

From the Massage Parlour to the 'Plan Bizi': The New Faces of Female Prostitution in Ouagadougou in the Digital Age (Burkina Faso).

Abstract:

Context: Social media, particularly virtual platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram, have become, through new information and communication technologies, the foremost sites to which all manner of commercial activities have relocated. By reducing the world to a simple global village, these digital platforms enable their commercial users to reach a wide audience. It is within this headlong rush towards digitalisation that the phenomenon of prostitution has been transposed onto online platforms through the creation of WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels and Facebook pages, sometimes bearing names such as beauty or massage parlours.

Objective: This transition warrants particular attention, and it is for this reason that the present article seeks to contribute to an understanding of this phenomenon in the city of Ouagadougou.

Methodology: To this end, a qualitative approach was adopted, employing three purely qualitative data-collection techniques in the city of Ouagadougou. This involved immersion in ten digital platforms (five WhatsApp groups, three Telegram channels and two Facebook pages), the conduct of formal (3) and informal (6) interviews, and participant observation in four massage parlours and across the digital platforms.

Results: The analysis of the data collected reveals that female sex workers use virtual platforms to advertise their services in order to reach a wider audience. This practice constitutes a resilience strategy in the face of financial precarity, as well as an adaptation to the digital age, all the more so as these platforms have today become spaces and working tools that make contact with clients easier and faster. This also enables discretion in the exercise of the profession, particularly among those who use certain massage and beauty parlours as a cover.

Discussion and Conclusion: These findings suggest that the digital platformisation of prostitution in Ouagadougou reflects a broader strategy of adapting to legal constraints on soliciting and to financial precarity, while simultaneously exposing sex workers to new risks associated with visibility and data protection. Further research is needed to examine these dynamics across other Burkinabè cities and to consider their legal and data-protection implications.

Keywords: Sex work; Digital platforms; Massage parlours; Social media; Burkina Faso.

Introduction

The contemporary world is engaged in a headlong rush towards new information and communication technologies (the digital age), which are substantially reshaping several dimensions of our societies, notably economic systems, human relationships and regimes of social representation. This technological shift is accompanied by a reconfiguration of the boundaries between the licit and the taboo, particularly around sexuality and, more specifically, prostitution. This is a practice which, since Marcel Mauss's foundational work

on techniques of the body, has been revealing of the systems of social representation associated with the body and its social uses (Mauss, 1936). As early as the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan (1962) spoke of the advent of a 'global village' in which communication technologies would abolish distance. More than sixty years later, this insight finds particular contemporary relevance in the way that activities once confined to physical spaces have been transposed onto digital platforms accessible at any time and in any place.

Regarded by common sense as 'the oldest profession in the world', prostitution has evolved by adapting to the influence of new information and communication technologies (Fondation Scelles, 2023). Before this shift towards social media, pavements, flats and clandestine establishments constituted the principal sites in which the profession was exercised (Mathieu, 2000, p. 101). These sites of practice also served to categorise prostitution. In large cities such as Paris, a distinction was thus drawn between 'studio' prostitution and that practised 'on the street kerb', where practitioners identified themselves as 'traditional' (Mathieu, 2000, p. 108). This sociology of prostitutional space has since been extended by studies showing that the shift to digital technology does not eliminate these internal hierarchies within the profession but redeploys them in new forms (Jones, 2015; Rand, 2019).

The reasons underlying engagement in such activity vary from one individual to another, but it most often emerges that entry into this practice stems from constraint, whether adapting to a situation of distress or violence, or making up for a lack (Mathieu, 2002, p. 59). It is in this context that the deterioration of economic living conditions is cited by many young women to justify their entry into prostitution (Bambara, 2011, p. 98). In other words, precarity, experiences of sexual violence and the desire to improve living conditions are among the most frequently cited motives (Fondation Scelles, 2023, p. 7). This activity is thus perceived as a response to an urgent need for financial resources, particularly in situations of social disaffiliation (Mathieu, 2002, p. 60).

However, the financial motive is not central for all practitioners. Some men engaged in male prostitution via digital means do not foreground financial precarity as their primary motivation, but rather a form of exploration of their sexuality or the staging of their fantasies (Lavergne, 2021, p. 608). This diversification of profiles and motivations is also observed in the international literature, where research on sex work has progressively moved away from a univocal reading centred on exploitation, towards a more polymorphous reading that takes into account the plurality of experiences, sectors of activity and gender identities involved in these practices.

The 'platformisation', or 'uberisation', of prostitution (Fondation Scelles, 2023, p. 8) encompasses multiple issues, both advantages and disadvantages. Recourse to virtual spaces makes it possible to minimise the stigmatising nature of the activity, in the sense already given to the term by Erving Goffman (1963) in his analysis of stigma as a spoiled social identity, while also contributing to a decline in street prostitution (Fondation Scelles, 2023, p. 8). For Angela Jones (2015, p. 558), the use of the internet enables sex workers to maximise their profits and reduce certain risks associated with direct encounters with clients. Online platforms thus function as advertising channels (Mergenthaler & Yasseri, 2021, p. 1) within a genuine digital value network that restructures relations between workers, platforms and clients (Howson et al., 2021).

This process is not, however, free of tensions. Several studies show that digital platforms, despite the increased visibility and autonomy they provide, also expose sex workers to new risks, such as breaches of privacy, digital violence, or exhaustion linked to the constant

management of their online image (Pajnik & Kuhar, 2024). The analysis in terms of 'structural violence' developed by Palatchie, Beban and Nicholls (2025) further shows that the algorithmic systems and payment mechanisms integrated into platforms reproduce, in a dematerialised form, relations of domination and precarity already known in the informal sex economy (Pitcher, 2015). These platforms redistribute work without offering the protections associated with salaried status, which compels workers to develop individual tactics of resistance and negotiation in the face of the constraints of visibility (Rand & Stegeman, 2023).

In Africa, this movement of digital translation of prostitution is also documented, albeit more fragmentarily. Studies conducted in Abidjan show the rise of organised groups and networks using social platforms to recruit clientele, with differentiated logics between organised network-based work and individual practice of the activity (Dagbe Ahodan, Kazon Diescieu & Kebe Sopia, 2024). In Burkina Faso, in a context marked by an abolitionist legal regime with respect to prostitution, this dynamic is reflected in the accelerated proliferation of WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and Telegram channels bearing explicit names such as 'Plan', 'Plan Bizi' or 'Private group plan', as well as by the resurgence of massage-parlour pages.

This digital dissemination of prostitution is not confined to female provision. A recent study conducted in Dédougou, in the Burkinabè region of the Boucle du Mouhoun, documents the emergence of male sex work aimed at a female clientele, whose practitioners present themselves not as prostitutes but as 'couples' therapists' (Tengueri et al., 2026). This study shows that, as in Ouagadougou, the connection between practitioners and clients is made via social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram) and through paid intermediaries, but with even greater discretion, given that the clientele consists of financially comfortable women concerned to preserve their social and marital reputation. This finding suggests that the digital reconfiguration of prostitution in Burkina Faso is not confined to a single locality or a single gender of practitioner, but reflects a broader dynamic of digitally driven recomposition of sex markets, of which Ouagadougou and Dédougou offer two complementary variants.

This shift of prostitution towards the digital sphere raises particular concern given the issues it entails, notably platform security, the protection of personal data, and the emergence of new forms and networks of prostitution. This leads us to pose the following research question: how have new information and communication technologies restructured the field of prostitution in Ouagadougou? More specifically, what are the forms, or indeed the spaces, of prostitution in the digital age? What explains sex workers' recourse to modern social media? What socio-economic issues arise from this? This article aims to contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon of prostitution in the digital age by addressing these questions.

I. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comprehensive approach, comparable to that used in several recent studies on online sex work, which combine mixed methods associating online observation, informal interviews and content analysis to capture the lived experiences of sex workers (Pajnik & Kuhar, 2024; Rand & Stegeman, 2023). Data were collected in various ways, following three complementary techniques, in the city of Ouagadougou, over the period from December 2024 to February 2025. Owing to the sensitivity of the subject, the relative clandestinity of the activity, and the risks associated with the direct identification of respondents, data collection was conducted informally, without recourse to audio recording

or a standardised interview guide. Although this methodological choice limits the exhaustive verbatim transcription of exchanges, it made it possible to preserve interviewees' trust in a context where a declared survey might have compromised access to the field, a methodological trade-off frequently encountered in research on stigmatised and partially clandestine populations (Pitcher, 2015).

These three data-collection techniques were as follows.

- **Online immersion:** Within WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and Telegram channels bearing names such as 'Plan Bizi', 'Plan' or 'Private group plan' (in the practitioners' jargon), as well as on massage-parlour pages. This immersion made it possible to observe numerous prostitution advertisements, of the type 'I am available', 'I receive, a blow job for 5,000 francs', 'I travel to you'. These advertisements, found in WhatsApp groups and on advertising posters on massage parlours' Facebook pages, served as an entry point for sending private messages to certain sex workers and for continuing exchanges on WhatsApp. Some exchanges remained limited to online conversation, while others required arranging a meeting to pursue the exchange further.

- **Informal interviews:** Practitioners identified in WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, Telegram channels and/or massage-parlour pages were subjected to informal interviews, by appointment, with the researcher presenting himself as a prospective client.

- **Participant observation:** This was conducted at two levels. On the one hand, through immersion in the various groups and pages, in order to observe their functioning, their posts and the means of establishing contact. On the other hand, through visits, as a client, to certain massage parlours and meeting places where services are offered.

In total, three formal interviews and six informal interviews were conducted in four massage parlours. Ten meeting platforms were also explored, comprising five WhatsApp groups, three Telegram channels and two Facebook pages. This approach made it possible to collect a substantial volume of data, without recourse to paper records, in accordance with the research questions formulated in advance. At the end of each exchange, notes were written up immediately, recording the elements retained. Manual analysis was then carried out, based on thematic categories constructed from the research objectives, followed by a qualitative content analysis cross-referencing field notes with messages extracted from online groups and pages, in a logic of source triangulation.

Summary of the sample

Technique / data category	Detail	Number
Formal interviews	Massage parlour managers	3
Informal interviews	Sex workers met by appointment	6
Massage parloursvisited	Establishments observed online and in the field	4
Digital platformsexplored	WhatsApp (5), Telegram (3) and Facebook (2)	10

Source: field survey, December 2024 to February 2025.

This approach entails limitations that should be explicitly acknowledged. The sample, being non-probabilistic in nature, does not permit any claim to statistical representativeness of the phenomenon under study. The prospective-client stance adopted to gain access to the field, while enabling the observation of genuine interactions, also raises an ethical question relating to the absence of explicit informed consent from respondents regarding their participation in

research, a recurring issue in studies of hard-to-reach and partially clandestine populations, which calls for the utmost caution in the reporting and dissemination of the data collected.

II. Results

Social media are put to multiple uses; among these, they are mobilised as working tools that lend greater visibility to digital activities linked to prostitution. This section presents, in turn, the functioning of the virtual platforms observed, the reasons why sex workers resort to these platforms, and, finally, the socio-economic issues that arise from this.

II.1. Presentation and Functioning of the Virtual Platforms

Social media constitute virtual platforms that present themselves as spaces for the promotion of services, communication and interaction. They offer a view of a world in miniature, in that they enable connection on a global scale without any physical travel, an observation that echoes McLuhan's (1962) analysis of the compression of space-time by communication technologies. In Burkina Faso, and particularly in Ouagadougou, these platforms take multiple and proliferating forms. Facebook occupies a central place, notably through the online presence of physical businesses transposed into the digital world, such as the beauty and massage parlours that flourish in the city. These parlours meet a number of criteria that distinguish them from one another. First, they all have a physical presence in the districts of Burkina Faso, such as Rêve d'Or, Institut Sou-Massage, Bibiche Beauty Spa, Darling Massage or Flore Beauté Cosmétiques et Soins, to name but a few establishments observed in the city of Ouagadougou. For several decades, these parlours have multiplied across the districts of the capital and are, to a large extent, used for the purposes of prostitution. Our observations on the web, notably on the Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups of these parlours, make it easy to read the details of the services and prices on offer.



Services et Prix	
Different type de massage :	
• Massage relaxant.....	10000f
• Massage intégrale.....	11.000f
• Massage Tonifiant.....	15.000f
• Massage Sénégalais.....	18.000f
• Massage américain.....	20.000f
• Massage à la serviette chaude.....	30.000f
• Massage à 4 mains simple.....	22.000f
• Massage tonique.....	25.000f
• Massage américain à 4 mains.....	35.000f
• Augmentation du 3e pieds.	6000f(une séance) 3 séances à 15.000f
autres services	
• Soin du corps.....	20.000f
• Soins de visage.....	10.000f
• Gommage corporel.....	15.000f
• Epilation à la crème.....	7000f
• Epilation à la cire.....	10.000f
• Manicure/Pédicure.....	8.000f

Figure 1. Example of a price list from a massage parlour observed on a Facebook page (fieldwork, Ouagadougou, 2024–2025).

On these parlours' posters, the full range of services on offer is listed, along with prices. From one parlour to another, the range of services and prices differs considerably, with some parlours devoted exclusively to massage while others combine several types of body treatment.

Another notable fact concerns the geographical location of these parlours within the city of Ouagadougou. Some are situated in villas or secluded compounds, spread across peripheral districts such as Bagré-Pooré, Nagrin, Saaba, Nioko I or Bonheur-Ville. Others, by contrast, are located in the city centre, in the districts of Zone 1, Patte d'Oie, Dassasgho, Somgandé or Bendogo.

II.1.1. Beauty and Massage Parlours Disguised as Hidden Sites of Prostitution

Among these massage parlours, fieldwork makes it possible to distinguish two types of establishment: those that genuinely practise massage in its classic form, and those oriented towards prostitution. In the first case, the clientele frequenting these venues comes to receive straightforward massages; these are most often people acting on medical advice or in search of bodily well-being. This type of parlour is distinguishable from its price list alone, where the services offered are indicated explicitly and unambiguously, as with establishments such as 'Flore Beauté Cosmétiques et Soins', 'Rose Beauté' or 'Institut Sou-Massage'. In addition to existing on Facebook, these parlours are identifiable in reality by signboards indicating the district and precise location of their premises. For the most part, they do not operate illegally, insofar as they are registered and meet their tax obligations, in the same way as any legally constituted business in Burkina Faso.

1 The second group comprises massage parlours that exist on Facebook but which, in reality,
2 operate clandestinely, without any signboard. They are difficult to identify in the districts
3 where they are established, to the point that neighbours are often unaware of what actually
4 takes place there. Some local residents, noticing an unusual movement of people entering and
5 leaving, form an a priori idea of what may be happening; the more curious sometimes seek to
6 find out more. For these establishments, the entire process of making contact takes place on
7 Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram, where contact is established before any physical
8 meeting.

9 **II.1.2. Virtual Platforms as a Working Tool and a Means of Resilience in the Practice of** 10 **Prostitution**

11 Fieldwork confirms that certain Facebook pages and certain WhatsApp and Telegram
12 accounts are created for the purposes of online prostitution. These platforms facilitate
13 communication and the promotion of all manner of activities, offering increased visibility in a
14 world that is today interconnected by social media, a dynamic which the literature describes
15 as a digital value network linking workers, platforms and clients (Howson et al., 2021). The
16 city of Ouagadougou is no exception to this rule. Sex workers have moved into these digital
17 spaces to increase the visibility of their activity, which facilitates access to a connected
18 clientele. Through these channels, they present their range of services, and clients negotiate
19 with them via the same channels until an agreement is reached.

20 An interview conducted with a manager of a massage parlour, Institut B, illustrates this
21 functioning:

22 *‘Our services are as follows: the four-hand massage is performed by two girls*
23 *who massage you; the erotic massage involves masturbation and caressing of*
24 *the intimate parts, and lasts thirty minutes; the American massage is a*
25 *massage for fatigue and sensuality, using plenty of oil; the Ghanaian massage*
26 *is a massage for fatigue, with the girl wearing sexy attire; the toning massage*
27 *is used to relax the joints, aches and fatigue; the full-body massage is a*
28 *relaxing massage with a hand finish; the relaxing massage is used to relax,*
29 *unwind and recharge.’*

30 This range of services provides a typology of the massages offered by Institut B to its
31 clientele. All these types of massage are intended to give the client a sensation of bodily well-
32 being. As regards the erotic massage, involving masturbation and caressing of the intimate
33 parts, it can, by the end of the session, only arouse sexual desire in the client, to the point that
34 he most often requests sexual penetration with the masseuse. In reality, these thirty minutes
35 of masturbation and caressing of the intimate parts represent sufficient time to constitute
36 foreplay to a sexual act, even before the penetrative phase begins, should the masseuse agree,
37 in exchange for a sum added to that already paid for the massage service. This sum varies
38 from one parlour to another, ranging on average between 5,000 and 10,000 CFA francs.

39 A clarification should be made regarding massages ‘with a finish’. In one case, the massage
40 with a finish may end in sexual intercourse, should the client so wish; in a second case, the
41 ‘hand finish’ amounts to nothing other than masturbating the client to ejaculation, should he
42 desire it. Some clients decline this final step entirely and seek only bodily relaxation, without
43 any pursuit of sexual pleasure.

44 According to a masseuse (KF):

1 *'What we were taught during our two-week training, before starting work, is*
2 *that once you have finished massaging the client, you do not need to ask him*
3 *whether you should make him ejaculate: you move straight on to masturbation*
4 *and caressing his genitals until he ejaculates. Sometimes you start the*
5 *masturbation and the client tells you to stop, because he is not interested, or,*
6 *on the contrary, he tells you he is interested in a finish involving sexual*
7 *penetration. At that point, it is up to you to negotiate the price with him. I do it*
8 *for 5,000 francs.'*

9 According to OF, from the D. Massage parlour:

10 *'After I have finished massaging the client, and as soon as I start the hand*
11 *finish, the client sometimes asks me for a penetrative finish. I do it for 10,000*
12 *francs, take it or leave it. Sometimes the client asks for a lower price; some*
13 *accept my rate, others refuse and get annoyed, but that is not my problem.'*

14 Behind the words of these two sex workers practising in massage parlours lie realities that
15 remain largely concealed. The first is that the massage parlour serves as a cover for the
16 clandestine practice of prostitution, without recourse to soliciting, a practice whose
17 prohibition limits practitioners' room for manoeuvre and exposes them to social disapproval.
18 This ban on soliciting in Burkina Faso indeed restricts the scope of action of sex workers,
19 who are compelled to find other forms of resilience in order to carry out their activity. This
20 resilience involves the mobilisation of digital platforms as a means of communication and a
21 working tool in the service of advertising massage parlours. The second reality concerns the
22 building of a loyal clientele composed, to a large extent, of married men seeking sexual
23 relations and experiencing difficulties with their spouse. These parlours then become,
24 initially, a place of refuge, and subsequently, a place for satisfying libido. This situation may,
25 over time, give rise to a form of addiction among certain clients if they are not careful, and
26 may contribute to the social normalisation of this phenomenon.

27 II.2. Reasons for Sex Workers' Recourse to Modern Social Media

28 Several reasons account for the use of social media in the practice of prostitution. Our field
29 data reveal three main reasons explaining this recourse to virtual platforms. For the users
30 interviewed, these platforms constitute a rapid means of communicating with several people
31 at once. They also offer the possibility of presenting service offers at no significant cost,
32 unlike a physical business, which would require heavier investment, both at the time of its
33 establishment and in its day-to-day operation (recruitment of staff and payment of wages,
34 rental of premises, recurring expenses).

35 As K.B., a sex worker in the Bagré-Pooré district of Ouagadougou, explains:

36 *'With WhatsApp, everything is easy. I can do my business easily; all I need is*
37 *Telecel, Telmob or Airtel data [...]. I can also chat with several clients at*
38 *once; we chat, we agree, and I set the appointment; he comes for his*
39 *massage.'*

40 The broadening of one's social network and the resilience of the activity in the face of legal
41 restrictions constitute a second reason cited. Digital platforms expose sex workers less to
42 social criticism, insofar as they can operate clandestinely, limiting others' scrutiny of their
43 activity. These platforms further enable them to reach a wider clientele, to negotiate prices

1 and to set appointments. This requires no travel, only an internet connection, whether
2 provided by Telmob, Airtel or Telecel.

3 The words of S.A., a sex worker in the Tampouy district of Ouagadougou, illustrate this well:

4 *'I work mainly through WhatsApp; communication is quick and contact is*
5 *easy [...]. If a client contacts me, I am easy to reach, I am connected at all*
6 *times. I manage all my business on WhatsApp, so that when I go out, I can*
7 *arrange the appointment quickly and efficiently, instead of wasting time.'*

8 Thirdly, some sex workers who use digital platforms offer services outside massage parlours.
9 The appointment may then take place elsewhere, generally at a hotel, at the client's expense,
10 or at the client's home. Home visits nevertheless remain little practised, as many sex workers
11 are not in favour of them, the risk of abuse being considered higher.

12 According to T.A., a sex worker in the Kossodo district of Ouagadougou:

13 *'In what I do, I am first and foremost a bizi manager; there is also the*
14 *massage I offer to some of my clients who wish for it. I do it at a hotel, at the*
15 *client's expense, in addition to the price of the massage [...]. If the client also*
16 *wants a sexual finish, he adds around 5,000 CFA francs.'*

17 These accounts attest that some sex workers have incorporated massage into their activity in
18 order to retain part of their clientele, even though the sex trade remains their main activity.
19 From this perspective, the diversification of services offered forms part of a resilience
20 strategy aimed at meeting the expectations of clients seeking novelty.

21 **II.3. The Socio-Economic Issues of the Phenomenon**

22 The use of digital platforms by sex workers is regarded by a large proportion of the young
23 women and women concerned as a channel of economic and social integration. These
24 platforms enable them to develop their activity profitably. It should be noted that, behind
25 these platforms, there are often financial backers who organise the activity with a view to
26 attracting clientele to the massage parlours they own. In these parlours, young unemployed
27 women in search of work come to hire out their services in order to build up savings, which
28 some envisage reinvesting in an activity deemed more 'dignified'.

29 O.F., aged 18, employed in a massage parlour, testifies:

30 *'I arrived from Bobo-Dioulasso three years ago. I left school in Year 10*
31 *[troisième], for lack of means to continue, and I remained unemployed. It was*
32 *for lack of a job that I entered this line of work, while waiting to find*
33 *something better [...]. I know that this work is often frowned upon, but we are*
34 *forced to do it. We are looking for money, and once we have earned a little, I*
35 *will go and open my own business [...]. I found this job on Facebook: I saw*
36 *the advertisement, I called, and that is how I ended up here, after first having*
37 *worked in another parlour, in Pissy.'*

38 Some young women come from other countries in the sub-region, Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire,
39 to seek an income in these massage parlours, which they consider to enable them to earn
40 money quickly, and discreetly.

41 The account of A.I., a young Togolese woman, illustrates this:

1 *'I came from Togo to look for work; I studied economics and completed my*
2 *studies. For lack of employment, I came to Burkina to earn money, before*
3 *going back to open something better than this job. I do it because it is what I*
4 *found on arriving in Ouaga; you can earn a good living here. I left a child*
5 *back home before coming.'*

6 These accounts show that the unemployed young women who work in these parlours are not
7 all sex workers. Some are so from the outset, while others become so gradually, under the
8 effect of circumstances, particularly when they carry out activities that expose them to it, as
9 in massage parlours where, on a daily basis, some clients request sexual services at the end of
10 the massage. The economic opportunity offered by this work thus compels some to engage in
11 it. It should also be noted that a hybridisation of commercial functions develops around this
12 activity of prostitution, marked by a diversification of services, with massage parlours
13 becoming multifunctional venues combining the sex trade, the trade in bodily well-being, and
14 the sale of cosmetic products (perfumes, ointments, beauty products), the prices of which
15 range between 7,000 and 30,000 CFA francs. This local trade responds to a logic of economic
16 opportunity that enables these venues to increase profitability and turnover. This
17 multifunctionality of certain massage parlours could thus be described as a secondary
18 income-generating activity, grafted onto a principal activity, in short, a small trade within a
19 larger trade.

20 **III. Discussion**

21 The world has become a 'global village', as McLuhan (1962) affirmed, a claim that finds
22 particular resonance in the various channels of communication that today interconnect the
23 entire world. Information circulates and spreads within a reduced span of time; one can be on
24 the other side of the world and communicate easily with others, attesting to an unprecedented
25 ease of communication. African cities are no exception to this dynamic. Ouagadougou, the
26 political capital of Burkina Faso, is undergoing a modernisation expressed notably through
27 the daily use of communication tools integrated into the habits of the Ouagalese population.
28 Massage parlours, like other activities once confined to the sphere of discreet clandestinity,
29 have thus moved onto digital platforms, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, which have
30 become working tools for practitioners of prostitution, or 'bizi managers', in the development
31 of their activity.

32 Regarded as the oldest profession in the world according to a tradition dating back to biblical
33 writings, this phenomenon has endured through time and persists in our contemporary
34 societies. In certain countries, a regulationist approach has enabled the recognition and
35 legalisation of this practice (Rouamba, 2016). Other African countries, like Burkina Faso,
36 adhere more closely to an abolitionist approach. The practice is not officially prohibited
37 there, but it is exercised in its most widespread form, 'soliciting', which is sanctioned under
38 the Criminal Code. In Burkina Faso, four typologies of prostitution are generally recorded,
39 namely street prostitution, brothel-based prostitution, escort and related services, and child
40 prostitution, an emerging practice suppressed under Law No. 011-2014/AN. Prostitution is
41 thus not illegal in principle, but soliciting is, under the Criminal Code.

42 This legal configuration partly accounts for the digital migration observed. The legal
43 restriction on soliciting has driven sex workers to make the digital sphere a space for
44 circumventing the social and legal constraints weighing on the exercise of their activity. This
45 reading aligns with international analyses of the platformisation of sex work, which show that
46 recourse to digital platforms stems less from a straightforward choice than from a strategic

adaptation to a constraining regulatory and social environment (Rand, 2019; Pajnik & Kuhar, 2024). Platforms thus offer an enhanced possibility of attracting clientele, particularly through the integration of massage parlours, which constitute, to a large extent, veiled sites of prostitution.

This dynamic is not, however, without ambivalence. While the international literature highlights the gains in autonomy, safety and visibility afforded by platforms (Jones, 2015; Mergenthaler & Yasseri, 2021), it also warns of the emergence of new forms of economic dependence on the platforms themselves, whose algorithmic logics and mechanisms of competitive matching may reproduce, in digital form, relations of domination already identified in the informal sex economy (Palatchie, Beban & Nicholls, 2025; Rand & Stegeman, 2023). The case of Ouagadougou thus illustrates, at the local level, a broader tension between relative emancipation and new vulnerabilities, characteristic of the contemporary platformisation of sex work at the global scale (Howson et al., 2021; Pitcher, 2015; Swords, 2021).

This reading is reinforced by comparison with the study conducted in Dédougou by Tengueri et al. (2026) on male prostitution aimed at a female clientele. Although concerned with a different object, young men selling sexual services to older, financially established women, this research highlights mechanisms structurally close to those observed in Ouagadougou, namely the systematic recourse to social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram) for making contact, the mobilisation of paid intermediaries acting as brokers, and, above all, a strategy of identity requalification intended to neutralise the stigma attached to prostitution. In Ouagadougou, practitioners present themselves as 'masseuses' or 'bizi managers' operating in outwardly legal parlours; in Dédougou, practitioners define themselves as 'couples' therapists' making up for marital shortcomings. In both cases, this rhetoric of a utilitarian, therapeutic, relaxing or restorative function enables the actors to continue a stigmatised activity while giving it social value, illustrating, in Goffman's sense (1963, 1975), an active management of the gap between virtual and actual social identity.

This comparison also reveals significant differences according to the gender of the practitioners and of the clientele. Whereas female prostitution in Ouagadougou caters to a predominantly male clientele and charges moderate rates (of the order of 5,000 to 10,000 CFA francs for a service with a finish), male prostitution in Dédougou targets a female clientele with markedly greater financial means and charges considerably higher rates, which can reach 100,000 to 250,000 CFA francs (Tengueri et al., 2026). This price asymmetry suggests that the reversal of the usual economic roles between buyers and sellers of sexual services does not eliminate the centrality of economic domination in the transaction, which, as Bourdieu (1998) shows for masculine domination in general, continues to structure relations between partners, but rather redistributes its poles according to gender, with female clients of male sex workers having substantially greater purchasing power than the clients of female sex workers. This finding invites us to regard the platformisation of prostitution in Burkina Faso not as a homogeneous phenomenon, but as a set of digital markets differentiated according to the gender of the actors, their respective economic resources and the forms of stigmatisation to which they are exposed.

Conclusion

At the close of this analysis, it appears that new information and communication technologies have profoundly restructured the field of prostitution in Ouagadougou, shifting part of its practice from public spaces to semi-private digital spaces, WhatsApp groups, Facebook

pages, Telegram channels and outwardly legal massage parlours. This reconfiguration responds to several logics, namely the pursuit of a wider, more loyal and more discreet clientele, the desire to circumvent the legal constraints on soliciting, and the construction of economic resilience strategies in the face of precarity. The socio-economic issues that arise from this are manifold, notably the professional integration of vulnerable young women, the hybridisation of commercial activities around massage parlours, and exposure to new risks relating to platform security and personal data protection.

This study has limitations that should be noted, namely the qualitative and informal nature of the data collection, dictated by the sensitivity of the subject, which does not permit any claim to statistical representativeness of the phenomenon; furthermore, the focus on the city of Ouagadougou alone calls for caution regarding any generalisation to the national scale. Further research could usefully deepen the comparison between several cities in Burkina Faso, as well as the legal and personal-data-protection dimensions associated with the platformisation of prostitution, in a context where the national regulatory framework remains largely silent on these new forms of practising the activity.

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