Support for prostitution legalization in Romania: individual, household, and socio-cultural determinants

Abstract

Romania is a major source country of labor migration to other EU countries, being commonly perceived as a source country of sex workers operating in more prosperous economies. However, very little is known about population attitudes in relation to prostitution in Romania. Based on nationally representative data from the Romanian Gender Barometer (2018) survey, this study analyses data on 860 individuals to examine the predictors of policy preferences for legalizing prostitution. We consider individual-level socio-demographics, household-level indicators such as the presence of children and migrants, and also socio-cultural beliefs and behaviors related to social liberalism and religiosity. The findings suggest that gender and education are strong predictors of preferences towards the legalization of prostitution. However, living in a household with migrants and attending church regularly were negatively associated with the legalizing policy option. Moreover, social liberalism expressed as both favorable attitudes towards the introduction of sex education in school curriculum, and as a rejection of traditional gender roles, increased the odds of supporting the legalization of prostitution. The interaction between household composition and respondent's occupational status also reveals a significant effect. Such findings are relevant in order to correctly orient prostitution policy in a way that works for citizens.

Key words

Prostitution, legalization, gender, gender roles, social liberalism, migrant social remittances

Introduction

Romania is commonly perceived as a source country of sex workers operating in more prosperous economies. In an attempt to escape punishment by authorities, negative attitudes by the general public, and vulnerable working conditions in Romania, a significant share of Romanian sex workers has migrated to work in the global sex industry, with some eventually returning to their home country. This context makes Romania a particularly interesting site to study population attitudes in relation to prostitution. Romania is commonly understood of as one of the main origin countries of migrant sex workers in more developed European countries (TAMPEP, 2009a). Romanians active in the sex industry might seek work opportunities abroad given the highly hostile socio-cultural and political domestic environment marked by the framing of sex work as both a violation of human dignity, and a threat to public morality and people's security (TAMPEP, 2009b). In spite of the high visibility of Romanian sex workers in the global and local sex market, academic research and policy debates on prostitution in the decades following the collapse of communism have been almost absent in this country. The scarce and outdated available information on Romanian sex workers suggests that a significant portion of them have migration experience linked to their work history in this domain. TAMPEP (2009a, p. 25) reports that 80% of Romanian sex workers had prior migration experience for work purposes in the sex service in another country before returning to conduct sex work in their home country. According to the same source, the reasons why Romanian sex workers chose to migrate and work in this industry abroad are complex and intertwined: to escape punishment, avoid severe moral judgement by their communities and the broader society, improve their access to better health care, and more generally, the opportunity to enjoy better work conditions in countries where prostitution is regulated. However, this migration for sex work by Romanians and other national groups from underdeveloped economies contributed to a reshuffling of prostitution policies in developed countries from Europe and beyond. The governments of these countries more often than not tend to mistakenly equate prostitution with sex trafficking and, in an attempt to eradicate the latter, move towards stricter governance and even criminalization of sex

work (Benoit, Smith, Jansson, Healey, & Magnuson, 2019; Crowhurst, 2012; Outshoorn, 2012; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). Research evidences outside Europe document the contrasting policy outcomes in relation to anti-trafficking in U.S. and Australia as a result of these countries' diverging feminist views (radical versus liberal) and political attitudes (criminalization versus legalization) on sex work. In contrast to the U.S. anti-trafficking policymaking revolving around the hearings of radical feminist activists asserting a causal relationship between prostitution and trafficking, in Australia, the prevalent influence of liberal feminism together with government's support for sex workers' organizations acknowledged as stakeholders led to a policy approach aimed at reducing harms in the sex industry (O'Brien, 2015).

This paper aims to fill a gap in the knowledge of public opinion towards the legalization of prostitution in Romania, a country where sex work, although visible, remains largely ignored by most stakeholders: academics, policy makers, human rights and feminist activists, and the general public. The literature argues that the scrutiny of public opinion on prostitution is necessary since it enables the examination of people's perceptions on sensitive issues that otherwise would go unnoticed, resulting in states' perpetuation of punitive laws toward prostitution (Cao & Maguire, 2013). In the absence of a thorough and updated documentation of public attitudes towards prostitution, the government's approach runs a serious risk of drifting away from the population's view and therefore misrepresenting the common perception on prostitution and enacting laws that run counter to the interest of significant groups in the population of a country. When dealing with a matter which is often classified as morality politics (Grohs, 2020; Wagenaar & Altink, 2012), the careful and responsible production of knowledge on sex work is even more relevant in order to correctly orient prostitution policy in a way that works for citizens. Although there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of morality politics, Wagenaar & Altink (2012) distinguish six characteristics that help understand why it is difficult to design prostitution policy. Those characteristics include reference to an explicit ideology, the lack of legitimate experts that can produce reliable data because of a dominant view according to which everyone feels expert on that issue, and the reluctance to accept

facts by those in a position to design such policies especially when facts challenge their stereotypical views and personal moral values (Shaver, 2019).

Another significant aspect highlighted by prior research is that differences in the legal status of sex workers are associated with uneven health and safety outcomes of those workers, while scholars acknowledge that there are incongruent opinions within and between each category of stakeholders (e.g. policy makers, law enforcement officers, sex workers, clients, and general public) regarding the most appropriate legal frame (Ma, Chan, & Loke, 2018). Worldwide, there are four policy options with respect to prostitution (i.e. prohibition, criminalization, partial or total decriminalization, and legalization of prostitution) that rest on contrasting theoretical and political underpinnings ranging from abolitionist views rooted in the radical and Marxist feminism equating prostitution with exploitation, to sex positivism framing prostitution as work and acknowledging the rational choice and free will to engage in sex workers (Gerassi, 2015). The four policy options accommodate a large variety of attitudes on prostitution that differ not only between countries but also within countries across time (Harcourt, Egger, & Donovan, 2005; Sanders & Campbell, 2014). The latter authors notice however a global tendency towards criminalization of prostitution spurred by the increasingly popular 'Swedish model' claiming to promote gender equality through criminalizing the demand for sex services (i.e. the Swedish Law Prohibiting the Purchase of Sexual Services came into force at 1st January 1999): 'The Swedish model, with its clear focus on "demand" has been promoted globally across Europe and beyond, pushing principles of abolitionism and sex work as violence against women, with the primary utopian goal of eradicating sex work' (Sanders & Campbell, 2014, p. 537). EU countries are gradually converging towards this **neo-abolitionist perspective** following the recommendations of the European Parliament (2014). Not all European countries follow this perspective, Netherlands being one such exception where sex workers are granted the opportunity to work legally and benefit from social and civil rights. Such rights have been historically ignored by sex work policy reforms which rarely include provisions linked to emancipatory labour conditions and power relations within this industry (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). While the literature shows that there is

a relationship between policy frame and attitudes towards prostitution (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017), in Romania there is no consideration of the general public's view on prostitution, but only a superficial and formal concern to align prostitution laws with supranational recommendations especial from EU institutional bodies since Romania joined EU in 2007.

The paper proceeds with a brief discussion of the cultural environment, structural and legal context shaping the individuals' attitude towards prostitution in Romania and presents some historical turning points that helps to best situate the analysis of attitudes of the general public with respect to the support for legalization of prostitution. Then, a presentation of prior findings concerning individual and socio-cultural predictors of acceptance of prostitution by the lay public from different national contexts is offered. The results of the present study are introduced next, followed by their discussion in the light of both previous international findings and national peculiarities. A conclusion section suggests some policy implications and further queries to be addressed by future research.

Research Context

Over the past century, prostitution has had a sinuous history in Romania, with several disruptive changes marking its discontinuity. For a short spell during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, prostitution was a legal occupation provided that the persons engaged in this activity were over 17-years of age, and were registered with both Local Police office and Health Service. The Sanitary and Protection Law adopted on the 14th July 1930 inspired by the dominant health threat narrative and the concern for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases led to the sudden criminalization of prostitution and cancellation of all establishments facilitating this occupation (i.e., brothels) under the menace of administrative fines and even imprisonment for up to 6 months in case of repeated violations of this law. Prostitution became tolerated outside of the managed premises and within the confines of private housing, while women engaging in these activities could sell their services on an independent basis. Beyond its frame as a health matter, the shift towards a 'limited abolitionist' perspective of this law was underpinned by both international

ideological debates driven by the growing movement of radical feminists voicing their concerns regarding prostitution as patriarchal exploitation of women, as well as a moral crusade by Orthodox priests inciting communities to fight prostitution in their neighborhoods as signs of the lowering of moral standards (Dărămuș, 2015, 2017). During the Second World War, in 1943, Romania moved back to legalizing prostitution but with severe punishment of illegal prostitution and the deliberate spread of venereal diseases by women selling sexual services. At the same time, this new regulation introduces the obligation of regular medical check-ups, and prostitutes' savings accounts where brothel keepers should direct 10% of daily workers' incomes. State controls overs women's bodies working in the sex industry as well as over their freedom to manage their incomes were aimed at deterring women from practicing this activity. However, it was not until 1949 (i.e. Decree 351) that prostitution became truly criminalized and prostitutes became targets of rehabilitation programs in dedicated centers implemented by the communist regime in an attempt to eradicate any deviant behaviors that may threaten the ideological construction of the morally superior and hard-working 'new Soviet man' (Alonso González, 2016). These global and regional ideologies such as the abolitionism advocated by the radical feminist movement, or the cultural project of the 'New Man' designed through Marxist-Leninist ideology, have chiefly influenced the policy approach towards prostitution in Romania across time. Aside from these influences, the accession of Romania to the EU in 2007 has contributed to the partial adoption of the neo-abolitionist Swedish approach that has been disseminated and gradually embraced by other European member states (Kilvington, Day, & Ward, 2001; Sanders & Campbell, 2014). As a consequence, Romania has adapted its Criminal Code in 2014 in order to keep aligned with European Parliament recommendations suggesting the normalization of the Swedish approach. Therefore, the current Criminal Code partly decriminalizes prostitution. Prostitutes are no longer criminals but they are liable to pay an administrative fine or perform a number of hours of community work, pimps are incriminated, while clients of prostitutes are considered criminals if they knowingly buy sex from minors or trafficked persons.

While this brief overview of historical events helps in situating the policy changes in Romania in regard to prostitution through influences from 'above', it completely overlooks the potential for implementing changes from 'below', namely individual preferences for prostitution policy regulation which can further the consolidation of a democracy. Indeed, research in advanced democracies (Wagenaar, 2006) has shown that deliberative and collaborative work between several stakeholders, including municipalities, sex workers, police officers, business managers in sex industry and inhabitants of 'red districts' are conducive to more responsible and sound policy regulations in this area. We argue therefore that a closer examination of the general public's views on prostitution in Romania is a stepping-stone towards the implementation of such democratic deliberation negotiations.

One notable aspect in the presentation of the context of our research is the enduring role played by the Orthodox church as a political actor that has extended the power of control over the State's affairs, including prostitution, abortion, family planning, and homosexuality. During the last decades, Orthodox priests have fiercely condemned prostitution publicly for ruining the family, have organized campaigns against it in high-schools, and opposed prostitution bills aimed at its legalization in Parliament:

> The country's major religious denominations have actively sought to shape democracy, mentalities and lifestyle in Romania. Sexuality is one area where the churches have worked together with, and often against, the post-communist state to impose their views and define acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour for society, their followers and members of the clergy. In Romania sexual behaviour and practices have been a contested territory for church and state throughout the last century. (Turcescu & Stan, 2005, p. 291)

Orthodoxy has been and remained the main religion in Romania where 86.5% of the population declared being of Orthodox faith at the last Census, compared with 72.6% in 1930 (NIS, 2013). Aside

from the growing share of believers, Romania witnesses also a revival of religious behavior upon the fall of the communist regime which imposed on a forced secularization by severely limiting religious practices and forbidding religious education (Voicu & Constantin, 2012). According to the latter source, Romania nowadays looks like one of the most religious societies in Europe, both in terms of religious beliefs and practices of church attendance, while religious education is introduced in the school curriculum and State provides financial support to religious institutions.

Finally, this discussion of the research context situating the current paper would not be complete without the discussion of Romania's socio-economic and political reforms which began in 1990 and led to important levels of emigration composing a large share of the population (Sandu, 2007; Vlase & Voicu, 2014). Indeed, communism's fall equated with the demise of state socialism and the rise of neoliberalism in turn responsible for a rapid deterioration of living conditions (Chelcea & Druță, 2016; Gog, 2020). Lack of adequate welfare state support to help people cope with unemployment and housing shortages, coupled with pervasive western lifestyle aspirations especially among some segments of population such as urban inhabitants with less than tertiary education (Sandu, Toth, & Tudor, 2018), were conducive to significant outflows of labor migration to other EU countries. Romania became in the past decade the main source country of labor migration in the EU. Italy and Spain now host the largest Romanian migrant communities (78% and 45% respectively of EU-28 movers in these countries are Romanians) (Fries-Tersch, Jones, Böök, de Keyser, & Tugran, 2020). Given the highly entwined discursive relationship between migration and sex trafficking in the political debate and mass-media coverage, migration and especially women's migration is stereotypically associated with prostitution in common representations of some Romanian populations (Vlase, 2006). Moreover, the majority of Romanian migrants live in Italy and Spain, countries marked by rather repressive laws towards prostitution (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; TAMPEP, 2009a). Although historically Italy and Spain had registered an earlier introduction of prostitution licensing (1800, and 1840s respectively) compared to other countries, it was abandoned by the mid twentieth century (Harcourt et al., 2005). Likewise, in both countries, the Catholic church

plays a crucial role in moderating governments' attempts to modernize prostitution laws, although these countries witness divergent patterns of change in prostitution regulation owing to context-specific arrangements such as the differential in the bargaining power of coalitions that governments were able to form with institutional and societal actors opposing the *status quo* in this domain (Schmitt, Euchner, & Preidel, 2013). According to these authors, as a result of low mobilization of veto players by Catholic church in Spain, change coalitions did succeed in progressive reforms in three successive stages (1995, 2003, and 2009) leading to gradual decriminalization of both prostitution activity, and its facilitation and procurement. However, prostitution is still not acknowledged as proper work and is generally conceived of as an activity performed by migrants (90%), as shown by the Spanish mapping report based on data collected from civil servants and experts from non-governmental organizations and social services addressing sex workers' needs (TAMPEP, 2009a). Unlike Spain, in Italy, which is by far the most important destination of Romanian migrants, Crowhurst (2012) shows that prostitution bills, proposed during consecutive center-right governments led by Berlusconi, failed to change the old punitive prostitution law in place since 1958. The political rhetoric continued to criminalize street prostitution seen as a prevalent activity of migrant women given the metonymic association between prostitution and other social phenomena such as migration, and sex trafficking. In this context, one can reasonably expect that migrants living in countries where such political discourses are commonplace become therefore exposed to ideas and attitudes towards prostitution that can further be circulated towards their home communities in the form of social remittances. These represent the cultural and social practices, identities, social capital and political ideas that migrants selectively adopt from their host societies and send back to their home societies. In doing so, migrants actively contribute to the diffusion of cultural and political ideas across transnational communities that are marked by dense exchanges within social ties, spanning the geographical borders of sending and receiving countries (Levitt, 1998). Being the most important migrant group in different European countries and beyond, Romanians are often described as transnational migrants actively engaged in the circulation of cultural and political ideas

towards their places of origin (Petroff, 2016; Sandu, 2005; Vlase, 2013). One can reasonably expect that non-migrants in Romania become familiar with political ideas about prostitution when they have strong ties with migrants working in other European countries. As a result of such social remittances, that migrants disseminate in their home communities (i.e., these symbolic representations of migrants as prostitutes and victims of trafficking common in the political debates of destination countries), they can affect the general public's policy preferences towards prostitution of Romanians.

Determinants of policy support for prostitution legalization

This section reviews the literature findings on most important determinants of attitudes towards prostitution. The assessment of the general environment in which sex workers live and work is critical for the understanding of risks and threats posed by unfriendly communities to the health and well-being of sex workers (Ma et al., 2018). Researches conducted in national contexts marked by the decriminalization of sex works such as Australia (Rissel et al., 2017; Seib, Dunne, Fischer, & Najman, 2010) (Rissel et al., 2017; Seib et al., 2010) and New Zeeland (Abel, Fitzgerald, & Brunton, 2009) show that sex workers feel safer and fare better in these societies upon the implementation of legal changes aiming at recognizing sex work as legitimate work. Contrary to claims raised by opponents prior to the decriminalization, these countries didn't witness an increase in men's demand for sex work (Rissel et al., 2017), nor a growing number of sex workers because there are more decisive structural and personal factors that drove someone into this business than the mere legal status of this occupation (Abel et al., 2009). More importantly, longitudinal research on commercial sexual practices with comparable samples of females sex workers (N=200 in 1991, and N=247 in 2003) suggests that there is a 'change to safer sexual practices' after the legalization of sex wok in Australia (Seib et al., 2010, p. 987).

These compelling evidences indicating that the decriminalization of sex work is associated with better living and safer working conditions for sex workers are a starting point for the examination of people's attitudes towards legalization of sex work. Our findings will further inform policy makers

about the need to design and implement awareness-raising campaigns that target specific populations harboring unwelcoming sentiments towards sex workers. At the individual level, several socio-demographic characteristics and socio-cultural beliefs and behaviors have been shown to have an effect on people's attitudes towards sex work. Gender is often significantly associated with views and attitudes towards prostitution, women reporting less favorable attitudes than men overall (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Long, Mollen, & Smith, 2012; Mancini, Pickett, Budd, Bontrager, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020). A study based on 1208 Finish students aged 18-30 years old shows that men hold more positive views on prostitution and pornography compared to women (Räsänen & Wilska, 2007). A common explanation is that since men are the majority of consumers so they would favor legalization because they have an interest in this trade. Findings from a cross-country comparison on attitudes towards buying sex services suggest that women in all eight European countries surveyed are more likely to see sex buying as a morally wrong behavior, although the magnitude of association is smaller in countries with liberal prostitution regimes such as Germany, Netherlands and France (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). However, there are also studies finding no significant association between gender and tolerance of prostitution (Cao & Maguire, 2013).

Aside from gender, increased age and education seem to trigger more favorable attitudes towards prostitution. In the U.S. scholars found that older people tend to be more likely to accept prostitution as justifiable under certain circumstances (Cao & Maguire, 2013), while in many European countries, except from Sweden, older people are not condemning sex purchase (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). A study on 2,525 adult men from 2017, shows that older men are more inclined towards the legalization of prostitution (Mancini et al., 2020). Likewise, findings from a telephone interview with 413 respondents from Ohio suggest that age and education have significant positive effects on favoring prostitution legalization (McCaghy & Cernkovich, 1991). It is often hypothesized that higher levels of education are associated with social liberalism and therefore, based on such association, one can expect that highly educated individuals hold more tolerant attitudes towards moral issues such as prostitution (Stack, Adamczyk, & Cao, 2010). The evidences on the relationship between

education and people's approval of various policy options (i.e., legalization, suppression, decriminalization, toleration) are not however clear-cut. McCaghy & Cernkovich (1991) found a negative association between education and policy preferences for suppresion of prostitution, while significant effects of the interaction between education-sex on the legalization option further complicated this relationship, with most educated men disfavouring legalization, and moderate education in men associated with strongest approval of legalization. In different European countries characterized by divergent prostitution regimes, education has been also found to have dissimilar effects on attitudes towards prostitution as indicated by Jonsson and Jakobsson (2017). The latter authors show that out of eight countries included in their comparative study on condemning the purchase of sex, only in two countries does education have a significant effect on respondents' attitudes;the association was positive in Sweden and negative in the UK.

Marital status and having children are believed to be of significance as well in shaping the attitudes towards prostitution since married people and those with children may want to protect their strong bonds from deviant behaviors that may undermine the conservative values underlying marital unions and the moral duty of passing down these values to next generation (Stack et al., 2010). However, it may also be that people who are already married and with children may feel less worried by prostitution. No such significant relationship has been found in the U.S. general public based on data from the fourth wave of the World Value Survey 1999/2000 (Cao & Maguire, 2013). On the other hand, while there is some recent evidence of a negative association between being married and approving of legalization of prostitution in a US male sample (Mancini et al., 2020). In Europe, prostitution is also featured in political discourses as threatening marriage institutions and corrupting youth (Crowhurst, 2012). When it comes to Europeans' moral views on buying sex, however, only in some countries (i.e. Sweden, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands) married or cohabiting people are more likely to be condemning sex purchase (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017).

Income has also been found to act as a determinant of public views on prostitution, with some evidence suggesting a positive association between higher incomes and expressing tolerant attitudes

towards prostitution. Men reporting higher incomes are more likely to approve of legalization of prostitution perhaps since they may be also more likely to be clients (Mancini et al., 2020). However, this relationship is not confirmed in other research on pooled samples including both genders (Cao & Maguire, 2013).

Aside from socio-demographic determinants, socio-cultural practices and beliefs play a significant role for attitudes towards prostitution. For instance, frequent church attendance has been analyzed in different populations and research suggests a negative bearing of this religious practice on acceptance of prostitution (Cao, Lu, & Mei, 2017; Cao & Maguire, 2013; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). In addition, other cultural determinants such as the endorsement of gender equality values, have been considered in the literature on the general public's view of prostitution. In their study on the American public's tolerance of prostitution, Cao and Maguire (2013) did not find however any significant effect of their gender equality index on the acceptance of prostitution. Similarly, a study employing World Value Survey data (2005-2007) on 48,630 subjects from 54 countries (Chon, 2015) could not identify such an effect of gender equality on prostitution, even if the author modified the composite scale measure used by Cao and Maguire by retaining only two instead of three (i.e. privileging university education for boys, and men's political leadership). Comparative research on attitudes towards buying and selling sex in Norway and Sweden evidences that holding gender equality views is rather associated with condemning commercial sex, but the association is stronger in Sweden (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011). The latter authors draw attention to the countries' contextual differences regarding the intricacies of feminist thinking and political debate over prostitution laws, as well as countries' dominant feminist school of thought. Radical and Marxist feminism advocate the abolition of prostitution because the former sees it as a male privilege normalized by the patriarchal social order entitling men to buy and control women's bodies, while the latter posits that prostitution is violence and appropriation of women's sexual energy by men who afford to buy sex leading to women's alienation from their own bodies (Gerassi, 2015). Pro-sex feminists argue for the consideration of diverse experiences of sex workers and for the recognition of

prostitution as regular work that would enable sex workers to enjoy their full human and social rights (Musheno & Seeley, 1987; Pitcher, 2019). Therefore, people supporting gender equality may be more inclined to oppose prostitution if they live in countries characterized by a firmer feminist neo-abolitionist stance such as Sweden, while the association is opposite in countries where prostitution is seen as regular work (i.e. Netherlands, Germany) (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017).

Method and data

Participants

We employ data from the Romanian Gender Barometer (2018) run by the Romanian private institute for surveys IMAS in collaboration with the Center for Curricular Development and Gender Studies: FILIA and with the Center for Support and Training for Developing a Fair Society. Computer assisted personal interviews (CAPI) have been conducted face-to-face at the respondents' household between 15 November and 23 December 2018 on a nationally representative sample of N=1140 individuals from the population. The design of the survey follows a multi-stage stratified sampling starting on 11 country regions and five types of localities according to their population size and their urban/rural situation, and then random selection of localities and sampling points was applied. The choice of households was based on the random-route method, while respondents within households were selected using birthday method. The socio-demographic profile of the respondents meets the national population structure with respect to gender, age, educational, marital status, occupational and residential categories, while non-response rates range from 0,1% for education to 2% for incomes (Grünberg, Rusu, & Samoilă, 2019).

Procedure

This dataset allows us to document Romanians' policy preference for prostitution legalization by considering the effect of individual and household characteristics, as well as the impact of socio-cultural beliefs and practices amongst respondents. We ran logistic regression on 860 individuals from the nationally representative sample of 1140 observations of the Romanian Gender Barometer. We deleted cases that had missing data for our variables of interest.

Measures

Our measures are described as follows: the outcome variable refers to the *policy preference towards legalization* of prostitution and is recoded as a dummy (1=yes, 0=no). The independent variables comprise socio-demographics such as *gender* which was originally coded as 1=male and 2=female while we have recoded it as dichotomous (1= male, 0=female), *age* comprises four categories (1=18-29; 2=30-44; 3=45-59; 4=60 and over), *education level* in four educational categories as well (1=lower secondary or below; 2=some high school or vocational school; 3=high school and post-secondary school; 4=university degree). Respondent's *occupational status* has been recoded as a binary variable (1=high occupational status comprising five top categories from the original variables: entrepreneurs, managers/directors, chiefs of department, professionals like lawyers, doctors, and other professionals with higher education; 0= others), and *marital status* (1=married or widowed, 0=otherwise), following prior research (Cao et al., 2017). Moreover, our independent variables include whether the *household includes children* under 18 (1=yes, 0=no), whether the *household includes migrants* working abroad (1=yes, 0=no). This represents a new development in research investigating the predictors of general attitudes towards prostitution. In our view it is extremely important to elucidate the relationship between factors such as whether the household includes members who have migrated and its spillover effects on non-migrants' preferences regarding prostitution policies. As we have seen earlier, migrants and their family members left behind do not live in separate social worlds but rather participate in the formation of a transnational community in which new ideas and beliefs travel back and forth between sending and receiving societies and permeate the lived realities of home countries. Finally, respondents' social beliefs and behaviors are taken into consideration through the inclusion of independent variables such as religiosity that is measured through the frequency of *church attendance* (1=respondents reporting that they attend church at least once a month, 0=otherwise). Social liberalism has been previously tested in relation to the population's acceptance of prostitution with an expectation of a positive association between the two since liberalism is described a 'global symbolic orientation that signifies one's openness to

new concept and new trend' (Cao & Stack, 2010, p. 534). Unlike previous research that considers education level as a measure of liberalism, we rather include two measures that in our view tap more directly into it, namely the approval of teaching *sex education in school* (1=yes, 0=no), and the rejection of traditional *gender roles* that is a scale variable based on the addition of two items (i.e., women should take care of house, men's role is to bring money home). For this scale variable higher scores mean dismissal of traditional beliefs and therefore moving away from conservatism toward more liberal views on gender. This scale variable has a good internal reliability as indicated by its Cronbach's alpha of 0.734.

Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of the DV amongst the IVs included in the logistic regression model models.

Table 1 Support for prostitution (DV) by Independent Variables (IVs) included in the models

Independent Variable	%	N
Gender		
Male	49.8	414
Female	33.2	446
Age groups		
18-29	37.7	175
30-44 years	43.9	198
45-59 years	49.3	223
60+ years	34.5	264
Education level		
Lower secondary or below	17.9	156
Vocational school	39.0	218
High school	44.1	347

University degree	63.3	139
Occupational status		
High	62.6	107
Other	38.1	753
Marital status		
Married or widowed	40.7	580
Other	42.1	280
Presence of children in the household (hh)		
Children under 18 in the household (hh)	40.5	247
No children under 18 in household	41.4	613
Migrants in the household (hh)		
Household with migrants working abroad	33.0	203
Household without migrants working abroad	43.7	657
Frequency of church attendance		
Church attendance at least once a month	35.5	422
Church attendance less than once a month	46.6	438
Sex education in school		
Approval of sex education in school	46.1	703
Disapproval of sex education in school	19.1	157
Disapproval of traditional gender roles		
Highest	52.8	258
Middle	42.8	170
Low	33.3	432

Source: Romanian Gender Barometer (2018), N=860

Table 2 shows the results of the regression on the support for the legalization of prostitution in Romania.

Table 2 Do you think that prostitution should be legalized (unstandardized coefficients and odds ratio).

	MODEL 1		MODEL 2	
	B	OR	B	OR
Gender (male)	0.614***	1.847	0.583***	1.792
Age groups (ref. 18-29)				
30-44 years	0.105	1.110	0.074	1.077
45-59 years	0.586**	1.796	0.549**	1.731
60+ years	0.376	1.457	0.300	1.350
Education level (ref. Lower secondary or below)				
Vocational school	0.534**	1.706	0.539**	1.715
High school	0.813***	2.254	0.809***	2.245
University degree	1.522***	4.580	1.541***	4.671
Occupational status (high)	0.036	1.036	-0.485	0.616
Marital status (married or widowed)	0.019	1.019	-0.010	0.990
Children (under 18) in the household (hh)	-0.037	0.964	-0.262	0.769
Household with migrants working abroad	-0.386**	0.679	-0.374**	0.688
Church attendance (at least once a month)	-0.379**	0.684	-0.386**	0.680
Approval of sex education in school	0.964***	2.622	0.983***	2.672
Disapproval of traditional gender roles	0.278***	1.320	0.247***	1.280
Children in the hh*high occupational status			1.346***	3.840
Constant	-3.029	0.048	-2.829	0.059
Nagelkerke's R2	0.194		0.204	

* p<.10, ** p<.05, *** p<.01   *Source*: Romanian Gender Barometer (2018), N=860

For the logistic regression, first we present the full model (1) and then we present the model including an interaction term (model 2). We turn first to examining the results from Model 1 in Table 2. Turning to the results in Model 1 we can see that men are about twice as likely as women to support the legalization of prostitution. With respect to age, the middle age group (45-59) is about twice as likely as the youngest (18-29) to support legalization. As expected, education also has a positive influence and this is net of liberal values which are also included in the model as further controls. Individuals with a University education are almost 5 times more likely than those with the lowest level of education to support legalization. Even vocational or high school education about double to support it relative to the lowest educational level. However, occupational status, marital status and having children under 18 in the home does not have an impact on support for the legalization of prostitution. Those coming from households with migrants working abroad were about half as likely as those not coming from such households to support legalization.

Similar to other research investigating the effect of religiosity on attitudes towards prostitution (Chon, 2015; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011), in our results also from model 1 those who attended church more regularly were about half as likely to support legalization than those who didn't. Our variables related to social liberalism show a significant positive association with the preference for prostitution legalization as expected. Compared to respondents disapproving of teaching of sex education in school, those approving of the introduction of sex education in school curriculum were almost three times as likely to support the legalization of prostitution. Likewise, the scale variable looking at social liberalism expressed as rejection of traditional gender roles according to which men's primary duty is to provide for their families, while women's role is to be caretaker shows that those with more liberal roles net of sex education and education were almost 1.5 times more likely to support legalization.

Finally, in Model 2 (Table 2) we tested the interaction effects in particular that between higher occupational status and the presence of children in the household and show a positive interaction effect. As the main effects were not significant in Model 1, this suggests that the effect of these

variables is opposite depending on the value of the other (i.e. a crossover interaction). So whether having children in the household is linked to support has opposite effects based on status. Those of higher status and with children in the household appear to be more likely to support prostitution legalization perhaps since they are less likely to feel threatened by it. On the other, those with low status and children are the least likely to support legalization.

Discussion

In Romania there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the opinion of the general population on prostitution. In the past century, prostitution policies in this country have been marked by discontinuities triggered mostly by the changes from 'above', namely institutional and supranational forces that have historically shaped the framing of prostitution debates globally. The general public's attitudes towards prostitution have been overlooked even after the overthrowing of the totalitarian regime in 1989. Upon three decades of democratic governance, policy makers in Romania still ignore the preferences of population concerning many life domains, including prostitution, abortion, and family planning over which Orthodox Church preserves a powerful hold (Turcescu & Stan, 2005). Absence or scarcity of research in this field is harmful for a young democracy and has a negative bearing on the lives of people involved in this trade. Cao and Maguire (2013) raised similar concerns in the United States and have rightly pointed to this necessity of both researchers and policy makers to bring back into academic preoccupation the issue of public's attitude on prostitution:

> …social scientists cannot shy away from research on prostitution. Silence about this issue can support the *status quo* in at least two ways: first, by allowing inaccurate or unrealistic perceptions about prostitution in the United States to go unchallenged; and second, by sustaining current punitive laws against prostitution. (Cao & Maguire, 2013, p. 202)

Our paper has singled out the effect of some important drivers of prostitution attitudes in the Romanian population. It has shown that men compared to women are almost twice as likely to

support prostitution legalization. These findings are consistent with the bulk of the literature that has generally suggested that men have more favorable attitudes towards prostitution. Men are more often those who benefit from these sexual services as clients (Chon, 2015; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Stack et al., 2010). Their reasons to do so are varied but an important driver seems to be the ability to engage in paid-for sex as a way to emulate the hegemonic masculinity ideal which involves the representation of men as sexually potent and experienced, seeking to satisfy their urges with different women (Hammond & van Hooff, 2020).

While age has not been consistently shown as an influential factor of prostitution attitudes across various national contexts (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017), it appears that at least the middle-aged population (45-59 years) in Romania is more supportive of prostitution legalization compared to the younger category aged 18-29 year old. This could be due to socialization under communist historical specificities of this cohort since they have lived their formative years as children and teenagers during the secularization imposed by the communist regime and therefore, they may be freer of strong religious beliefs regarding the prostitution as sinful and impure. Education has not been shown to uniformly associate with tolerance of prostitution in previous research from Europe, China or United States (Cao & Stack, 2010; Chon, 2015; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). However, it appears as strongly related to Romanians' preferences for prostitution legalization. Indeed, each additional educational level increases the odds of supporting this policy option. However, occupational status it doesn't affect policy preferences towards prostitution. We consider occupation as a better proxy than education or income for social class in Romania. Although high occupational status may reflect educational investments, recent research on struggles of Romanian parents to secure a middle class position for their offspring raises questions about this association (Savu, Lipan, & Crăciun, 2020). The effect of social class on prostitution tolerance has not been confirmed in previous research either, although it could be hypothesized that occupants of higher social positions in the social structure may disapprove of prostitution as a sign of distinction. This disapproval may signal a display of disgust towards practices and behaviors such as prostitution consumption that could be interpreted

as a deviation from the upper-class politics of self-restraint and discipline (Cao & Maguire, 2013). However, when we introduced in the model the interaction between high occupational status and household composition (i.e., presence of children under 18 in the household), the effect becomes significant suggesting more tolerant views on prostitution by those (likely) parents enjoying high occupational prestige associated with highly regarded occupations such as entrepreneurs, managers/directors, chief department, professionals like lawyers, doctors, and other professionals with higher education.

An important finding of our study is the negative effect of migrants working abroad on the attitudes of family members left behind in Romania. This means individuals with close family ties abroad are less likely to support prostitution than those living in households without migrants. This is in line with our expectation and two complementary explanations can be formulated to clarify this association. First, according to the social remittances hypothesis, individuals with kinship ties abroad are the most direct recipients of social remittances including political ideas and common negative representations of prostitution that flow from host societies during migrants' visits back home, phone calls or video chats with those left in Romania. Second, given that migration, human trafficking and prostitution are too often interwoven in the political discourse and mass-media representations (Crowhurst, 2012; Outshoorn, 2012), respondents related to migrants working abroad may oppose prostitution legalization in an attempt to protect the reputation of their migrant family members. More explicitly, respondents rejecting prostitution legalization may try to dissociate the image of the labour migrant from the stereotypical representation of migrants as prostitute by displaying a negative attitude towards an activity that they want to signal it's not their family members' occupation.

Compared with the respondents without relatives working abroad, these are less likely to support prostitution legalization. This is in line with our expectation of social remittances since Romanians tend to migrate especially in countries where migration and prostitution are conflated, resulting in prevailing derogatory discourses and punitive laws towards prostitution. We also found an effect of

religiosity. Many researchers have found evidences of this negative association between religiosity and prostitution tolerance (Cao et al., 2017; Cao & Maguire, 2013; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). The allegedly high exposure to religious teachings that sanction sexual relationships outside marriage as immoral is conducive to negative opinions on prostitution and therefore religious people are more prone to oppose its legalization.

Of notable interest are the results regarding the effect of our measures of social liberalism, namely the approval of sex education in school, and the rejection of traditional gender roles. Both are positively associated and statistically significant, although the effect is larger for the former with an odds ratio of 2.7, compared with 1.3 for the disapproval of traditional gender roles. These findings suggest indeed more tolerant attitude by people moving away from conservatism expressed both as a preference for emancipatory sex education in school, and a rejection of traditional ideas about men and women with highly specialized roles as breadwinners and respectively caretakers. Measures of social liberalism very often boils down to education in the existing literature on attitudes towards prostitution. We have considered new ways of operationalization of this concept that enabled to more accurately capture the degree of openness of Romanians towards new ideas, as liberalism has been broadly defined (Cao & Stack, 2010, p. 534). In Romania, although people seem largely open to this new adjustment of the school curriculum, this is still a matter of concern and controversy especially since sex education and long-established religious education in school may be conceived of as two disciplines whose content do not sit well with one another. Those opposing sex education in school may therefore oppose prostitution legalization by fear of seeing proper education (including religious education) jeopardized through the liberal teaching of sex as a recreational and not limited to reproductive goal within the marital bonds.

Conclusion

Our paper shows that a number of factors are significant for understanding why individuals are more or less supportive of prostitution. We largely confirm previous findings but add the dimension on

migration as well as an interaction effect between higher occupational status and children in the home suggesting that the effect of certain factors may well be differential for different groups. Having children and being of higher status might make prostitution less threatening, for example. Based on these findings, we suggest that policy makers in Romania need to become more aware of the population views on sex work and include multiple voices, seeking to strike a right balance between national/supranational institutional bodies (i.e. Orthodox Church, EU Parliament), and general public's attitudes. Giving precedence to institutional bodies and their regulations in this field over general public's view results in biased decision-making that underplays people's lived realities and their meaning-making in everyday interactions that span the countries' borders. Migration and migrants' social remittances seem critical points in genuinely addressing prostitution policy in Romania. Campaigns for dismantling the stereotypical view on Romanian migrants as street sex workers can be carefully designed in order to reduce concerns of those left behind to protect the image of their family members working abroad.

In terms of future research, we urge future studies to examine these questions in other contexts, for example other Eastern European postcommunist countries and compare significant factors. More interaction effects could be explored to see which have differential effects. Moreover, longitudinal studies could also be relevant as could experimental set ups. The results of our study may also help to tailor policy change moving further to more closely align policy with the values and lived experience of citizens.

This study has also a number of limitations. First, this is only a cross-sectional study in one country and it would be interesting to compare cross-nationally and do run over time studies in the future. For this purpose, new surveys shall include more questions that address also the interaction between respondents with the sex industry in the country. Second, for a policy shift towards decriminalization we would likely need to see some generational over time change for example by more highly educated and socially liberal younger cohorts replacing older, more conservative ones in the population, as illustrated in other contexts (Grasso, Farrall, Gray, Hay, & Jennings, 2019).

Declarations

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