each time that as a whore, I'm a human trash can, I'm a device to meet their needs. I'm enslaved to their needs and desires. They don't need to ask or consider my needs … When I work, I get a slap right in my face. Every time. If not physically, then metaphorically.

Although WHP.M didn't gain the same massive exposure and popularity as WHP,[12] both campaigns changed the Israeli public discourse about the sex industry completely. The texts were reposted and shared by many individual activists and on the Facebook pages of politicians and aid organizations. For example, on December 12 2015, MK Zehava Galon, the initiator of the law on the criminalization of buyers of sex, shared the WHP.M page on her public Facebook profile. Her post received 3500 likes, 103 comments, and 850 shares:

> There is little to add to this testimony of a woman writing in this new project "WHP. Me" … to consume prostitution is a crime, and it is time that the State of Israel recognized it as

> such. In recent years, along with other MKs and organizations, I have been promoting a bill to incriminate the clients of prostitution … . Share this important campaign, read this and other testimonies.

The popularity of both of Koral's pages demonstrates the argument put forth by Jakob Svensson (2009) that social media like Facebook, while not intentionally designed to produce social change, still constitutes a political act. Yet, this popularity became a double-edged sword for Koral's online activism, because many did not understand the purpose of the pages and reported them to Facebook as offensive. Facebook's management responded by blocking WHP several times. This was accompanied by extensive media exposure; thus, paradoxically, reinforcing public resonance: the page's growth rate of 3000 likes per annum became its monthly growth rate. On September 21 2016, after Facebook blocked the page once again, MK Galon shared a post taken from WHP on her public profile. The post gained 2300 likes, 102 comments, and 384 shares:

> I took this horror from the important page called "WHP" … Tali Koral, the brave woman who runs the page, was blocked again yesterday by Facebook … . Every week, Koral manages to overcome the nausea, dive into the dark forums of these men, and take away their monstrous stories, so that no one can continue telling us the usual lies about how women "choose it" or "enjoy it" … .Koral's blocking is an excellent opportunity to do two things: to recommend you to go onto her page … and to update you about the statutes of the law.

Beside politicians such as MK Galon, another key player in increasing the popularity of Koral's campaigns was the Facebook page of Task Force Against Human Trafficking,[13] an NGO working with civil society organizations and MKs from across the political spectrum in order to promote the neo-abolitionist model of prostitution. They shared many of the posts that Koral uploaded, thus creating widespread public support for both of her campaigns. According to Jose Marichal (2013), the growth of social networking sites like Facebook can also teach us the difference between conventional activism and media activism. According to Carroll and Hackett (2006), conventional activism makes strategic use of the media as a means toward some other political end. Media activism, on the other hand, can be seen as a reflexive form of activism that treats communication as both the means and end of the struggle simultaneously. However, despite this analytical difference, the line between the two is, in practice, unclear.

Koral's media activism is reflected in her attempt to publicize the voices within the sex industry, both the clients and the sex workers. Her initial aim was to create a discourse calling for a less polarized exploration of sex work and to express thus the political identity of those involved without formally or publicly requesting rigorous real-life activism or engagement in political power. Unlike Koral, MK Galon and the Task Force Against Human Trafficking—both well-established actors—tried to use Facebook as a more conventional arena for the intentional and deliberate call to action. They tried to promote social and political change by fostering the neo-abolitionist position, which was not Koral's initial aim. Although Koral defines herself as a neo-abolitionist activist, she does not support the law to criminalize buyers of sex:

> I know that many people thought that the campaign was a kind of propaganda for the law, but for me, it was never about that … .My intention with the campaign was not to demonize and incriminate clients. My intention was to deepen the discourse so that it would be more than the total clichés used by the NGOs.

Although Koral's initial intention was to create anonymous campaigns, her online activism has changed over time due to the popularity of her campaigns. She has thus been involved in offline activist actions such as collaborating with other organizations in video and animated campaigns, lecturing, and participating in Knesset sessions.

Chain reaction

The evolution of the WHP and WHP.M campaigns not only brought Korel into grassroots activism but also had an important impact on the various individual activists who decided to start different public Facebook pages on the issue. None of those gained the same popularity as WHP and WHP.M, receiving between 450 and 2,600 likes. Yet, the number of likes does not necessarily reflect the impact of these pages on public opinion and policymakers. As Michael S. Bernstein, Eytan Bakshy, Moira Burke, and Brian Karrer (2013) claimed, there is a fundamental mismatch between the size of the perceived audience and the actual audience of a social network site. According to all the admins that I interviewed, the content they post is difficult and often pornographic in its nature, and thus the number of likes does not reflect the extent of their campaigns' exposure.

In September 2016, after the Facebook blocking and WHP's subsequent wide exposure and alongside progress in the legislative process, three new Facebook pages were created, inspired by Koral's campaigns. The first, "The Discreet,"[14] stated that its aim was "knowing the men who pay for sex and the world they create. How come they manage to remain anonymous and in the dark?" The page was initiated by activists who wanted to promote the law criminalizing buyers of sex. They decided to open a public Facebook page in order to share theoretical articles and data about clients. Neta, a neo-abolitionist activist who is one of the admins, explained in her interview that they wanted to be the "WHP for the masses … we wanted to translate Tali's page into a common language; a lot of people didn't understand what Tali was doing, so we wanted to fill the gap."

Although they sensed that "The Discreet" had got public exposure, they decided to open another Facebook page, "Coming to the Lecher,"[15] in order to encourage grassroots activism such as demonstrating in front of strip clubs and brothels and protesting in front of public figures who had expressed support for the legalization of prostitution. On December 22 2016, they organized their first demonstration in front of a strip club in Tel Aviv. I participated in this demonstration. The protesters confronted the police while carrying signs calling the clients "rapists" and declaring that "prostitution is not a free choice" and "prostitution is murder." While this grassroots activism didn't last long, it had a significant impact on public opinion by creating the language used today in Israel to refer to buyers of sex; if in the past they had been given neutral names such as clients, consumers, customers, or buyers of sex, "Coming to the Lecher" insisted on calling them *zanai* (the Hebrew word for a lecher). The Hebrew word for a prostitute is *zona*, and their purpose, according to Neta, was to transfer the social disgrace from the prostitute (*zona*) to the lecher (*zanai*). Proof of their linguistic success can be seen in the letter sent on March 12 2017 by MK Aliza Lavie, chair of the Subcommittee on Combating Human Trafficking and Prostitution, to the head of the Hebrew Language Academy calling for the word *zanai* to be defined in the Hebrew dictionary as a "consumer of prostitution."

In addition to those two pages, they also opened an open public group with the name "The Lobby against Lechers,"[16] with the aim of creating a non-party political

pressure group working to convince policymakers to adopt the Nordic Model. When I asked Neta about the differences between the three Facebook pages, she answered:

> "Coming to the Lecher" is grassroots activism. On "The Discreet" page it was like revealing the mechanism of horror. If we compare this to the Holocaust, let's say that "The Discreet'" tells us what's going on in the ghettos and "The Lobby against Lechers" tell us what's going on in the society that lives alongside the ghettos.

While this is, undoubtedly, a harsh analogy, it demonstrates the depth of the activity and the accompanying emotional investment. The desire for "The Discreet" to be the "WHP for the masses" led to the adoption of various discursive strategies that went far beyond the primary goals of WHP. While Koral had tried to create a complex and multilayered discourse, "The Discreet," "Coming to the Lecher," and "The Lobby against Lechers" lacked its complexity and presented a dichotomous position that matched the radical feminists' conception of the feminist sex wars.

Moving beyond dichotomy?

In 2017, the establishment of a new Facebook page, "When She Works" (WSW), with four anonymous admins all currently or previously involved in the sex industry, kicked off the online feminist sex wars. In an art fanzine called "Gender Tuck" that was published in April 2018, Raven, one of the admins, explained that the reason for opening the page was to expose what she called "the gray areas of life":

> We opened the page when we understood that women in the sex industry don't have a place in the social media radical discussions which are binary. Opinions are either black or white … there is a very large gray area that should be discussed.[17]

Raven's words reflect the two integrated processes that led to the establishment of WSW: the various aforementioned successful Facebook pages that had strengthened public awareness of the prostitution-as-harm narrative and progress in the law to criminalize buyers of sex, which was passed on July 19 2017 with 74 MKs (of a total of 120 MKs) voting in favor.

The creation of WSW, drawn from the need to oppose the legislation process, was no less than a revolution in Israel's online public discourse. While cyberspace and conventional media focused mainly on the humiliating, exploitative, and harmful aspects of the sex industry, WSW tried, for the first time, to create a safe space for Israeli sex workers to end criminalization and reduce the stigma. A.,[18] a former sex worker and one of the initiators of WSW, explained that:

> The initial goal was to create a safe space for female sex workers where they can write and share their feelings … we tried to destigmatize each other in the sense that if you read someone else's experiences that actually talk about your own experiences, then you feel much less ashamed and alone … .throughout the discussions, we understood that we are actually the strength and visibility of this industry. We are the voice that the Israeli public and Facebook crowd have never heard before.

On March 16 2018, I attended the first Freaky Femi Friday (FFF), a feminist festival that took place in Tel Aviv. A. gave a lecture called "Keyboard Feminism and the Destigmatization of Sex Work," in which she said that:

> Public discourse takes place above the heads of women in prostitution. Those whose voices are being heard are women represented by aid organizations that promote a discourse full of myths such as "everyone involved in the sex industry was sexually abused in childhood." But this is a stigma and, as we have seen, the stigma kills. It kills us.

A. stated what Hammond (2015) also claimed, namely, that the politics of prostitution denies the ability of those actually involved in the industry to express their opinions about the policies that directly concern and affect them. WSW claims that the Israeli legislative progress toward a neo-abolitionist model of prostitution does not consider sex workers' voices despite evidence from around the world of the need to involve sex workers themselves in the law-making process and monitoring practices. WSW attempts to present a compound feminist perspective of involvement in the sex industry, as they declare on their page:

> We do not encourage prostitution … There is no such thing as "the happy hooker." The reality is complex, and we are here to talk about this complexity … .We are not in favour of legalizing prostitution, but we do oppose its criminalization … .The world of the sex industry is wide and diverse. Trying to narrow it down and present only one narrative is not a feminist act … it's time to stop this dichotomy.

It is thus clear that WSW is trying to move beyond the polarity of the feminist sex wars. However, as I go on to show, their online activism can be framed within a sex-radical feminist perception. This is partially because of their popularity, as they soon discovered, became a double-edged sword. As Victoria Pitts (2004) and Rahul Gairola (2002) showed, the project of redefining the self is not always liberating and may actually compound social pressures that already exist for women. A. explained that WSW was facing a harsh backlash from the Israeli feminist movement, especially from SWERFs,[19] which claimed that since anonymous admins ran the page, there was no way of knowing whether they were just pimps or clients creating fake posts.

Both of the WSW admins I interviewed expressed similar claims to Ferris and Allard (2016) about the hostility sex workers face when trying to talk about their experiences in feminist communities. Eden, a stripper and one of the WSW admins, stated that Israeli online feminism and feminist communities deny sex workers their own subjective experience. A. explained that the public feminist discourse is full of prejudices drawn from almost a decade of promoting "victimized prostitute" narratives. This can also be seen in a post uploaded on WSW by a sex worker on July 2 2018:

> Recently I have noticed something absurd: whenever I have been treated with disrespect and contempt, it has always been by a woman who argues that she is fighting for other women. It never comes from a client. How does that make sense? We exist. We have the right to express ourselves. Stop underestimating us.

According to Eden and A., the feminist public's hostility derives from the popularity of the WHP page, the global endorsement of the criminalization of buyers of sex, the trafficking discourse, and the domination of the prostitution-as-harm narrative over the sex work narrative. This demonstrates that the internet is not necessarily a separate virtual world (Daniel Miller and Don Slater 2000) but that global anti-trafficking organizations in fact influence local activist campaigns. Contact analysis of WSW posts revealed their movement between and beyond dominant discourses in their attempt to reflect

the range of voices expressed by women within the industry. For example, in a post uploaded on July 1 2018, Lilach[20] stated:

> So I turned to a somewhat controversial area, something I had always wanted to do but was afraid of the stigma. Ultimately, I always wanted to be a whore: to be my own boss, to set the amounts of money and the hours, to choose my clients. It's perfect! So I went for it, and it is among the decisions I'm most pleased with. I enjoy working, making money … so yes, I'm a whore out of free choice, and I'm happy!

This testimony corresponds with Ronald Weitzer's (2018) claim about sex workers' individual-level resistance such as expressing control of their working conditions and defining sex work as a service profession like any other. Alongside such testimonies, there are also posts reflecting the effort to present complex, profound, and contradictory narratives. In a post from September 3 2017, an anonymous sex worker wrote:

> The world of prostitution is wide and complex. It has amazing things, and it has things that are not so amazing … we are not all the same. You cannot compare the experiences of a 12-year-old prostitute to the experiences of a 19-year-old student in a luxury apartment or the experiences of a 29-year-old BDSM queen or the experiences of a woman who was kidnapped from the FSU and is now sleeping with 30 men a day. We may all be sex workers, but we are not all the same.

Although WSW aims to promote a multilayered narrative, it is not accepted as such by the admins of the other Facebook campaigns nor by other feminist communities. For instance, Neta echoed Phipps's (2017) argument about the way that sex worker activists who believe that decriminalization will mitigate the dangers of their work are often reconstructed as privileged promoters of the industry who put other women in danger:

> I'm not in favour of silencing them, but I think their voices do not reflect the large percentage of those who are hurt by prostitution. Although they have the full right to express themselves, they are not voices that really reflect what happens in prostitution … I think they are coming from such a narrow and limited perspective that they cannot grasp the change we are offering.

Koral agreed with Neta that WSW's voice is marginal, but she presented a softer perception of WSW than Neta:

> From the very outset, I shared their campaign at WHP.M, because I believe that we should give space to complexity. I am very angry when WSW is accused of being pimps. What made them think that if someone writes about prostitution from an empowered position, it can't be real? I understand why they opened WSW. They feel silenced by the media that is controlled by the radical feminist lobby which sees them as victims.

Though WSW's initial aim was to give voice to sex workers, as the legislative efforts progressed, their online activism becomes more professional and strategic, turning into grassroots activism such as organized meetings where people could meet sex workers and listen to their experiences. These meetings were organized by two feminist activists who were not from within the industry but were inspired by the page called "Nothing About Us Without Us." They took place in bars in Tel Aviv and in both of the meetings I attended, WSW admins acted as the leading spokespersons. The meetings aimed to challenge patterns of knowledge and power that, according to Marisa N. Fassi (2015), give superiority to

ostensibly expert knowledge above and beyond the claims, experiences, knowledge, and needs of sex workers themselves as meaningful sources for lawmaking. Two other examples of grassroots activism that grew out of the WSW page were the stripper protest and the establishment of Argaman—the Organization of Working Women.[21]

The stripper protest took place in Tel Aviv on May 3 2018, against the proposed law to ban strip clubs and define lap dancing an act of prostitution. The strippers, all wearing masks, held signs protesting the stigma attached to strippers, with slogans such as: "I'm a feminist stripper," "let us dance in peace," "stigma kill" etc. This first protest of its kind in Israel's history attracted the media and got wide coverage. Eden, the initiator of the stripper protest, explained that: "There are women who want to be strippers. You can't close a woman's workplace without talking to her first." (see Figure 1)

Argaman, WSW's newest development, is an attempt to establish a formal organization of Israeli sex workers. WSW understood that they could only influence public opinion and policymakers by combining their online activities with more organized grassroots activism. Inspired by sex work organizations around the world, they chose the name Argaman (the Hebrew word for the colour scarlet) and the red umbrella as their logo.

During their brief existence, Argaman have created a political lobby, met with MKs, and participated in all discussions relevant to the subject of sex work. As with the majority of sex workers' rights movements around the world, Argaman supports the decriminalization of sex work. They initiate meetings with activists from Israel and around the world to get inspiration, ideas, encouragement, and advice. They have held demonstrations and conferences at academic institutions, managed online protests both inside and outside of Facebook, and have been interviewed by the media. While it can be claimed that they have failed to achieve their major institutional goal of preventing Israel from adopting the Nordic Model, I argue that their achievements should be examined beyond the accomplishment of immediate concrete gains. According to this line of thinking, they have established Aroney's (2018) aforementioned

Figure 1. Photographs from the stripper protest, May 3 2018, Tel Aviv (source: author).

"narrative of influence." While it is too soon to determine which kind of influence Argaman will have, there is no doubt that its activities, both online and offline, have already enabled Israeli sex workers to realize the potential of collective action for challenging authorities and injustice. The establishment of Argaman should thus be viewed as a significant cultural achievement for the Israeli sex workers' movement.

Conclusion

The Israeli online feminist sex wars constitute a useful case study with which to examine the complexity involved in using digital tools to effect social and political change. The two main campaigns—WHP and WSW—aim to present the "gray areas" in life and hence to oppose the sex wars' reductionist agendas. They call for the adoption of grassroots legislation that derives from the active involvement of those who are most affected by the laws and incorporates their experience, knowledge, and claims.

However, my analysis shows that these goals have not been achieved. State actors such as politicians and aid organizations as well as some of the other Facebook pages have "hijacked" the complex narrative that WHP was trying to produce. In their act of translation and simplification, these actors deprived the narrative of its complexity and used it as a way to advance the prostitution-as-harm narrative and neo-abolitionist legislation. This reflects David Levin's (2012) claim that a protest may mobilize support via the internet, but in order to affect public discourse, it still requires legitimization by the traditional state actors. The democratic process is thus, according to Fassi (2015), closed to those who do not have access to the relevant social, economic, or cultural capital and who are denied status as political subjects. The same is true regarding WSW. In light of the harsh backlash they experienced from feminist communities and alongside the progress of legislative processes, they were also forced to sharpen their attitudes and waiver their aim of moving between and beyond the sex war dialectic.

Although both WHP and WSW were prevented from transforming the public discourse around sex work and making it more nuanced, online feminist activism should be evaluated beyond merely the achievement of immediate concrete gains. While the Israeli sex wars may not have been around for very long and are constantly expanding, they still have the capacity to teach us about how social media activism serves to amplify various feminist voices around the issue of sex market regulations by building different collective identities. The vibrant online feminist sex wars in Israel can be seen to reflect Gerbaudo and Treré's (2015) assertion that social media often leads to the proliferation of collective "we"s and allows them to demand recognition in the political process.

Furthermore, one cannot ignore the various achievements of Facebook campaigns. WHP has succeeded in creating public debates on the role and responsibility of clients in driving the sex industry. "The Discreet," "Coming to the Lecher," and "The Lobby against Lechers" not only promoted the neo-abolitionist legislation but also changed the language used for clients in public discourse. WSW has succeeded in being the first in Israel to present the life experience of sex workers. By opposing the prostitution-as-harm narrative and establishing the sex work narrative, they created a community of solidarity from which Argaman emerged. Women's own personal writings about their experience in the sex industry can, according to Pitts (2004), generate knowledge that is independent from the hegemonic discourse promoted by the main actors in the field.

I, therefore, conclude that the Israeli online feminist sex wars on Facebook should be seen as more than simply the achievements of specific policy outcomes. By being part of the larger story, namely, the ability of feminist activists to build a collective identity based on solidarity at both ends of the spectrum and to contribute to the public discourse around the legislative progress, they have established a "narrative of influence" (Aroney 2018). This explains Miller et al.'s (2016) claim that digital technologies are not inherently transformative or conservative but rather exist only through variable social practice. Online activism has become an effective tool for motivating social change, especially when combined with other grassroots activism, either among the supporters of the prostitution-as-harm narrative or among the sex work narrative advocates. Therefore, the vibrancy of the Israeli online feminist sex wars reveals the interplay between online activism and offline politics, the global and the local, and, in particular, the interplay between different sex work policies and the way they are influenced by online pressure groups.

Notes

1. Sex Work activists worldwide, especially sex workers of color, have criticized the use of the term abolitionist which references the abolition of slavery, to be offensive and inaccurate in its application to sex work and prefer to refer to it as fundamentalist, prohibitionist or carceral feminism. However, I use "abolitionist" as a feminist strategy for respecting the titles that activists give to themselves. For elaboration on the critic of the term, see: Robyn Maynard 2018; Mechthild Nagel 2015.
2. Examples of these pages include: "Sex Work and Other Jobs"; "John School Israel"; "The Religious Organizations Coalition for the Struggle Against Prostitution"; "The Discreet"; "Coming to the Lecher"; "The Lobby Against Lechers"; "When He Tries To Buy Me"; "When I Work—The Truth"; "Myth—For the Day After Prostitution"; "The Truth About The Law of Incriminating The Client." There are also private Facebook groups and the private pages of women working within the industry. From ethical considerations I have only mentioned the open and public pages.
3. The Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) are the U.S. Senate and House bills that as the FOSTA-SESTA package became law on April 11 2018.
4. They are also often called "anti-pornography feminists" (for more detailed discussion, see Lorna N. Bracewell 2016; Alice Echols 2016).
5. They are also sometimes called "sex-positive feminists" (see, for example, Melanie Heath, Jessica Braimoh and Julie Gouweloos 2016).
6. According to John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015), Facebook has around 3.9 million registered users (out of a population of about 8 million) while Twitter has around 155,000 users in Israel.
7. These laws include: the prohibition of recruitment advertisements for prostitution (2017); the prohibition of strip clubs (2018); the prohibition of telephone lines used to advertise prostitution services (2018); and the criminalization of buyers of sex (2017). In addition to these laws, two amendments to existing laws have been added. The first raised the punishment threshold for sexual consumption from a minor from three to five years. The second added prostitution to the restricted access of offensive websites (until then defined as websites dealing with gambling and incitement).
8. https://www.facebook.com/When-He-Pays-953331571347707/.
9. http://todaango.org.il/an NGO that aims to raise awareness among public and policymakers of the destructive consequences of prostitution.
10. http://the-invisible-men.tumblr.com/.
11. https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=when%20he%20pays.%20me.

12. As of August 20 2018, WHP has 13,825 likes and 14,020 followers, while WHP.M has 6,381 likes and 6,452 followers.
13. https://www.facebook.com/TaskForceHumanTrafficking/?fref=mentions.
14. https://www.facebook.com/%D7%94%D7%93%D7%99%D7%A1%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%98%D7%99%D7%9D-975418402580520/.
15. https://www.facebook.com/%D7%91%D7%90%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%9C%D7%96%D7%A0%D7%90%D7%99%D7%9D-1147627928677444/.
16. https://www.facebook.com/groups/1371772782837240/.
17. https://view.publitas.com/art-fanzine/gendertuck-fanzine-april-2018-color/page/1.
18. She chose to be called A when I interviewed her.
19. SWERF is an acronym for "sex worker exclusionary radical feminism" which is characterized by its opposition to those involved in the sex industry.
20. A pseudonym given by the WSW admins.
21. https://www.facebook.com/argaman.alliance/.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This research was supported by The Israel Science Foundation (grant No.54/18).

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