

## NEWS

The human rights advocacy group Aditus embarks on dialogue to give voice to sex workers in safe space for them to talk about their lives, experiences and dreams

**MATTHEW VELLA**

THE Aditus Foundation is embarking on a discovery of the voices of sex workers who will be impacted by forthcoming reforms in the regulation of prostitution of Malta.

Already mired in controversy over opposing views on whether sex work and sex-buying should be decriminalised, Aditus's project is the first to foster a dialogue to hear sex workers' voices and respond to their difficulties.

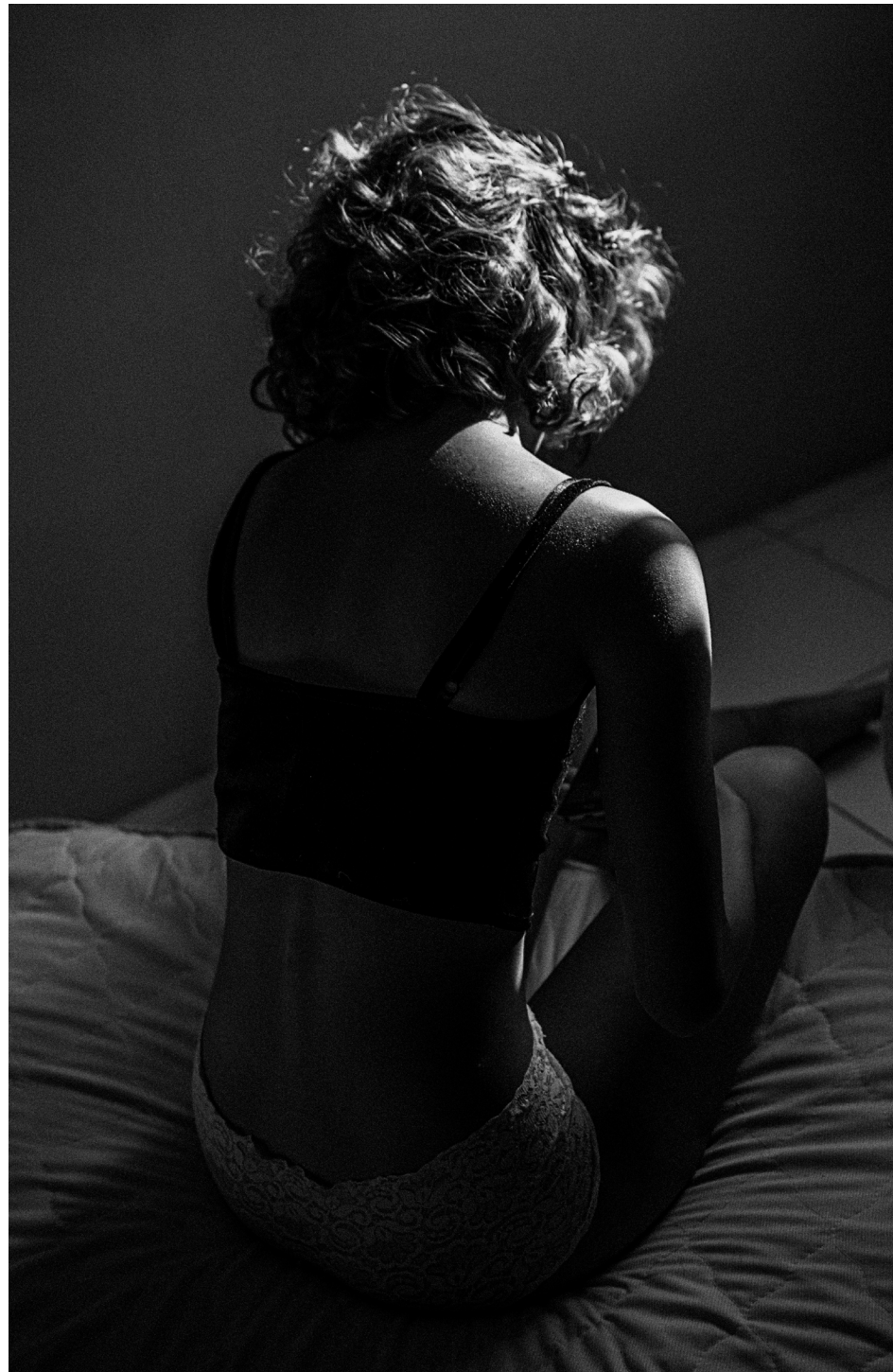
The Out of the Shadows project will give this much-needed voice to sex workers in Malta by creating a safe space for them to talk about their lives, experiences and dreams. "Their stories will allow the nation to better understand the human complexities of sex work, going beyond hurtful or misconceived stereotypes," Carla Camilleri, assistant director at Aditus, said.

Through the work of Marija Grech, an independent researcher, the project aims to reveal voices of sex workers. "The research will be intimate, respectful, inclusive and based on a deep respect for all relevant ethical and human considerations. It will attempt to engage with women, men, LGBTIQ+ persons, Maltese and non-Maltese sex workers in order to be as inclusive and diverse as possible," Camilleri said.

Research to date has focused on the vulnerability and exploitation of sex workers, based on the understanding that sex work may never be a free human choice. But there is also a large international movement that supports the idea that sex work – whilst often exploitative and abusive – may also be the result of a free and informed choice of men and women.

"Our aim in this research is not to favour or dismiss any view, but mainly to demonstrate that Malta – like all other countries – is host to a diverse community of sex workers," Camilleri said.

Aditus hopes the project will be a key contributor to the ongoing national discussion on the reform of sex work and trafficking. "It has the potential of offering national stakeholders a unique insight into a sector that so far has only been spoken about, and not spoken to," Camilleri said.



## Sex workers: voices that live in the shadows

The work, the first publication of its kind, will be a bid to give a much-needed voice to a community often shrouded in shame, discrimination, poverty and marginalisation.

"So much has been said about sex workers, but rarely have their own voices been heard. It is time to bring them out of the shadows and listen to their narratives.

We are confident that the research will have a profound effect of national law,

policy and services owing to its unique nature," Camilleri said.

Aditus and the Integra Foundation have supported the right of sex workers to be allowed to practice their work on their own terms and exit the profession when they want to, and feel safe and free from exploitation.

Gay rights NGOs like MGRM and ARC are also taking a nuanced stance on prostitution reforms advanced by the Labour government, suggesting that sex

work should not be exclusively conflated with sex trafficking.

But their position, presented as part of a nationwide consultation on the decriminalisation of sex work, is contrasted by a coalition of NGOs and women's rights groups who fear liberalisation will serve as a back-door for human trafficking and female exploitation.

Aditus and Integra have said their position is grounded in respect for the agency of sex workers, and makes a distinction between trafficking and sex work, as well as trafficking and migration.

"The criminalisation of sex work (including the criminalisation of clients), embalmed in stigma and shame, forces sex workers to operate at the margins of society in dangerous conditions, and increases exposure to violence, discrimination and abuse. Multifaceted and intersecting forms of discrimination and structural inequalities have an impact on the autonomy of sex workers and their quality of life," the NGOs said.

They call for a clear distinction be-

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- Carla Camilleri

tween sex work and human trafficking as this creates confusion amongst practitioners, the media and the public, and can lead to laws that are harmful to trafficked individuals, migrants and sex workers alike. "Any automatic assumptions that sex workers are victims of trafficking is detrimental to efforts in reducing trafficking and detrimental to the protection of the rights and safety of sex workers. A clear distinction must be made between exploitative situations and trafficking, and voluntary and consensual sex work."

Women's rights NGOs on the other hand insist that regularising the sex industry will encourage the spread of disease from STDs transmitted by men to women, and increased trafficking of poor and desperate migrants lured and tricked into the industry. "This was clearly the case in Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand which have all seen significant increases in trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. All these countries are now scrambling to control and reverse the disastrous consequences of their legislative mistakes," the 40-strong-group coalition said.