

# Urban Justice in Amsterdam's Red Light District

20-05-2026

# Introduction

Anna Torres & Marthe Singelenberg

# Welcome

## SAFETY & ACCESSIBILITY

- Spoken language is English - please **speak slowly and clearly**;
- **No tolerance for discrimination** - no racism, transphobia, whorephobia, ableism, or classism;
- **Respect** people's jobs, names, pronouns & anonymity;
- **Prioritise sex workers' voices** - listen and stay aware of the space you take;
- Strictly **no photos or recordings** - presentation will be available by email

"PIC display"

Picture by Nat Portnoy (2023)



# Program

<b>17.00</b>	Opening & statement by L
<b>17.10</b>	Research presentation by Anna & Marthe
<b>17.50</b>	Questions from the audience
<b>18.00</b>	Panel discussion with L, Ada & Nayra
<b>18.30</b>	Get together & drinks

# Opening Statement

By L

*“Behind the window I am my own boss. I choose when I want to work, who I work with, what I do with them, and for how much money. I can say “no” as much as I like because I have the privilege of being able to work in a safe, licensed work space, something most sex workers in Amsterdam do not have. But the second I step outside that window, I am faced with the reality that, no matter what type of sex work we do, society typecasts us as either victims or criminals and, either way, we're unwanted.”*

*“When I walk through this neighborhood, which by the way, many other window workers and I also live in, I see constant reminders for tourists not to pee in the canals, not to drink alcohol or buy drugs. But where are the permanent, big white signs on the bridges and light posts telling people to respect sex workers? If people are taught to respect us, they will learn to respect the space around us as well.”*

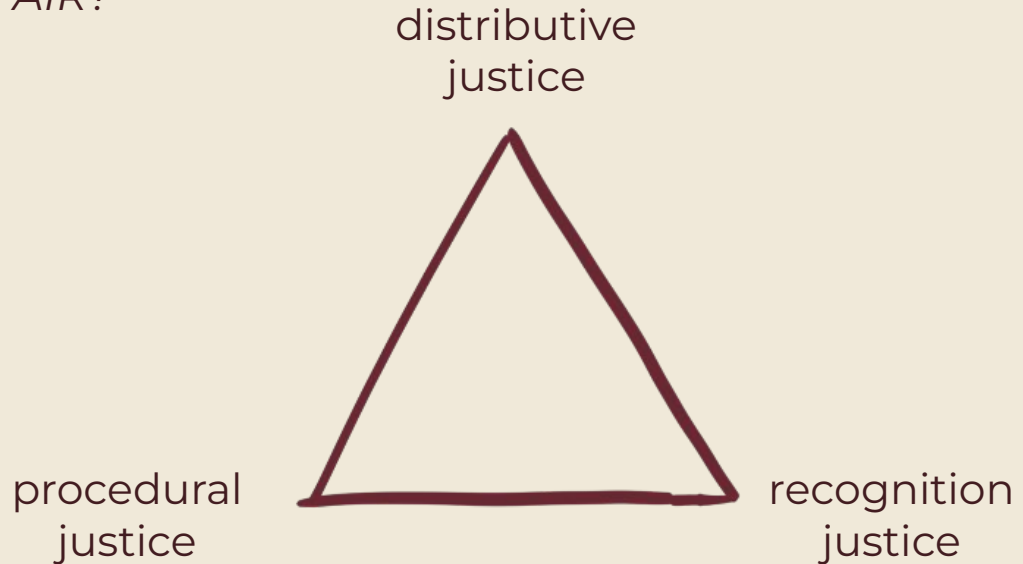
# Research Presentation

# A Very Short Intro to Justice

JUSTICE MEANS “FAIR, THE RIGHT THING TO DO”.

*WHO DETERMINES WHAT IS FAIR?*

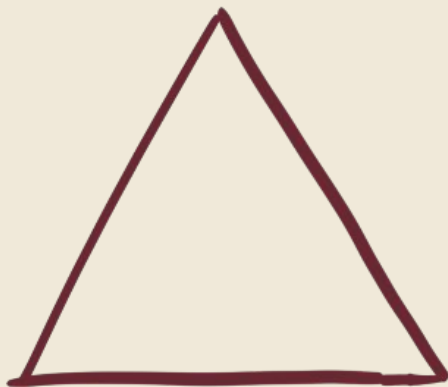
- 3 dimensions of justice:



# Three Dimensions of Justice

**Who** gets **what**, why and **why** is this fair?

distributive  
justice



Who gets **involved** in what way,  
how are **decisions** being made  
and **why** is this fair?

procedural  
justice

Do I **recognize** all relevant  
groups and entities?

recognition  
justice

Source: Just Design Toolbox (2025)

# Justice in Urban Development

“In order to achieve a just city, all three dimensions of justice have to be met.”  
- Susan Fainstein (*The Just City*, 2011)

- In this research, main focus on **distributive justice**:  
*Who has a right to the space in the RLD?*
- To answer to question, we started by addressing **recognition justice**:  
*Which groups or individuals should be recognized when talking about the future of sex work in the red light district?*
- Design of the research methodology supports policy makers in achieving **procedural justice**:  
*How can we include as many perspectives as possible in decision-making processes?*

# Goals

- To **support local communities in getting their voice heard** in urban development processes where conflicting needs cause experiences of injustice
- To **provide tools to (local) policy makers** to incorporate justice into their decision making processes
- To add **nuance to the debate** on the future of sex work in the Red Light District and **build a bridge** between different stakeholders



# Desired Outcomes

- To evaluate and add more insights to the existing '**Just Design Tool**' and use the Amsterdam RLD as a real life case study
- To help foster **conversations and understanding** between the different stakeholders and policy makers
- To **decolonize the power hierarchy** between policy makers / designers and affected stakeholders (designing *with*, not *for*)
- To use a **value-based approach to add depth and nuance** to the debate on the future of sex work in Amsterdam's RLD



# Methodology

## STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

- *Who has a stake in the future of sex work in the RLD?*
- *What do they value for the future of the RLD?*
  
- 18 interviews with different types of stakeholders:
  - Residents
  - Entrepreneurs (sex workers, business owners)
  - Social workers
  - Cultural/religious institutions
  - Tourists/visitors
  
- Fieldwork observations



# On safety

“You want someone on the street with eyes on you. [...] It feels less scary to walk around a place where there are 18 women who’ve seen you, you know.” -  
*Sex worker*

# On community

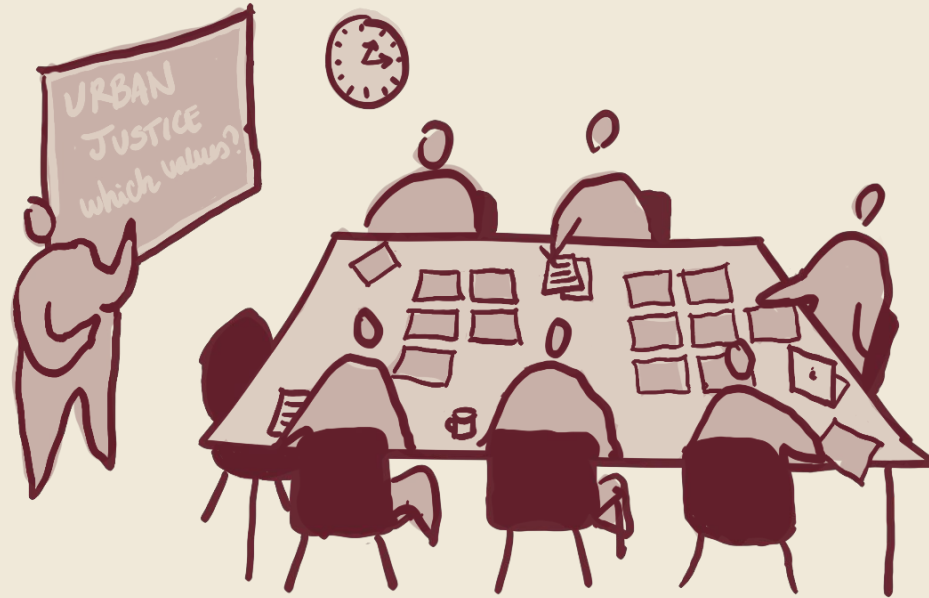
“Really funny things happen here. Off course serious and sad things happen, but it can also be just very cozy and we celebrate together. Or we just chat and hang out. I have so much love for this place and the people here.” - *Social worker*

# On culture

“Your culture is very liberal. We love the culture, the art, the buildings, the architecture, the canals. Very interesting.”- *Tourist*

# Focus Group 1

WITH LOCAL POLICY MAKERS



# Focus Group 1

WITH LOCAL POLICY MAKERS

- Picking values from the interview data:
  - Showing the **complexity of balancing different needs** in urban development processes
  - Discussing the values **most often mentioned** by respondents
- Evaluating existing scenario's for the future of sex work in the Red Light District:
  - **Primary values / secondary values** → how do you determine what has priority?
  - **Which groups** do you prioritize?

safety



community



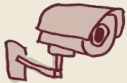
culture



# Focus Group 1

- Some values are **defined differently** → a different definition can create misunderstanding & friction, or on the other hand, foster listening and understanding
- Some values are **competing with each other** → when one is being met, the other will not. This will cause friction or **nuisance**.

safety according  
to some



safety  
according to  
others



calm



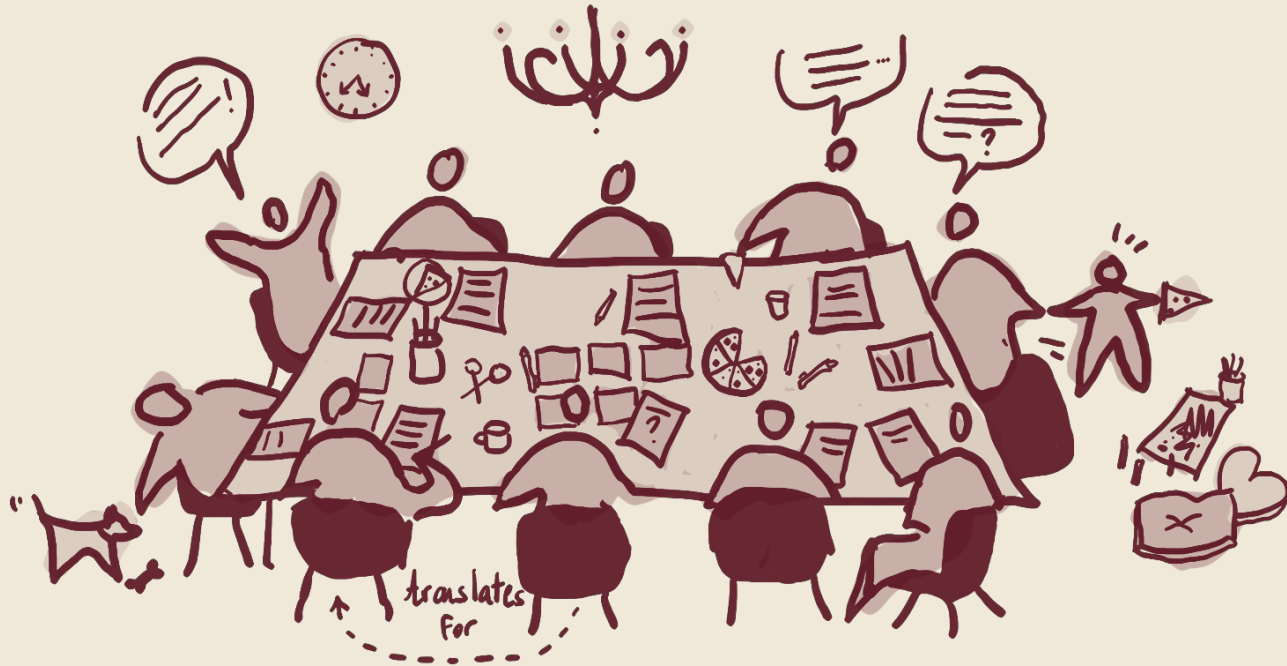
VS

busy



# Focus Group 2

WITH SEX WORKERS

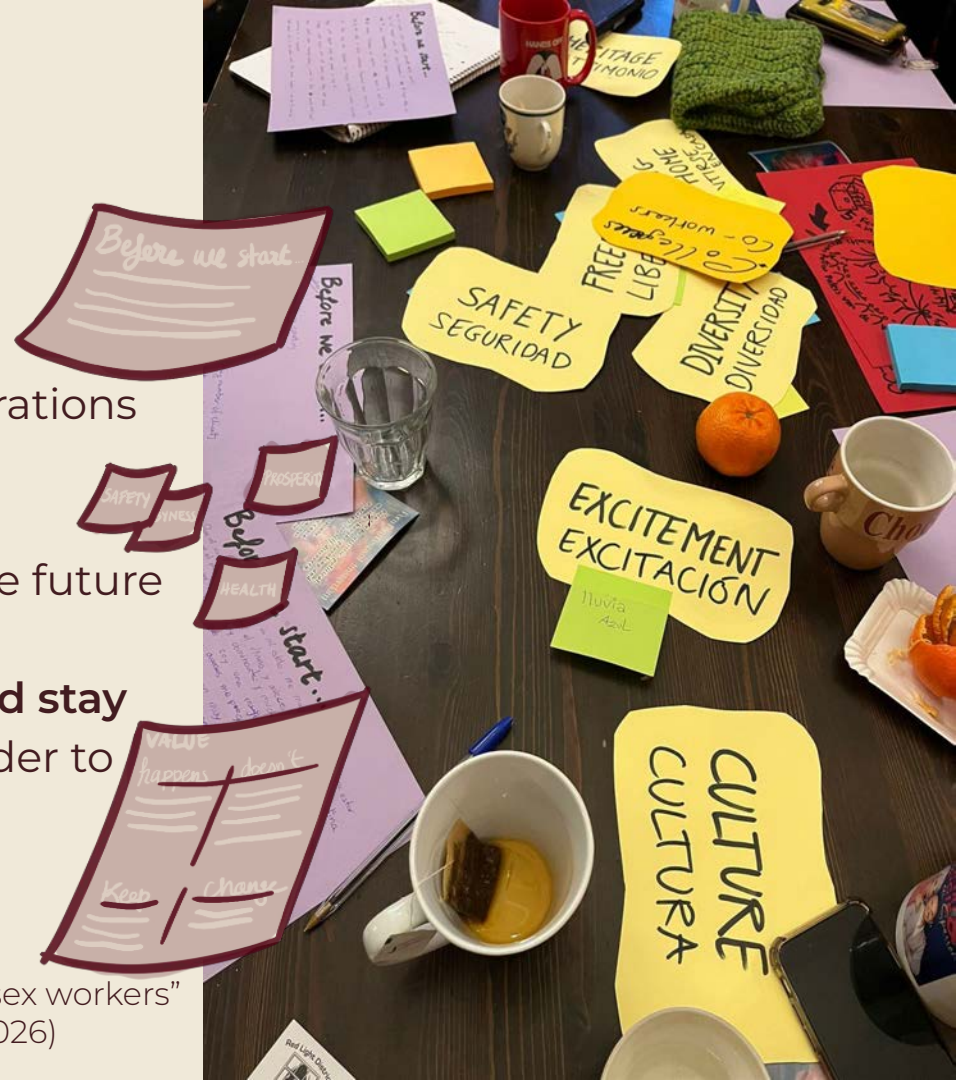


# Focus Group 2

## WITH SEX WORKERS

- Start with **unloading concerns**, frustrations and other things which need to be expressed
- Adding and **prioritizing values** on the future of sex work in the RLD
- Filling in the value cards: **what should stay and what should be discarded** in order to meet this value?

“Focusgroup with sex workers”  
- by Anna Torres (2026)



# Focus Group 2

- Some values are **dependent on other values** → when one is not met, the other can also not be met.
- There is diversity within groups → members of groups **do not always agree on the prioritization or interpretation of values**

sw's safety can  
only be met when



sw's rights  
are in order



same community



different lived  
experiences



# Value-based analysis: four levels

1. **Intra-value conflict:** the same values are defined differently
2. **Inter-value conflict:** different values are competing with each other
3. **Interdependency:** values are dependent on other values
4. **Inter-community diversity:** members of the same group do not agree on the prioritization or interpretation of values

# Values matrix

safety



culture



accessibility



prosperity



feeling  
at home



excitement



heritage



diversity



community



freedom



rights



health



participation



relationship  
to co-workers



calm



beauty



busyness

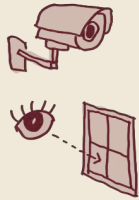


eroticism



# Intra-value conflicts

safety



culture



accessibility



prosperity



feeling at home



excitement



heritage



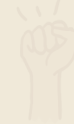
diversity



community



freedom



rights



health



participation



relationship to co-workers



calm



beauty



busyness



eroticism

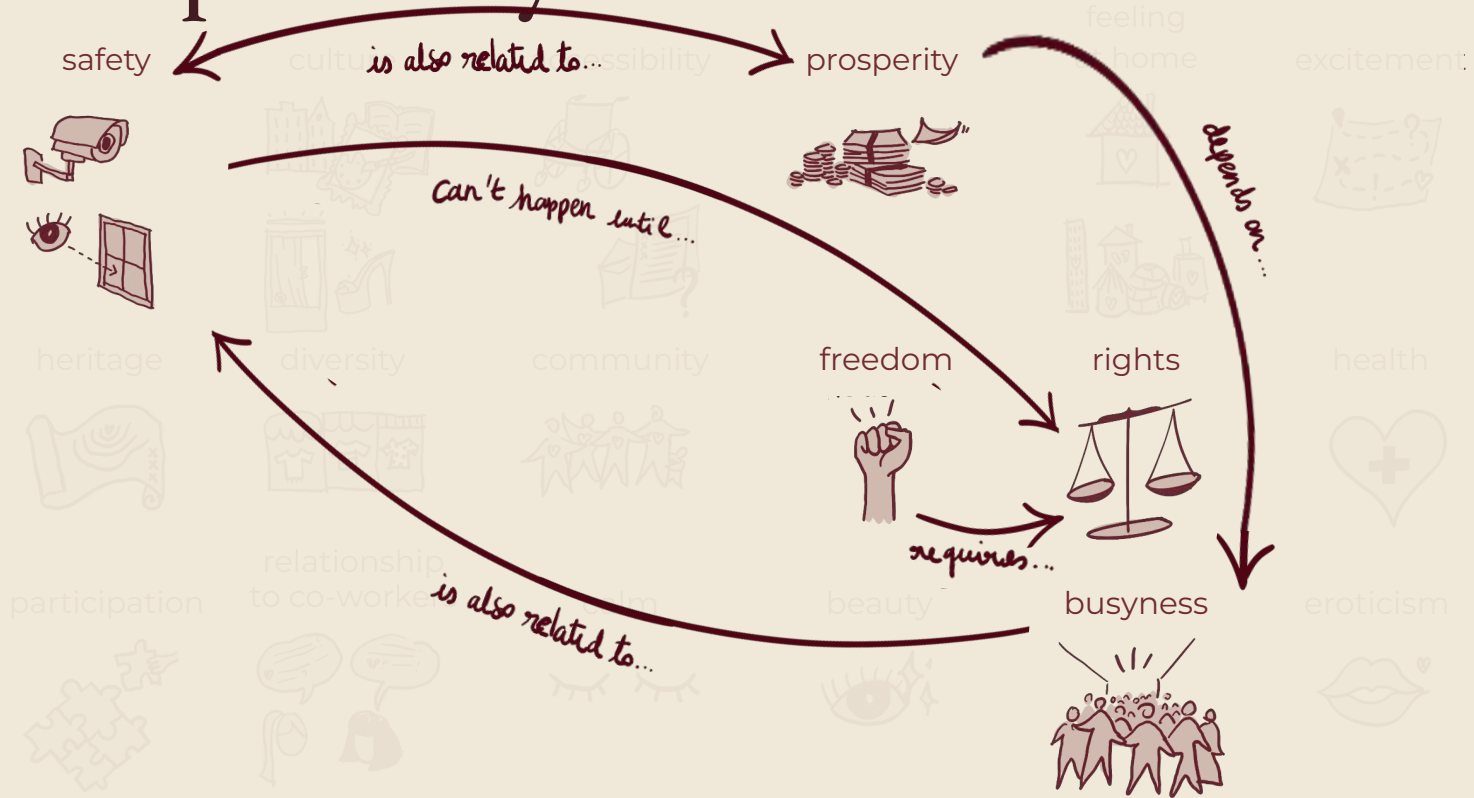


*this means something else for you than it does for me!*

# Inter-value conflicts



# Interdependency



# Inter-community diversity

safety



culture



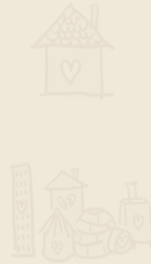
accessibility



prosperity



home



excitement



*This value is crucial to my experience in this field!*

heritage



diversity



community



freedom



rights



health



participation



relationship to co-workers



calm



beauty



busyness



eroticism



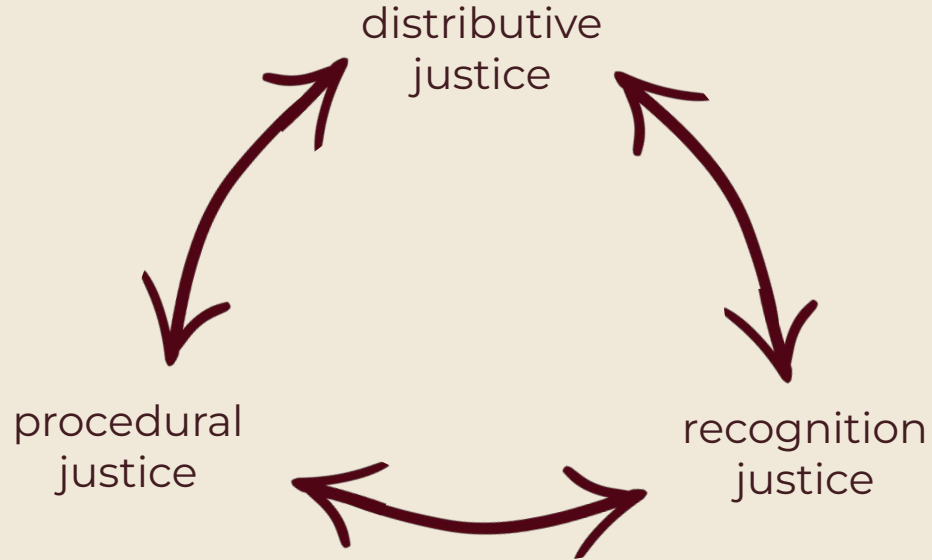
# Conclusions (what?)

- Shifting from **problem solving** to **mediating conversation** helps to design *with* and not *for* communities - from top down to horizontal
- Urban justice depends on **including affected communities** in the decision making process from the start
- Conversation setups must be adapted to the **needs and capacities** of the stakeholder group - “we take a step in each other’s direction”
- Lived experiences and emotions are **valid sources of knowledge** and should be included as such in the decision making process
- **Value-based dialogue** helps to address tensions, priorities and conflicts in a more open & constructive way
- Value-based dialogue helps include **nuance and diverse viewpoints** when discussing complex ecosystems

# Conclusions (how?)

- How can we **build a bridge** between **'the designer/policy maker'** - the one taking the decisions and **'the beneficiary'** - the one affected by the decisions?
- We **have created tools to foster conversations and more understanding** between stakeholders
  1. **Focusgroup set-up** designed to the needs of the affected stakeholders
  2. **Value-based analysis** helps to get clarity on what matters to whom and to point out frictions, interdependencies and different interpretations

# Making just decisions



# Conclusions - how to make just decisions

- Make sure you **recognize** existing power structures and make extra effort to reach groups whose voices are not automatically heard in decision-making
- Carefully design your participation **process** in order to reach all relevant stakeholders - catered to their needs. Forgot anyone? Go back a step and include them.
- When talking about **distributing** rights, spaces and other things, **focus on values** to find out what really matters and use the value cards to operationalize these values;
- Foster conversations with relevant stakeholders to **highlight frictions** and **prioritize** values together.
- **Let's get to work!**

# Questions from audience

Clarifying questions - there will be space for your input during the panel discussion

# Panel discussion

With L, Nayra Green & Ada

*“For me, after working on the streets for many years, de Wallen are a safe haven. Working behind the windows means I can experience safety, peace and prosperity.”*

*“In order to include sex workers, you have to work a little harder by providing translations and meeting us at different hours than your working hours. Only sending us a letter with an invitation to a participation meeting is not enough.”*



# Thank you!

Contact info:

[m.singelenberg@hva.nl](mailto:m.singelenberg@hva.nl)

[contact@studioannatorres.com](mailto:contact@studioannatorres.com)

“City of Red”

Picture by Nat Portnoy (2007)