

VIEWPOINT

“That’s a Definition for a World That Does Not Yet Exist”: Reflections on Accountability from a Participatory Action Research Project with People Engaged in the Sex Trades

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This viewpoint is a product of a long-standing set of coalitional academic-community projects, specifically dedicated to advocacy alongside people engaged in the sex trades. In this piece, we present moments of friction that have challenged our understanding of accountability. We describe the conversations we have engaged in as part of a participatory action research project with people engaged in the sex trades that explores the structural forms of accountability available to and/or built by people who are already marked by alleged “criminality” and simultaneously facing abuse, especially at the hands of state actors in the United States. We also describe our reckoning with the forms of accountability between actors engaged in research with different powers and privileges, specific to our positions as researchers in and outside of the academy who have varying relationships to the sex trades but are committed to a shared understanding of justice for sex workers.

The Global Health Justice Partnership (GHJP) is a project of Yale Law School and Yale School of Public Health that has had long-standing relationships with the Sex Work Advocacy Network (SWAN) in New Haven and the Sex Workers Project (SWP) in New York City. In 2021, SWAN had begun receiving reports that its members were being coerced for sex by a certain police officer. Police abuse of people engaged in the sex trades is well documented.¹ Furthermore, the lack of recourse to report abusive officers can compound existing hesitance to seek services, including health services.² SWAN used its relationships throughout

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Connecticut to remove that police officer from the police force and ensure his decertification.³

Following this experience, both SWP and SWAN were interested in addressing the larger problem of police abuse of people engaged in sex trades, including understanding the different routes for accountability that people in the sex trades utilize or desire. Both organizations recognized that definitions of accountability might shift for individuals based on their own understanding of the harm they have experienced and what they would need to heal from that harm. Working with SWAN and SWP, GHJP team members conducted a literature review and series of interviews with subject-matter experts, developing a definition of accountability as “any process that aims to identify a harm, stop that harm, prevent its recurrence, and create some type of consequences.”⁴

With this definition, our next phase of research was to talk to people in the sex trades about the accountability measures that they have used and witnessed. We committed to using participatory action research, an approach rooted in demands for scholarship that documents and challenges social injustice.⁵ As its name suggests, participatory action research is conducted by a group of researchers, including those who are most affected by the social injustice in question, who work with shared power and responsibility.

Our research questions transformed again, becoming (1) What are potential routes for accountability when police and others with societal power abuse people in the sex trades? and (2) Can we coalesce a group of researchers comprising those with experience in academia and those with experience in the sex trades to answer these questions about accountability? We aimed to answer these questions through a series of focus groups with people engaged in the sex trades throughout New York City.

In late 2024, as we prepared to conduct the focus groups, the governor of New York launched “Operation Restore Roosevelt,” a deployment of the National Guard to Roosevelt Avenue, a busy street in Jackson Heights, Queens. For decades, Jackson Heights has been a commercial hub for the sur-

rounding immigrant community, often described as one of the most diverse zip codes in the city.⁶ Jackson Heights also has many bars and restaurants that cater to queer and trans communities of color. Without work permits, many of the most recent immigrants support themselves as street vendors and in other aspects of the informal economy.

Jackson Heights has become a flashpoint in conversations about New York City’s “migrant crisis” and street vendors, sex work, and other elements of the informal economy.⁷ Some local homeowners and business owners have complained about the visibility of sex work on Roosevelt Ave, and local politicians have drawn on a conservative Christian politic to specifically target trans sex workers.⁸ These narratives provided fodder for Operation Restore Roosevelt, during which the National Guard conducted arrests and delivered citations. Immediately, Decrim NY, a coalition of organizations dedicated to the decriminalization of sex work, held a protest, using the slogan “Resources, Not Raids.” Our co-researchers had been attending Decrim NY meetings, and we also attended this protest and witnessed the multilingual coalition standing up for both sex workers and street vendors. Members of Decrim NY also pursued advocacy in other venues, including op-eds in local newspapers.⁹

Understanding that this increase in policing and criminalization would impact our partners’ work, we spoke to members of the coalition to explore how our focus groups might support their efforts. We worked to be accountable to our partners by being transparent about our ability to participate in rapid response actions and how quickly we would be able to share data from the focus groups.

Our focus groups continued through the spring of 2025, and the questions that we had added about the increase in surveillance from the National Guard shifted to become questions about increased surveillance by Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). Focus group participants acknowledged the particularities of this moment: the rhetoric about “cleaning up the streets” that accompanied the National Guard, and the violence that ICE employed while wearing masks to evade identification. Yet they also contextualized these actions in a long line

of abuses by agents of the state, who felt that they could act with impunity toward these communities, emboldened by discrimination related to race, gender, immigration status, and language.

When we presented the definition of accountability that we had coined from the literature review, the focus group participants told us in poignant terms that our definition “was for a world that doesn’t exist yet.” They felt that our idea of accountability was unattainable for many reasons: misogyny, racism, xenophobia, sexism, classism, imperialism, and transphobia created a stark power imbalance between themselves and the agents of the state who perpetuated abuse. Even among those who look to restorative justice and transformative justice processes for guidance, there was an understanding that because these police officers were not part of their community (the necessary grounding for restorative and transformative processes), there was no way to rectify these power imbalances and facilitate accountability processes.¹⁰ Thus, our opening question reverberates: How do we facilitate accountability when people and institutions with power abuse those who are systematically denied power?

Although the speakers in our focus groups felt that our broad idea of accountability is currently inaccessible, they also shared ways in which they are working toward transforming power inequities so that they are able to actualize accountability. For example, participants took part in various modes of documenting their experiences, putting forth an analysis that counters the prevailing rhetoric about sex workers, street vendors, and immigrants. One such example comes from Red Canary Song and Centro Corona, who published a zine that clearly describes the current carceral measures and surveillance as part of a “social cleansing crisis.”¹¹ In doing so, these organizations refused the narrative that those who participate in the informal economy deserve surveillance, criminalization, deportation, and other forms of state-sponsored violence. Instead, they demonstrated how these approaches support social inequities.

Indeed, the specter of masked agents of the state breaking into cars, homes, and workplaces has already spread beyond Jackson Heights and into

communities around the nation and has impacted people beyond those who participate in the informal economy. One way to understand this moment is to recognize that traditional accountability measures—which rely on trust in the courts, agents of the state, and laws enacted by the state—have always been imperfect and have consistently offered inequitable recourse to different communities. As these measures erode, that inequitable effect is contributing to the current rise in fascism and must be combated through solidarity.

Participatory action research might be one way for academic researchers to use the power that they have to support attempts at building forms of creative and concrete accountability for those who have faced and continue to face abuse from police and other state actors. Participatory action research projects in the field of public health can go beyond describing the health inequities that result from policing and surveillance, and instead identify and analyze the power structures that enable the practices of these abusive institutions.¹² Research teams composed of those with academic experience and lived experience can put forth scholarship that supports advocacy efforts, helps rectify power imbalances, and bolsters attempts at creating just systems.¹³

Ultimately, academic researchers who are attempting to document different approaches to accountability must hold central the understanding that our interlocutors put forth: conversations about accountability are conversations about power inequities.

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Ethics approval

Throughout this perspective, we present generalized summaries of focus group conversations, in keeping with the commitments we made to our community partners and the Institutional Review

Board. For example, the quote in the title comes from one of the focus group conversations and is elaborated on here.

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