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New book from India Thusi explores conflicts between sex work and policing in Johannesburg

Posted on [December 3, 2021](#) by [joboyd](#)

[India Thusi](#) was clerking for the Constitutional Court of South Africa when she first visited the Hillbrow community in Johannesburg, South Africa. She'd heard various warnings and cautionary tales about the neighborhood, its seedy reputation keeping many away. But she quickly discovered a bustling, vibrant community that was both welcoming and exciting. And that first visit led to visit led to a nearly four-year project that culminates in the publication—by Stanford University Press—of [Policing Bodies: Law, Sex Work, and Desire in Johannesburg](#) on Dec. 21.

The ethnographic work from the Maurer School of Law professor is the result of two years of field research, interviewing scores of sex workers, law enforcement, and other members of the criminal justice system to paint a clear picture on what Thusi described as the liminal area sex workers often occupy—professionals in a community that has criminalized, but mostly turned a blind eye toward, their activities.



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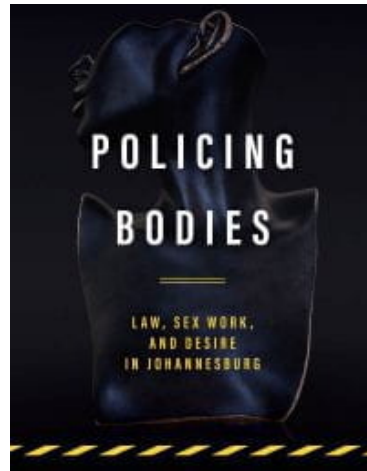
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Johannesburg police officer tasked with filing community complaints. “I began...by asking for his thoughts on ‘prostitution,’ (the term for sex work used by the police) and, soon after, asked him whether prostitution should be legal,” she said.

“It is legal...mostly,” the officer replied.



Policing Bodies will be released December 21 by the Stanford University Press.

The contradictions between the formal and informal policing of sex workers isn't unique to Johannesburg or even South Africa. But the transformation of the police there to a post-Apartheid institution intent on serving its community provided a distinctive window into how sex workers are, and perhaps should be, treated.

“I had been interested in the South African police as an institution, as they had claimed they were interested in embracing human rights norms and changing their reputation from Apartheid,” she said. “And I wondered what it meant to be a police force interested in changing to a more human rights-centered focus.”

But the friction between that evolving model of policing and the existing sex workers kept coming up in the people Thusi spoke with.

“One thing I learned is that policing is not just about protecting and serving the community,” she said.

“Sometimes they do things that would undermine public safety and reinforce racial and sexual hierarchies. We



Thusi said she initially focused her research on the ways sex workers were being treated by law enforcement, but the question of whether sex work should be legalized in the first place became unavoidable.

“I don’t think there’s a singular approach that will work,” she said. “Decriminalization could be a good starting point, but it involves so much more. Even the cultural norms around women in general need more work—there was a distinct difference in the way officers spoke to women as opposed to men. There needs to be, I think, a localized approach. There isn’t one grand scheme that will work. Sometimes, as my experience demonstrated, even the formal rules didn’t even matter.”

Policing Bodies will be released on December 21 and is available through the [Stanford University Press](#) and other booksellers.

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