

Panimula, Pamumuhay, Pagmamahal, and Pananatili: Experiences of Some Female Sex Workers in Puerto Princesa City



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Abstract

Sex work is a prominent and often contested aspect of society worldwide, frequently challenging established social norms. Although sex work occurs through consensual transactions, it is profoundly impacted by societal judgment and persistent stigma (Weitzer, 2018). Recognizing that stigma is a critical problem in this field, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of selected female sex workers in Puerto Princesa City. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research examined eight participants—four street-based and four bar hosts—identified through snowball sampling. Guided by four themes, i.e., *Panimula*, *Pamumuhay*, *Pagmamahal*, and *Pananatili*, and Goffman's Stigma Framework, the study reveals how stigma emerges from tensions between participants' identities and prevailing cultural norms. Despite feeling stigmatized, many remain in sex work due to economic hardship and limited employment options linked to low educational attainment. The study highlights how economic hardship, cultural stigma, and systemic challenges shape the lived experiences of selected female sex workers in Puerto Princesa. It also recommends support from related agencies alongside government support aimed at reducing stigma and expanding access to healthcare services, capacity-building initiatives, and economic empowerment opportunities.

Keywords: sex work, street-based sex workers, bar hosts, lived experiences, stigma

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1. Introduction

Sex work is a global phenomenon that, according to Akinboye (2013), could even be traced back to ancient times and practiced across different countries. In fact, it has already been coined as the "oldest profession," according to Aguilar (2020). The term "sex work" was coined by American sex

worker, performer, academic, and activist Carol Leigh to describe consensual transactions between workers and clients, emphasizing that selling or buying sexual services is not a human rights violation. Emerging during the 1970s–1980s, global sex workers and women's movements, it marked a shift from the negative connotations of "prostitute," historically associated with moral corruption and powerlessness (Leigh, 1997, cited in Duria, 2021). Lister (2017) highlighted that "sex worker" includes all roles in the industry, from glamor models to phone sex operators, granting autonomy and professionalism and reflecting the complexities of modern sex work. Historically, sex work has been a persistent social feature, often sparking debates and challenging established social norms. Globally, stigma has resulted in widespread violence against sex workers, including abuse, human rights violations, and murder, as noted by Deering et al. (2014). Platt et al. (2020) report that sex workers are often excluded from government relief, protection programs, and health services, making them one of the most marginalized groups. Berthe (2018) adds that this stigma forces sex workers to hide their work to avoid abuse and public shaming. As a result, harmful misconceptions such as viewing sex workers as uneducated and poor continue to justify socially accepted disrespect and discrimination.

In the context of the Philippines, Aguilar (2020) suggested that the legalization of sex work is a better option to minimize its negative implications, if not totally resolve them. Despite consensual transactions between sex workers and clients, the work itself is not free of societal judgment and stigma, which remain pervasive even today. Stigma is one of the key problems in sex work (Weitzer, 2018). It has been conceptualized by Berthe (2018) as "whore stigma," a form of insult to sex workers, particularly women who embody unconventional gender norms, such as selling their bodies for sex, satisfying lust and fantasies, and carrying and transmitting sexually transmitted diseases. Furthermore, Article 202 of the 90-year-old Revised Penal Code (RPC) says that selling sex is a criminal violation, and women are considered "prostitutes" if they "habitually indulge in sexual intercourse or lascivious conduct." Individuals who sell sex may face penalties and prison time. However, the Philippine Sex Workers Collective (PSWC) advocates for sex workers' rights and decriminalization, thereby envisioning a society in which sex work is viewed as just another type of job. Furthermore, the Magna Carta of Women designated prostitution as a form of abuse against women in 2009. This means that sex workers are both offenders and victims in the eyes of the law. According to Rivas (2020), both parties believe that the government has marginalized the people involved in the sex trade. Given this legal context, the researchers acknowledge the complex socio-legal position of sex workers as both offenders and victims. Thus, the researchers do not intend to normalize sex work, advocate for its legalization, or promote the recognition of sex work as an acceptable occupation in contradiction to Philippine law. The purpose of the analysis is neither decriminalization nor political advocacy, but rather social awareness and a phenomenological understanding of the participants' lived experiences, which may guide relevant organizations in offering appropriate support.

Given the emergence of sex work and the corresponding stigma and discrimination, Ma and Loke (2019) stressed that studies about the stigma that sex workers are particularly facing are still limited, even up to the present. In the Philippines alone, according to Jaymalin (2019), the narratives of the marginalized sex workers with their experiences were still undocumented and unheard because even in the digital era and with the internet, the subject of sex remains a "taboo" or forbidden topic in Filipino households. Accompanying the population and business growth of Puerto Princesa City is a corresponding increase in hotels, pension houses, and karaoke bars, which has influenced the recruitment of female sex workers. Timbancaya (2017) noted that the city's numerous karaoke bars and sex workers cater to a diverse clientele, including tourists, residents, and American soldiers who regularly visit during the Balikatan exercises. However, the



participants revealed that when catering to tourists, they must use contraceptives for safety. When asked for further clarification, participants explained that they understood it is ultimately the tourists' decision to seek their services, with some tourists simply preferring to go bar hopping. Remuneration for intimate services remains highly variable depending on the establishment, while freelance sex workers operate independently on the streets. Given these institutional constraints and ethical sensitivities, the researchers utilized a phenomenological approach as the overarching methodological framework. Rooted in Husserl's concept of "the objective study of phenomena" (as cited by Pretorius & Bricker, 2011), this approach allows for the narration of participants' lived experiences while bracketing researcher biases.

Parmanand (2019) emphasized the importance of listening to sex workers, noting that not all are victims in need of saving. Similarly, Duria (2021) stressed that the lack of documentation on their lived experiences continues to weaken advocacy efforts. This knowledge gap motivates the present study, which aims to increase awareness and understanding of participants' lived experiences. Using Goffman's Stigma Framework as its foundation, the study explores an industry whose realities have been insufficiently examined. The framework illustrates how stigma operates on multiple levels through public judgment, internalized shame, and pressures that lead sex workers to conceal their identities and manage how they are perceived within their communities.

To understand the selected female sex workers, the researchers focused on four base themes: *Panimula* [beginning/entry], *Pamumuhay* [everyday lived world], *Pagmamahal* [relational lived experience], and *Pananatili* [continuity of experience]. *Panimula* explored their entry into sex work, including motivating factors and their lives before involvement in the industry. *Pamumuhay* described their lived experiences while engaged in sex work, covering both occupational and non-occupational activities. *Pagmamahal* examined their personal relationships, including family, peers, and intimate partners. Finally, *Pananatili* addressed their reasons for remaining in the sex work industry. Through these narratives, the study aims to reduce the stigma and close the knowledge gap by providing a grounded understanding of the lived experiences faced by female sex workers. The findings also aimed to underscore the need for targeted government action and collaboration with relevant agencies, including possible local policies and healthcare interventions.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to gain in-depth knowledge about the *Panimula*, *Pamumuhay*, *Pagmamahal*, and *Pananatili* of the selected female sex workers in Puerto Princesa City. This knowledge was analyzed by answering the following questions:

- 1) What prompted the participants to enter into sex work?
- 2) In terms of the following themes, what are the lived experiences of the interviewed participants?
 - a) Inside Sex Work
 - b) Outside of Sex Work
- 3) In terms of the following themes, how do the participants view their relationships?
 - a) Family Relationship
 - b) Peer Relationships
 - c) Intimate Relationships
- 4) What made the participants stay with this type of work?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The researchers employed a qualitative research design, which, according to Creswell (2014), aims to understand the complex, subjective experiences of participants. Specifically, the researchers used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore and interpret the lived experiences of selected female sex workers in Puerto Princesa City. Through IPA, the researchers delved deeply into how participants perceive and make sense of their experiences beyond mere description (Nulty, 2019). This study examines these experiences through four main themes: *Panimula*, *Pamumuhay*, *Pagmamahal*, and *Pananatili*—to interpret their personal and social significance.

2.2 Participants

This study involved eight female sex workers aged 18 and above who have been working for at least a year. Four of the participants were bar hosts, while the remaining four were street-based sex workers in Puerto Princesa. Street-based sex workers, as defined by Deering et al. (2014), operate in public spaces rather than designated establishments.

To recruit participants, researchers utilized snowball sampling, a method recommended by Fusch and Ness (2015) for reaching hard-to-access populations. This approach allows participants to be referred through trusted sources, which is essential for studying marginalized groups in Filipino society, where sex work remains a sensitive and often "taboo" subject (Jaymalin, 2019). The process continued until the desired sample size was reached. During the analysis, the final interviews no longer produced new insights, thematic patterns became stable, and no additional superordinate themes emerged, indicating that saturation had been achieved and that eight participants were both methodologically sound and ethically appropriate for the study.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers employed a self-administered form as a profiling technique and used a semi-structured interview to gather important data from the participants. This method is defined by Mensah (2020) as an outline of the topics a researcher intends to cover in the interview, together with the questions that must be addressed for each topic. With the sole objective of gathering pertinent data to fulfill a study purpose, it directed a face-to-face conversation between a researcher and participants.

Using cellular phones, the conversation between the researchers and the participants was recorded by the researchers. Furthermore, the researchers utilized a pen and paper to take down the information provided by the participants. It was treated as additional information to the data that the researchers transcribed after the interview process. By keeping notes while conducting interviews, the researchers are able to identify and highlight key participant quotes (Rapport and Reflection: The Pivotal Role of Note-Taking in In-Depth Interview Research, 2017). Likewise, field notes are valuable in qualitative research because they capture not only what was said but also contextual details, nonverbal cues, and the researcher's impressions, leading to a richer set of data for both collection and analysis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Moreover, note-taking is a critical component of qualitative research, particularly when working with marginalized populations such as sex workers, as it contributes to data accuracy and



deepens contextual understanding of participants' lived experiences. Since qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of complex human behaviors and social contexts rather than numerical data, thorough and reflective notetaking is essential for capturing the depth and nuance of participants' perspectives (Baker et al., 2022; Oliveira et al., 2019). Supporting this view, Polacsek and Woolford (2022) emphasize the importance of detailed field notes in qualitative health research. Their study demonstrates that thorough note-taking helps researchers gain a clearer understanding of participants' experiences and the influence of their physical and social environments. Collectively, these findings underscore the critical role of comprehensive notetaking in capturing the complexity and context of qualitative data.

With the approved research topic and title, along with various literature and studies from credible sources on the internet, the researchers obtained signed approval of the thesis proposal form, along with participants' informed consent. According to the guidelines set forth by the Indiana University Human Research Protection Program (2023), obtaining participants' consent is a crucial element in all research projects involving human subjects, serving as a cornerstone for ensuring ethical and responsible research practices. Researchers gain formal access by sharing information and soliciting individuals' consent to participate in the research project (Klykken, 2022).

To collect data, the researchers utilized a semi-structured interview method, which, as George (2022) noted, is commonly used in qualitative studies to gather information flexibly and naturally through questioning. Specifically, the researchers interviewed sex workers using an open-ended approach guided by core questions and prompts to ensure that key topics within the study's framework were consistently covered across interviews. To further ensure participant understanding, the researchers conducted a pilot interview with two individuals to practice administering questions, build rapport, and refine the question design. Additionally, the researchers employed a self-administered form as a profiling technique to collect details on age, type of sex work (bar or street-based), years of experience, and estimated monthly income. They also respected participants' language preferences, used simple terms, and confirmed consent to use audio recorders, which were essential for data collection. Adhering to the interview protocol throughout, the researchers analyzed participants' responses based on phrasing and arrangement, with the data transcribed solely by the researchers and treated with the utmost confidentiality.

In this study, the researchers used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of female sex workers in Puerto Princesa through four main themes: *Panimula*, *Pamumuhay*, *Pagmamahal*, and *Pananatili*. IPA allowed participants to express their experiences without distortion, providing insight into their personal narratives (Alase, 2017). Eight female participants, either bar hosts or street-based workers, were purposely selected for their unique experiences and perspectives rather than to represent the opinions of the general population. This aligns with Smith et al. (2018), who emphasized that IPA studies typically employ small, homogenous samples to enable an in-depth exploration of lived experiences.

The researchers analyzed the data by identifying commonalities and differences through divergence and convergence across participants' accounts. The researchers practiced reflexivity, which Charmaz (2020) emphasizes as essential for recognizing and examining personal biases, and deliberately set aside their assumptions through team discussions to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' experiences. By bracketing their perspectives, following Moustakas's (1994) guidelines as cited by Alase (2017), the researchers aimed to remain objective and avoid personal bias in interpreting participants' narratives.

Responses were systematically coded according to the four themes, with researchers examining how each related to broader social or cultural trends. Data were analyzed systematically and thoroughly, with transcripts examined line by line to identify meaningful units of text. Initial codes were developed and continuously refined, then grouped into broader categories through cross-participant comparison. To enhance credibility and ensure consistency, the researchers regularly reviewed and discussed the codes and emerging themes. Furthermore, findings were verified with participants through essential statements derived from interviews. Each statement was treated as equally valuable, and the researchers worked to develop a list of non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements.

2.4. Ethical Issues

Ethical guidelines protect vulnerable groups like sex workers, who face stigma and discrimination globally. As Ma and Loke (2019) and Hubbard and Sanders (2017) note, sex workers are marginalized and at risk due to criminalization and economic challenges. This study addresses social, economic, legal, and psychological risks, ensuring strict confidentiality.

Risks include breaches of confidentiality leading to discrimination (Bloomquist, 2017), economic effects on employment, legal risks from criminalization of sex work (Article 202), and possible distress from discussing personal experiences. Drug use among sex workers (Lasco, 2018) may also pose legal concerns. To address these risks, participants were reminded that they were not required to share any information they were uncomfortable with, particularly regarding criminalized behaviors such as illegal drug use. They were informed that they could skip any question without consequences, and interviews were conducted in private, participant-chosen locations to ensure safety and minimize stigma.

To protect participants further, anonymity was maintained through the use of code names, all data were securely stored, and clear informed consent was obtained. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. No identifying details were shared in writing, and all responses were managed to ensure that participants' identities could not be recognized or revealed. These measures were implemented to reduce potential legal risks, emotional distress, and concerns about social or economic impact.

In addition, participants received compensation and reimbursement. Given the sensitive nature of the study, participants were debriefed after the interview and offered emotional support. They were also provided with information and referrals to relevant counseling services and support organizations to ensure their well-being was prioritized throughout the research process. Findings were shared with NGOs supporting marginalized groups. The study proceeded after ethical approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of Palawan State University, following the Psychological Association of the Philippines' standards to safeguard participants' rights.

3. Results

Table 1 summarizes the findings of the study on the lived experiences of female sex workers, highlighting base themes and subthemes. The main themes were grouped into *Panimula*, *Pamumuhay*, *Pagmamahal*, and *Pananatili*.



Table 1. Matrix of Themes of the *Panimula*, *Pamumuhay*, *Pagmamahal*, and *Pananatili* Base Themes

Main Themes: Lived Experiences	Primary Subthemes	Secondary Subthemes
Panimula	Poverty	
	Parental Responsibility	
	Educational Attainment	
	Domestic Violence	
	Failed Intimate Relationship	
Pamumuhay	Inside Sex Work	Views Toward Work
		Negative Experiences
		Positive Experiences
		Proposals
		Nature of Sex Work
	Outside of Sex Work	Parenting
		Going to Church
		Side Jobs
		Experiences of Discrimination
Pagmamahal	Family Relationships	Acceptance
		Fear
		Parental Responsibility
	Peer Relationships	Acceptance
		Resiliency
		Social Discrimination
		Sense of Belongingness
	Intimate Relationships	Acceptance
Pananatili		Break from Sex Work
	Income	
	Limited Choice	
	Family Responsibility	

3.1 *Panimula*

Under *Panimula*, the study explored poverty, parental responsibility, educational attainment, domestic violence, and failed relationships.

3.1.1 Poverty

The results showed that poverty was the main reason why participants engaged in sex work. Due to demands for living, they have found sex work as a way to make ends meet. During the interview, participants revealed that their early involvement in sex work was motivated by poverty. Participant 3 emphasized the need to support her children, and Participant 1 cited generational poverty stemming from their parents' financial situation.

Uhm, ganito po 'yon, unang una sa kahirapan namin, lalo may anak din ako na pinapaaral...[Uhm, this is how it is, first of all, in our financial difficulties, especially since I also have a child to send to school...]
- Participant 3

Mahirap na yung mga magulang ko.... Uhm, natives kasi yung ano, yung erpat ko.[My parents are already poor... Uhm, it's because my father is a native of an indigenous group.] - Participant 1

When asked whether sex work was their only option, participants emphasized the limited opportunities available to them, particularly due to their low educational attainment, which restricts their access to formal and stable employment. Faced with the immediate demands of daily survival, participants viewed sex work as the most accessible and efficient means to generate income.

For some participants, especially those from marginalized ethnocultural backgrounds, this poverty is further compounded by structural barriers that have historically limited their communities' access to economic resources. Their narratives reveal how poverty functions as a primary motivation for entering sex work, particularly when faced with familial responsibilities and generational hardship. These narratives highlight that sex work for participants is not merely a personal choice but a survival strategy shaped by structural inequalities and socio-cultural conflicts.

The findings confirmed the claims of Mathews (2017) that sex work is mostly motivated by economic necessity, which contends that the primary determining factor is necessity rather than choice for women, especially those in developing countries. Thus, sex work becomes a survival strategy to meet essential familial obligations in a context where alternative livelihood options are constrained.

In the Philippines, in particular, economic incapacity was one of the central themes that emerged in the study of Duria (2022), highlighting poverty and the desire to survive as the primary reasons why individuals enter sex work. The reasons range from supporting their families to sustaining personal comforts, revealing various motivations primarily driven by economic necessity.

3.1.2 Parental Responsibility

Parental responsibility surfaced as another sub-theme, and the majority of participants said that they are single parents. Some of them claimed that sex work was the simplest type of work to get money to support their families. As parents, they wanted to give their children everything, especially the things that they were unable to do for themselves when they were younger. The findings were consistent with the Filipino society, wherein parental responsibility has strong cultural value, which places pressure on parents to provide for their families (Bermas et al. 2024).



These strong cultural ties often lead women to enter occupations with fewer barriers to entry, such as sex work, particularly when they are faced with economic difficulties.

Participant 7, as a single parent, has viewed sex work as the easiest way to earn money. When asked about her reasons for entering sex work, she elaborated:

Para sa mga anak namin dahil single parents nga kami kailangan namin. Kasi parang ito lang yung pinakamadali or pinakamagaan... Di ko masabing magandang way. Parang pinakamalaking kita para maibigay namin yung suporta na para sa mga anak namin. Ganon. [For our children, because we're single parents, we need it. Because I think it is the easiest or simplest way... I can't say it's a good way, but it's the main income for us to provide support for our children.] - Participant 7

This echoes the voice of the majority of the participants, who had the same reasons for entering into sex work. Parental responsibility has become a major concern for them since they are single parents. They have emphasized the need to meet the needs of their children.

Since birth talaga ng anak ko, single mom na talaga ako. Parang yun na rin yung nag-ano sakin kasi hindi sapat yung kinikita ng monthly na sahod ko sa mga sales lady na yan... [Since my child was born, I've been a single mom. It's like that's what pushed me because the monthly salary I earn as a sales lady isn't enough...] - Participant 6

Yung iniwan ako ng asawa ko... Kahit hindi ko gusto, kailangan kong gawin kasi may mga anak ako eh. [My husband left me... Even though I didn't want to, I had to do it because I have children.] - Participant 4

...Lalo may anak din ako na pinapaaral. Hiwalay ako sa asawa ko, tapos wala naman akong pinag-aralan...Kaya po ako nakapagtrabaho dahil dito lang po ang kakayanan ko. [...Especially since I also have a child to send to school, I'm separated from my husband, and I didn't have any formal education... That's why I worked (in the sex work industry) because this is the only opportunity I had.] - Participant 3

Naisip ko nga yun kasi dahil sa pangangailangang pinansyal; pang-ano ng mga bata. Katulad ngayon, syempre... kasi may pinapaaral kasi ako, bale 3 yun sila. [I thought about it because of financial needs, especially for the children, of course... Because I'm sending three of them to school.] - Participant 2

The participants' statements further support the earlier claim that the decision of participants to enter sex work is often shaped not solely by personal choice but by broader socio-cultural and economic pressures. In particular, the sense of obligation to provide for the family has led the participants to enter into sex work, which they often find to have immediate financial returns despite social stigma. This confirmed the study conducted by Parmanand (2019), acknowledging a sense of duty to one's family as one of the reasons why women ended up working as sex workers.

Furthermore, findings revealed that participants' entry into sex work is shaped by structural constraints that limit their economic mobility and narrow their options for survival. This decision is

also influenced by gendered cultural expectations in the Philippines, as evident in the participants' narratives, where mothers are expected to prioritize their children's well-being even at high personal cost. In this context, sex work becomes a constrained form of agency, an adaptive strategy that reflects both the pressures of poverty and the enduring cultural mandate placed upon mothers.

3.1.3 Educational Attainment

Due to educational attainment, participants revealed that limitations to job opportunities were apparent and that sex work was the only job they thought they could immerse themselves in. They have perceived that not being able to finish their schooling made them unequipped to do other jobs. According to Participant 3, she perceived herself as someone uneducated, resulting in the limitation of her own skills and the jobs that she could choose:

...Tapos wala naman akong pinag-aralan Kaya po ako nakapagtrabaho dahil dito lang po ang kakayanan ko. [...and I didn't have any formal education... so I was able to work [in the sex industry] because this was the only opportunity I had.] - Participant 3

Participant 3's situation echoed the same statement of Participant 4 describing her educational attainment:

Wala rin kaming pinag-aralan. High school graduate lang ako. [We didn't have much education; I only graduated from high school.] - Participant 4

When Participant 8 asked about the time that she entered sex work, she described her situation by saying:

...Nagstop na ako. Di na akong nag-aaral no'n eh... Kaya noong time na 'yon, napag-isipan ko na ito na lang, para makalayo. [...I stopped; I wasn't studying anymore at that time... So, that time, I chose this so I could distance myself.] - Participant 8

3.1.4 Domestic Violence

Findings also revealed that domestic violence was among the reasons why participants entered sex work. As they found themselves in an abusive relationship, they tried to navigate the possibilities of getting a job and realized that they could also earn money, which paved the way for them to become sex workers.

According to Participant 4, it was during the time that her ex-husband abandoned her after being physically beaten and abused that she accepted the offer from a friend to explore sex work:

Yung iniwan ako ng asawa ko, lagi akong sinasaktan, nananakit. Niyaya ako ng kasamahan ko na 'yan dito magtrabaho. Kahit hindi ko gusto, kailangan kong gawin kasi may mga anak ako eh. [My husband left me. He always hurt me, physically and emotionally. My friend invited me to work here. Even though I didn't want to, I had to do it because I have children.] - Participant 4



The same case with Participant 1 when asked to elaborate on her statement that she does not want to have a partner again.

Buti sana kung makatsamba ng asawa na yung maganda ang ugali. Tapos yung may permanenteng trabaho... Dati sinasaktan niya ako. [It would have been better if I had married someone with good character and a stable job... He used to hurt me.] - Participant 1

However, Deering KN et al. (2014) stated that comparatively little attention had been paid to how violence, both violence in the workplace and abuse by intimate or other non-paying partners, affects the poor health outcomes of sex workers, who are heavily stigmatized and frequently prosecuted. The findings reflected Deering's call for the urgent need for structural research and interventions to better understand and address the contextual factors shaping violence against sex workers, as well as the growing body of evidence-based calls for making violence against sex workers a public health and human rights priority on national and international policy agendas. These narratives further highlight how intimate partner violence and abuse act as structural pressures that push participants toward sex work when safety and support are absent. Participants 1 and 4 illustrated how experiences of abuse, abandonment, and economic hardship limit their options, making sex work one of the few ways to survive. Participants' statements further highlight that sex work often becomes a coping response shaped by overlapping challenges such as gender-based violence, poverty, and the absence of strong institutional support.

3.1.5 Failed Intimate Relationships

A failed intimate relationship has become a recurring theme for participants. In this theme, they have shared how a failed relationship and a period of post-breakup made them navigate life without an intimate partner, which led them to visit bars. The youngest among the participants, Participant 8, has shared that her entry into sex work was largely motivated by her failed intimate relationship and the fact that she was then heartbroken:

Broken-hearted ako no'n. Ano 'yon, nagbreak kami ng boyfriend ko. 18 ako noon. [When I was 18 years old, I was heartbroken when my partner and I parted ways.] - Participant 8

Participant 4 also shared that she entered sex work by the time that her husband abandoned her:

Yung iniwan ako ng asawa ko, lagi akong sinasaktan, nananakit. Niyaya ako ng kasamahan ko na 'yan dito magtrabaho. [I was always being hurt by my husband. When he left me, I was invited by my friend to work engaging myself to sex work.] - Participant 4

The participants' narratives revealed that failed intimate relationships can function as a turning point for entering sex work. These failed relationships created emotional vulnerability, often triggered by sustained physical abuse and abandonment. This highlights that the absence of emotional and financial support influenced the participants' decision to enter sex work.

3.2 Pamumuhay

The *Pamumuhay* base theme delved into experiences within and outside of sex work, covering attitudes toward work, positive and negative experiences, the nature of sex work, and outside sex work experiences like parenting, going to church, side jobs, and discrimination.

3.2.1 Participants' Lived Experiences Inside Sex Work

The first subtheme in the participants' lived experiences inside sex work shows the participants' views regarding sex work. The findings indicated that they have different perspectives on their job activities.

Views Toward Sex Work. During the interview, some of them disliked their job activities and still considered them a convenient means of earning money. The participants narrated:

Sa totoo, ayaw ko talagang pumasok sa ganito. Napilitan lang talaga ako nung una. Ano kasi dito yung pinakamagaan trabaho eh. Yung pinakamadaling kumita ng pera talaga. Kaya sabi ko parang mahirap umalis talaga dito. [Honestly, I really didn't want to get into this kind of job. I was just forced to have this because this is the only way I can earn money easily without any hassle. So I say it is difficult for me to get out of this.] - Participant 5

Parang naibahan. Parang hindi naman ito yung pinangarap kong trabaho talaga, need lang talaga. [To be in this sex work is not what I dream of. I really felt sorry for myself. It's all because I need to support my needs.] - Participant 6

However, a participant already accepted the nature of her job since she was left with limited choice as she was financially struggling:

Okay lang naman trabaho dito. Kasi mahirap ang buhay. [Since life is difficult for me, this job is just alright.] - Participant 1

Furthermore, many of them find it shameful to work in the sex work industry and prefer to conceal the nature of their job from others:

Nahiya nga ako minsan. Nahiya nga ako kapag nakikita ko sila. Oo. kasi minsan kasi na pag nakikita nila ako dito na naga ano dumadaan sila tas nakikita nila ako- minsan nagatago ako. Nahiya nga ako kasi syempre parang iniisip ko na parang, yung ano ba- baka syempre baka naisip ko ba na ikakahiya nila ako. [Whenever I see my friends pass by, I cannot but be ashamed of what I am doing that I hid myself from them. Since I am so afraid that they might judge me for doing sex work.] - Participant 2

Hindi po ako laging gano'n, kasi syempre iniisip ko rin marumi, syempre lalo na syempre nakakahiya diba...[I don't do this activity as always because I am also considering that this is not right. I felt ashamed of this too.] - Participant 3

Ay, isheshare ko sa kanila ang trabaho ko? Ay, no, hindi. Kasi mamaya...lumayas pa 'yong mga anak ko pag nalaman nila, diba? [Because of the fear that my children will leave me upon knowing this sex-work activity. I won't really tell them the truth of this activity I have.] - Participant 8



Syempre, alam niyo naman sa ganitong trabaho nakakahiya naman lalong lalo na sa magulang ko, at syempre lalong lalo na sa anak ko pag yung time na may makaalam don sa 'min. [Of course, this kind of work activity that I have is really very disgusting for my parents, especially for my children, if they really know the truth about this.] - Participant 7

Wala, tahimik na lang. kasi, syempre, kahit nakakahiya, syempre, pangalan mo na yung naririnig. Minsan nakaganyan na ang leeg niyan sayo (demonstrating how heads turn when gossiping). Nasasaktan, tapos nag-iisip na magbago pero sa hrap ng buhay at para sa anak ko... [I keep silent about what I am doing because I know that it's very disgusting, shameful, and hurtful. Sometimes, I am still thinking that I can still change this sex-work activity. Had it not been for supporting my children's needs in life, I would not have engaged myself in this work.] - Participant 4

The participants' narratives illustrate how sex workers navigate a spoiled identity, as described by Goffman (1963), as cited in Health Research Funding Organization (2017), in which societal stigma marks them as morally or socially "tainted." Participants' experiences reflect not only personal challenges but also the impact of structural poverty and cultural norms that reinforce negative perceptions of their work. While some participants have accepted their circumstances, others conceal their realities in an effort to gain social acceptance. These highlight how societal judgments shape self-perception and sense of worth, revealing the complex interplay between individual experience and broader structural and cultural challenges.

The above-mentioned claims were supported by the results of a series of interviews performed by Open Society Foundations (2019) wherein sex workers, like most employees, express an array of emotions regarding their experiences inside sex work. Some sex workers dislike their jobs, yet it is their only or best option for a livelihood. Also, some of them are indifferent about their jobs, yet they like flexibility or higher rates of pay. In a nutshell, the participants choose to work in the sex work industry for monetary benefit, regardless of how it may affect their self-image and self-ideals.

Negative Work Experiences. Another subtheme is the participants' negative work experiences. The findings of the study indicated that participants were either physically or emotionally harmed while providing service to their clients. Several participants reported experiencing harm from clients, sometimes related to clients being under the influence of alcohol or drugs:

Meron... merong nananakit. Minsan sadista talaga, Oo nananakit tapos minsan, hindi ka pa binabayaran. Merong kaming case dito. Oo kasi minsan lasing yung customer eh, minsan naka droga naman kaya nakakatakot. [Some harm us. Sometimes they are sadistic, they hurt us, and sometimes they don't even pay. Sometimes, the customers are drunk, and sometimes, they are on drugs, which makes us scared of something that may happen to us.] - Participant 4

Minsan kasi mahahaba yung ano nila ba. Tapos nasasaktan ka ganun, minsan gagamitin ka, minsan kakagatin ka, minsan ganun. Parang ano sadista ganun. [Sometimes, a customer's penis is long, and I can really feel the pain or being hurt when they use me. They also sometimes bite me, somewhat in a sadistic manner.] - Participant 5

Aside from negative experiences that the participants encountered during their sexual services, a participant was subjected to public humiliation and physical threats from her clients:

Oo. Meron pa nga ako dating naranasan, that time, sa SM Palawan, parang tatagain na ako. Oo meron. Binabastos, ganun. Pinapahiya. [Yes, I even had a previous experience at SM Palawan, where I felt like I was being taken advantage of. I was disrespected and humiliated.] - Participant 6

These findings reflected Muldoon's (2017) survey of sex workers in Northern Uganda, where the majority of the participants had been subjected to physical or sexual abuse by their clients in the preceding six months of their study. According to their study, the most common kind of client violence was physical assault, which was also evident in this study. Additionally, it strengthens the conclusions from the research carried out by Mtetwa et al. (2015), which implies that, even when client interactions with sex workers appear to be casual in the absence of health concerns, they actually involve forms of harm within the sex worker community. This harm contributes to instances of abuse among the sex worker population, ultimately resulting in stigma and discrimination. In the context of Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, such experiences of abuse contribute to the spoiled identity of sex workers, as societal perceptions of their work are reinforced by both direct victimization and structural discrimination. The cumulative effect of client violence and community harm intensifies stigma and marginalization, shaping how others perceive sex workers and how they perceive themselves.

Positive Experiences. The participants, nevertheless, had positive experiences with their clients while providing services. Some of the participants indicated that they had generous clients who gave them gratuities and groceries and doubled the negotiated pay:

Meron, kahit na sa usapan hindi ganong presyo, nagdodoble. May nakakaunawa. [Yes, even though we agreed on a certain price, they doubled it. Some customers understand.] - Participant 4

Tinitipan nila ako, binibigyan ako, binibilhan akong grocery, binibigyan ako ganon.' Halika, bigyan kitang grocery para may pang-ano ka bukas', 'Oh ang boarding house mo bayad na ba? Bibigyan kitang tulong. Kawawa ka naman.' [They give me tips, they buy me groceries like 'Here, groceries so you have something for tomorrow.' 'Oh, is your boarding house rent paid? I'll help you out. You must be having a hard time.']] - Participant 3

Aside from material things they received from clients, some participants indicated that some of their clients also offer them encouragement regarding looking for other jobs rather than continuing in the sex work industry.

Ano, yung parang naiintindihan nila, na ganito ka. Yung parang, meron din naman, kasi, hindi naman kasi halos, mostly na makakasalamuha mo mga bastos talaga, Yung iba nakakaintindi. Tapos parang bibigyan ka pa ng dagdag na bayad. Tapos, eh, ano sayo na, i-explain nila sa inyo na hindi habang buhay nandiyan ka, hindi habang buhay maghihirap ka. [Some customers are understanding. They understand our situation and us. They give us extra payment and tell you things like, 'You won't be in this work forever, and struggling for the rest of your life.']] - Participant 6



Pero, ano, pinakamahalaga yung naiintindihan nila kami, hindi nila kami jinujudge. Uhm naiintindihan nila kami. Meron pang time na sasabihin nila, anoooo... maghanap ka na lang ng ibang work. Ganun. [But, you know, the most important thing is that they understand us; they don't judge us. There are times when they say, 'You should find another job, not like this.'] - Participant 7

Apart from the generosity of the clients, a participant stated that all of her past clients were kind:

Lahat naman mababait sila. [They're all kind-hearted.] - Participant 2

Furthermore, several participants stated that not every customer requires them to provide sexual services; other clients pay them to have someone with whom they can drink, roam, and converse. These were seen as positive experiences by the participants.

Meron halos, may time naman mag-iinom lang kami dalawa tapos alis na. Tapos meron naman mabilisan, tapos alis na, ganun lang. [There are times when we just have a drink together, and then they leave. There are also times when it's very quick — then they go. That's all.] - Participant 5

Okay naman. Kasi minsan naman bar hopping lang. Lalabas kami, babayaran kami dito, tapos lalabas kami, inom kami sa labas. Ganon ang lang. Parang barkada lang din. [It's okay...sometimes customers just go bar hopping. We go out or have drinks outside, get paid here, and that's it. It's kind of like just hanging out as friends.] - Participant 8

Sagar et al. (2016) corroborated these findings and inferred that engagement in sex work does not inherently equate to a negative experience. Their research revealed that a significant portion of the participants were more inclined to report positive aspects, such as having good clients and earning a satisfactory income. This revealed that despite the risks and stigma of sex work, positive client interactions also exist, which can provide emotional support to the participants, even an encouragement to seek alternative employment. Participants described these experiences as relational and empowering, further supporting Sagar et al.'s (2016) claim.

Proposals. Proposals emerged as another subtheme encountered by the participants in sex work. According to Participant 4, some of her clients offered to marry her, while Participant 7 revealed that several of her customers offered her money so she could start a business apart from sex work.

Meron naman ding customer na nag-alok na asawahin na kami. Meron pero di naman namin pinapatulan kasi dito nga namin nakilala 'yon. [Some customers have offered to marry us, but we didn't entertain it because we just met them here, and we don't know them in a deeper sense.] - Participant 4

Meron ding time na inaano ka pa nila: 'Gusto mo alisin kita dito? Sige, bigyan kita ng pang-business mo' Ganun. Iba-ibang experience talaga. Eh, kami naman kasi, hindi naman namin gina-grab. Kasi, may pamilya sila. May mga pamilya sila. Wala. Parang hindi kami naniniwala. Parang ganun. Dinedeadma na lang. Ganun ganun lang, kunware: 'Ah okay!'

[There are such instances when they ask if you want to leave this place. They say, 'Alright, I'll give you a capital for your own business,' like that. It's a really different experience. But for us, we don't entertain it because they have families. So, we don't really believe it, we just ignore it, and act like it's okay.] - Participant 7

Similarly, in a study conducted by Cruz et al. (2015), there was a case where a participant had a foreign client. This client regularly sends her money to cover her living expenses. Despite having a terminal illness, the client was willing to marry her, adopt her son, and take them abroad. Their study concluded that this narrative has the potential to both positively impact the sex worker's financial situation temporarily and negatively affect her physical and overall well-being. It is a situation with mixed possibilities.

Nature of Sex Work. The nature of sex work emerged as another subtheme discussed within sex work. It is elaborated in multiple sections, such as work preparations, income per client, client's age range, number of clients per night, service duration, work setting, and health-protective measures.

Work preparations tend to be an aspect that participants deal with in sex work. Given the nature of the sex work industry, participants believe that physical preparations, especially the application of beauty products to look attractive, are necessary before delivering sexual services:

Magmamake-up muna, mag-aayos bago mag-aalok ng mga customer dyan. [I'll put on makeup and get ready before offering services to customers there.] - Participant 4

Ah ganito po, nagpapaganda, naga-ganito ganito po rito, nag-eentertain ng mga lalaki. Gano'n po. Naga 'Sir, ano pong gusto niyo? Chix or ano?' Ganon.

[Ah, like this... I make myself look attractive, entertain men, and say things like, 'Sir, what would you like? A girl or something else?'] - Participant 3

The participants' income for every client was also explored. The findings indicated that sex workers' earnings vary depending on the workplace. Additionally, both participants pointed out that foreigners paid more than the locals. The minimum income of the street-based sex workers in the city ranges from 500 to 700 pesos per client.

Ano... minsan ano, 500.00, pag may guest isa. Sa foreigner, ano, libo rin. Mga 3,500.00, ganyan. [Sometimes it's 500.00 when there's one guest. For a foreigner, it's around 3,500.00.] - Participant 1

Minsan pag... yung talagang presyo lang 700.00. Kapag mabait, dinadagdagan. Minsan isang libo ganyan, dinodoble. Kapag foreigner naman, iba namang presyo nun. 1,500.00, 2,500.00. [The regular price is really 700.00. If they're nice, it increases. Sometimes, it goes up to a thousand; it gets doubled. When it's a foreigner, the price is different. 1,500.00, 2,500.00.] - Participant 4

Maliit lang naman yung dito yung bigayan dito. Minsan 700.00. [The payment here is not that much. Sometimes 700.00] - Participant 2



Ah, sa isang tao po, nagbibigay 1500.00, 500.00, o 700.00. Ang iba naman 1500.00. Pag may pera naman, 3000.00 ganiyan. Ay, syempre foreigner. Mga 10,000.00... [Ah, for one person, they give 1500.00, 500.00, or 700.00. While others give 1500.00, and if they have more money, it's 3000.00, and so on. Of course, for foreigners, it's different. Some even give 10,000.00...] – Participant. 3

The bar hosts, on the other hand, were compensated with a minimum of 1000 pesos for each client. The participants narrated:

Dito 1,700.00. Depende. Ikaw maga-price sa sarili mo. Ummm ano, yung 1,700.00 good for three hours na yun. [Here, it's 1,700.00. It depends; you set your own price. A 1,700.00 is good for three hours.] - Participant 6

1k, pero, depende 'yon sa babae. [1,000.00, but it depends on the girl.] - Participant 8

The age range of their clients was also featured in the experiences of the participants in sex work. The majority of participants stated that the typical age of their clients was older. The participants narrated:

Classified yan. May mga olds, may mga... yan. Umm, mga ano, matanda. [That's classified. There are older individuals. Umm, older ones.] - Participant 1

Minsan mga 60, 50, 40. [Sometimes they're 60, 50, 40 years old.] - Participant 4

Also, some of them disclosed that their clients were often of legal age, as they narrated by saying:

Ang dito kasi, ang pwedeng pumasok eh 18 pataas. Oo, 18 pataas. Wala talagang menor de edad. [Here, the ones who can enter should be 18 and above. There are no minors.] - Participant 6

On the other hand, a participant stated that the age of her clients varies between young and old:

Hindi naman. Meroon din bata. Meron din minsan matanda. Tapos may minsan may matanda na. Marami minsan. Halo halo ba. Hindi rin parepareho. May bata, matanda, sa isang gabi kumukuha. [There are young people, and sometimes there are older ones too. Sometimes, there are older ones, and sometimes a mix of young and old customers. There are mixed customers every night.] - Participant 2

Unlike bar hosts who were prohibited from taking clients under the age of 18 or those who were not of legal age, a street-based participant shared that there was a minor, the youngest at 16.

The participants further indicated the number of clients they had every night. The findings suggest that the number of clients for each night varies per participant. A participant reported that she only provides service to one or two participants every night since many sex workers like her provide services every single night. Another participant, on the other hand, claimed that she had two to

five customers on evenings when sexual services were in high demand, such as Saturday night. However, Participant 6 stated that she only takes one to two customers every night since she does not want to abuse her body. She shared by saying:

The duration of service of the participants was also included in their job experiences. A participant said that she provides sexual services for just a short time of two hours.

In addition, a participant also revealed that the rates of their service were strictly for specific hours. In times when clients were requesting extended time of service, they would have to pay again based on the participant's rate.

Basta bibilang ng three hours, three hours. Basta sa three hours, halimbawa, sinabi ko sayo na 2,500.00 or 2,000.00 ang three hours ko, pag nagbigay ng dalawang libo, three hours yun. Pag mag sobra ng three hours, edi dalawang libo ulit. [Just count three hours. So, for three hours, for example, I told you it's 2,500.00 or 2,000.00; if they give two thousand, it's for three hours. If it goes beyond three hours, then it's another two thousand.] - Participant 6

Furthermore, another participant admitted that the duration of her service is determined by her mood; if she is not in the mood, she would most likely provide the client with 30 minutes of sexual service; however, if she likes the client, she would extend it for two hours.

In addition, the work setting is included in determining the experiences of the participants in their work. The results of the study indicated that some of the street-based sex workers deliver sexual services in nearby lodging areas. Aside from lodging houses, one participant claimed being brought into bars. However, one participant, a bar host, was usually brought to hotels. Also, there were instances wherein her client used to bring her home whenever they were saving money.

The study of Hao et al. (2014) backs up these findings, indicating that high-level sex workers often engage in commercial sex in expensive hotel environments. In contrast, mid-level sex workers tend to work in places like karaoke bars. Low-level sex workers, on the other hand, generally pursue commercial sex transactions in informal settings such as streets, parks, and others.

Finally, health-protective measures were also covered in the participants' lived experiences inside sex work, exploring how participants maintain their own health while providing services to clients. A street-based sex worker stated that she secures two contraceptives when offering sexual services, which consist of a condom and a contraceptive injection. Also, one participant, specifically a bar host, indicated that she undergoes health check-ups every month, including pap smears twice or thrice a month and HIV testing once a month as required by the City Health.

Similarly, one bar host stated that she receives a yellow card every year, which enables her to get health checks up periodically. Aside from that, she claimed that she underwent a ligate procedure.

The study of Ochako et al. (2018) aligns with the findings, concluding that female sex workers face an elevated risk of both unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Consequently, it is established that sex workers employ a variety of protective strategies to mitigate the hazards associated with offering sexual services. The adoption of additional contraceptive methods, such as injectables alongside condoms, garnered a strong endorsement



from women as it offers a dual safeguard against both pregnancy and STIs.

3.2.2 Participants' Lived Experiences Outside Sex Work

Benoit et al. (2017) revealed that sex workers are involved in different occupations, places, and organizations if they are outside of sex work.

Parenting. The findings showed that most of the participants stay at home if they are not working, and most of them parent by taking care of their children and not just doing household chores, but also teaching their children how to do so.

The participants narrated:

Sa bahay lang. Oo, pahinga. Kasi ano, antok pagka-gabi. [I just rest at home, because I get sleepy due to my work at night.] - Participant 1

Wala, dun lang kami sa bahay. Dun lang kami mismo sa bahay, nag aalaga ng ano ng bata. [We're just at home and taking care of the child.] - Participant 2

Going to Church. Parmanand (2019) explored the experiences of sex workers who go to church if they are not inside sex work and received a variety of favorable and negative reactions from their religious communities. The findings, however, confirmed that participants often go to church with fellow sex workers; most of them were street-based, but they did not disclose their work to other churchgoers. Parmanand (2019) further revealed that sex workers used diverse tactics to reconcile their identities as sex workers and Christians, which reflected the case of Participant 2 when she shared:

Gusto ko na nga rin sana na mawala na rin dito. Kasi, lalo na ngayon, syempre, na-encounter na rin ako sa Born Again ba. Kasi gusto ko na rin sana. Eh, kasi, wala rin ako magawa. Sa totoo lang naman talage, eh, hindi ko naman ginusto na magkaganito. Pero wala akong pagkakitaan na. [I actually want to leave this already. Especially now that I've been getting involved with the Born Again group. But there's nothing I can do. To be honest, I didn't choose to be in this situation, but I have no other way to earn a living.] - Participant 2

Side Jobs. Aside from the earnings that the participant got from doing sex work, they also emerged themselves into other activities that generate income, which were categorized as their side jobs. Some of them were selling barbecue in the street, while others were gardening by planting vegetables such as okra, sponge gourd, and string beans, and eventually selling them in the market.

Tapos minsan nagtitinda tinda naman. Minsan barbecue-barbecue lang. Tapos kapag mahina, balik naman. [And sometimes, I sell things, like barbecue. When sales are slow, I just come back here.] - Participant 4

Experiences of Discrimination. Findings revealed that it was during outside sex work that the participants experienced discrimination. The majority of the participants shared a common experience of being catcalled and people being suspicious of the nature of their work as they leave their houses at night and come back early in the morning.

The participants narrated:

Oo kasi pinagtsitsismisan kami eh. Ayan ang kadalasan tsismis. Syempre aalis ng gabi, madaling araw uuwi. Tsismis. Talagang harap-harapan kang i-tsitsismis. Minsan babantayan pa kung saan ka papasok na... Danas ko 'yan doon eh. [Yes, because people gossip about us. Usually, if you go out at night and come back early in the morning, they gossip about it—right in front of you. Sometimes they even watch where you're going... I've experienced that there.] - Participant 4

Opo, tapos inaano po nila kami...hinuhusgahan nila kami: 'Mga pokpok 'yan, mga paiyot,' mga gano'n, 'mga bayaran.' [Yes, and they label us... They judge us, calling us 'prostitutes,' 'flirts,' things like that.] - Participant 3

Despite being labeled as a subject of criticism and getting snubbed, even by their own cousin, some of the participants justified sex work as they are aware of how it sustains their necessities in everyday living, such as enabling them to go to groceries and buy their needs. It has become a coping mechanism for them to make people see that they earn money from their own hard work. The participants argued:

Bakit maibigay niyo ba 'yong kailangan ko sa buhay ko, pagkain ko, araw-araw ko? So kung tulungan niyo ako pangnegosyo, na kahit papaano kahit, hindi ako marunong magsulat baka matutunan ko rin. Pero hindi ako naapektuhan sa sinasabi nila, kasi totoo naman. [Can you provide me with what I need every day? I don't know how to write, but if they can help me with a business, I think I will learn also. I don't get affected by whatever they say since those are true.] - Participant 3

Oo meron din. Yung mga iba kong pinsan. Ano parang minsan di nila ako inaano, parang naging mayabang na ba hindi nila ako pinapansin. [Yes, there are some. Some of my cousins... sometimes they ignore me, acting arrogant and not paying attention to me.] - Participant 4

Oo, dati na ma-marites ako, hinahiyaan ko na lang. Ginagawa ko, naggrocery na lang ako. Pinapakita ko sa kanila na may bitbit ako. [Yes, before I used to get embarrassed when people gossiped about me, but now I just ignore it. I go grocery shopping and let them see what I bought.] - Participant 5

The participant's experience of discrimination outside sex work has supported the findings of Haixia Ma and Alice Yuen Loke (2019) that encountering stigma and anticipating stigma can lead to internalizing the bias, which manifests as shame, fear, and low self-esteem, and makes sex workers feel ashamed of their line of work. This further aligns with the study's framework of Goffman's stigma that sex workers feel stigmatized on different levels, including internalization of shame and pressures that lead them to conceal their identities and manage how they are perceived within their communities.

However, sex workers typically rejected the notion that their work was unethical or deviant. They tended to justify sex work as a conscious decision they had made and did not feel guilty about it.



They openly admitted that sex work gives economic advantages, flexible work schedules, and enables them to care for their families' basic needs. This highlights that agency and stigma can coexist, revealing how some participants actively negotiate identity and social perception within a stigmatized context.

3.3 *Pagmamahal*

Pagmamahal is the third base theme that covers the participants' family relationships, peer relationships, and intimate relationships.

3.3.1 Family Relationships

Acceptance. The first subtheme explores how the participants were accepted by their children, parents, and siblings. In Alexandru's (2020) study, some participants mentioned that their parents were aware of their profession but did not have strong opinions about it. This lack of parental opinion might stem from the realization that their child had already made this career choice, knowing that society generally disapproves of such work.

This aligns with the majority of the participants in this study, who stated that they were accepted or their parents and siblings did not have a strong opinion about their job because they could financially support their family. This acceptance was largely attributed to the participants' financial support for their families, leaving their parents and siblings with little choice but to accept their circumstances due to financial dependence.

The participants narrated:

Alam na po ng mga anak ko na ganito ang trabaho ko. Sa pamilya ko parang naging okay na sa kanila kasi alam na rin nila ang buhay ko. Nagpakaano rin ako sa kanila. Nagsusuporta naman ako. [My children already know that this is my job. My family seems to accept it because they understand my life. I've explained things to them, and I provide support for them.] - Participant 3

Oo. Wala, halos, halos sa pamilya ko. Mga kapatid ko, nanay ko parang ganun, alam talaga nila. Kasi parang yung ano nila, na ako na lang yung ano nila, parang inaasahan ganun. [Yes. Almost everyone in my family, my siblings, my mother—they all know. It's like they expect me to be the one supporting them.] - Participant 6

Wala na rin sila magawa, kasi, na parang naunawaan na rin nila yung sitwasyon- yung ano ko kasi ano- yung hinahayaan na lang nila ako. [There's nothing they can do anymore because they seem to have understood my situation. They just let me be.] - Participant 2

According to Murphy et al. (2015), all five participants in their study, who were both sex workers and mothers, completely concealed their work from their children. In contrast, the findings indicated that some mothers did not conceal the nature of their work from their children, and they were open to sharing this information once they believed their children had reached an age where they could understand the situation. This was confirmed as the participants shared the following statements:

Maintindihan naman siguro ng mga anak ko yan. [My children will probably understand that.] - Participant 4

Yung panganay, alam niya na, na, dito na ako nagtrabaho. [The eldest one knows that I've been working here.] - Participant 2

Fear. Not all sex workers were accepted, leading to fear as another subtheme under family relationships. According to Alexandru (2020), sex workers aim to protect their children from any negative influences, hoping that their own children will not follow the same path but instead pursue a brighter future through education and secure, well-paying jobs. This is evident as some of them choose not to disclose their job to their families, fearing that their children may experience bullying at school or, worse, run away from home. In Goffman's theory, this demonstrates how sex workers manage a spoiled identity by selectively disclosing information about their work, allowing them to navigate social stigma while protecting their own and their children's social reputation.

The participants narrated:

Syempre, alam niyo naman sa ganitong trabaho nakakahiya naman lalong lalo na sa magulang ko, at syempre lalong lalo na sa anak ko pag yung time na may makaalam don samin. Syempre, pag dumating yung time na lumaki na sila, diba bubully-hin sila diba? Nakaka-ano din yon, nakakastress din yon. [Of course, you know that this kind of work is embarrassing, especially for my parents, and even more so for my child if he ever finds out. When he grows up, he might get bullied, which could be hurtful and stressful for him.] - Participant 7

...isheshare ko sa kanila ang trabaho ko? Ay, no, hindi. Kasi mamaya...lumayas pa 'yong mga anak ko pag nalaman nila, diba? [... will I share my work with them? No, I won't. If they find out, my children might even leave me, right?] - Participant 8

This concern is in addition to the fear of being disgraced by their loved ones. As Participant 2 stated:

Nahiya nga ako. Kasi, syempre, parang iniisip ko na parang, yung ano ba, baka, syempre, baka naisip ko ba na ikakahiya nila ako. [I felt ashamed because, of course, I thought they might feel embarrassed because of me.] - Participant 2

Another participant expressed concern that her family might harm her if they found out, while others chose not to disclose the true nature of their work to their families. This is similar to a participant in Alexandru's (2020) study who mentioned that, while her parents generally support her, they are unaware that she works as a prostitute.

Parental Responsibility. The participants were responsible for other things besides supporting their families financially. Most sex workers who are also mothers try to give their children everything they need (Alexandru, 2020). They were also parents who must provide guidance and emotional support for their children. They shared how they make an effort to spend time with their kids, while others continue to fulfill their parental responsibilities by doing housework. The



participants narrated:

Sa bahay lang. Yung mga anak ko, pinapasyal pasyal ko ‘yan kapag may kita. Ginagagala ko ‘yan. [Just at home... I take my children out for a stroll whenever I have some earnings. I bring them around.] - Participant 4

Pwede ka rin umuwi, katulad ko na taga-dito lang ako diba? In case na kailangan ako ng anak ko or may okasyon, ganun. [You can also go home, especially if you just live here (in Puerto Princesa). That way, if my child needs me or there's a special occasion, I can be there.] - Participant 6

Kasi gigising naman po, magluluto ng pagkain...Oo tapos yung bata medyo makulit pa. [Because I have to wake up, cook, and the child can be hard to manage.] - Participant 4

3.3.2 Peer Relationships

Peer Acceptance. How the participants were accepted by their peers is covered in the first subtheme under peer relationships. Stigma poses a significant challenge in the realm of sex work (Weitzer, 2018). Berthe (2018) has described it as 'whore stigma,' targeting sex workers, particularly women who challenge traditional gender norms by engaging in activities such as providing sexual services, fulfilling desires, and potentially transmitting sexually transmitted infections. Nevertheless, one participant in this study mentioned that initially, people did not accept her because encountering a sex worker was uncommon. However, over time, as they realized that her job did not affect them and that she had no intentions toward their husbands, they eventually came to accept her. Consequently, they began to respect her as a person.

Bago lang sila naka-encounter ng ganitong babae nagtatrabaho dito. Pero katagalan, kasi, makikita nila na wala naman ako ginagawa sa kanila. Lalo na sa mga asawa nila. Ganun. Nere-respeto pa nga nila yan ako. [They've only recently encountered a woman working here. But over time, they saw that I don't bother them, especially their husbands, and they even come to respect me.] - Participant 5

Another participant related how she told a fellow churchgoer about her job and was welcomed by her.

Tapos yung nagasundo sa akin, naga-invite sa akin na si sister talaga - Sister Ivy. Yun matagal na talaga yun siya. Alam niya dito ko nagtatrabaho. [The one who picks me up and personally invites me is Sister Ivy. She's been here for a long time and knows that I work here.] - Participant 2

Resiliency. This second subtheme under peer relationships focused on individuals' ability to withstand or recover quickly from challenges. For female sex workers, their self-determination and resilience offer valuable insights into the factors that enable them to persevere and eventually exit sex work. Some factors contributing to their resiliency include positive attachments and effective coping mechanisms (Flores, 2021). However, the findings indicated that these factors primarily assist the participants in coping with the challenges they face in sex work among their peers. Participants mentioned that when entering this line of work, one must be prepared to endure discriminatory remarks and focus solely on how their job can provide for their needs.

Basta naga-trabaho ka sa ganito, kaya mo yan. [When you are in this kind of work, you can handle it.] - Participant 1

Social Discrimination. This subtheme under peer relationships goes into more detail about discrimination. According to Berthe (2018), derogatory terms, such as “prostitutes”, “hookers”, and “whores”, are often used to describe sex workers in the media, politics, and even research literature. These derogatory terms extend to the peers of sex workers, as some participants shared hearing the terms (which are all synonymous with being a whore) *pokpok*, *paiyot*, and *bayaran*, in casual settings, or worse, having those terms said to them.

Despite the fact that it is uncommon to hear positive stories from them about their interactions with peers outside of work, the participants shared that they had positive relationships with their coworkers and employers. Even though there were periods of misunderstanding, it was important for them that they work it out and make things right.

Okay naman. Magkakasundo. Parang kami kasi, parang magkakapatid na lang. Tapos yung amo naman namin yung magulang namin. Kapag may hindi pagkakaintindihan parang minimeeting talaga nila. [It's okay. We get along well, like we're siblings, and our employers are like our parents. When there's a misunderstanding, they make sure to address it with us.] - Participant 6

In Evens et al.'s (2019) study, participants reported that peer support enhanced their ability to manage their work. It suggests that peer support can provide emotional and practical support. This was proven in this study, as one participant also added that they like working with others, and it is important to get along well with your coworkers in any type of work.

3.3.3 Intimate Relationships

Partner's Acceptance. The first subtheme discusses how the participants' partners accepted them. In this case, the participants revealed that they had met their boyfriends at work and that they accepted them. Some insisted that their partner has no choice since, without their money from their job, their partner would not be able to support them and their family financially.

The participants narrated:

Wala. Di naman niya kayang suportahan eh, kaya, wala siyang choice. [Nothing. He can't support me (financially), so he doesn't really have a choice.] - Participant 8

Alam niya... dito naman kami nagkakilala ng partner ko eh. Ganun. [He knows... my partner and I actually met here.] - Participant 5

Acceptance has become an important role in the lives of sex workers, considering the nature of their work. Findings also echo the study of Vanwesenbeeck (2017) that sex workers face particular challenges in forming and maintaining intimate relationships, but that many can establish stable and fulfilling partnerships. Participants described the importance of trust, communication, and mutual respect in their relationships and the strategies they use to manage the emotional demands of their work.



Break From Sex Work. This second subtheme concerns taking a break from sex work, which is a prevalent factor among sex workers who had intimate relationships throughout the course of their job. Having intimate relationships has become their reason to leave sex work. Taking a break from sex work, on the other hand, has become their way to maintain their intimate relationship and avoid any misunderstandings that may arise.

Participant 2 narrated:

Pero kasi nagkaroon din ako ng kinakasama. Wala na rin, nawala na rin ako dito. Tapos nung namatay na naman yung kinakasama ko, saka ako bumalik. Pero nung naging kami na, nawala na ako dito. Nagtigil na ako.
[But I also had a partner. When we were together, I left this job. After he passed away, I came back.] - Participant 2

The case of Participant 2 reflected the experiences of other participants of having intimate partners, making them leave sex work only to go back again after a period of misunderstanding. It was during this time that they experienced abuse from their partners, who kept making derogatory remarks about sex work. Other participants shared:

...nagtitinda lang ako ng mga kakanin, nagluluto ako ng mga kakanin. Ang problema lang, seloso, binubugbog niya ako kaya naghiwalay ako sa kanya. Bumalik naman ako sa ganito. [... I was just selling and cooking snacks. The only problem was that he was jealous and would physically abuse me, so I left him and returned to this work.] - Participant 3

The participants' narratives highlight that intimate relationships still exist in their lives and often play a complex role in their engagement with sex work. For some, their partners' acceptance provides a sense of stability despite the persistent societal stigma. At the same time, intimate relationships can also catalyze change and lead them to temporarily leave sex work, as seen in the experiences of Participants 2 and 3. These narratives show that personal relationships also shape their decisions to remain in, step away from, or eventually return to sex work.

3.4 Pananatili

The *Pananatili* is the fourth and last base theme, which covers the participants' reasons for staying in sex work. The following subthemes occurred to explain the different reasons for staying in sex work, namely income, limited choice, and family responsibility.

3.4.1 Income

The first subtheme discusses income as the participants' reason for staying in sex work. It is their reason for staying since it enables them to pay their bills and make ends meet. Some of them say that they work in this line of work to pay bills and support themselves; some also say that they are in sex work because they are saving up money.

The findings confirmed the study of Miller et al. (2014) that sex workers are still doing this type of work because of financial necessity. Many women, according to their study, described sex work as one of the few avenues available through which they could feed and support themselves. This implies that these women may not have access to alternative sources of income that would enable them to meet their basic needs, support their children, and provide for their extended families. Sex work becomes a means of generating the income required for these purposes. Furthermore,

Drucker et al. (2018) revealed that some of their participants stated that they were saving up money just so they could pay off debts and save up so that they could invest in what they wanted to do in the future. This supports the other statements of the other participants about saving up the money they earn in sex work.

Limited Choice. This subtheme shows how participants do not have other choices, which led them to stay in this work. According to Participant 2, she will do everything for her grandchildren, whom she is supporting; if it were not for her grandchildren, she would not be staying in this line of work.

This confirmed the study conducted by Parmanand (2019) that for some sex workers, there is no other option but to stay in this industry of work to provide for their families or loved ones. This also confirms the study conducted by Oleveira (2017), which states that sex workers have this type of job because of how hard life is, and since they are in a position where they are the provider for their loved ones.

Family Responsibility. This also emerged as a sub-theme, which shows that participants stay in this work due to the loads of responsibility for their families. From helping siblings and children to grandchildren. Given how difficult it is to earn money, for the majority of them, this is the easiest method to make money that will meet the financial needs of their family.

Sa hirap ng buhay at para sa anak ko, kailangan kong magtiis. Magtiis muna. [Because of life's hardships and for the sake of my child, I have to endure. I just have to endure for now.] - Participant 4

Opo, ang mga apo ko nag-aaral. Gusto ko rin makatapos. [Yes, my grandchildren are studying. I also want them to finish their education.] - Participant 3

Yung bunso kong kapatid, yan tinutulungan ko talaga siya mag aral. [I really help my youngest sibling [by paying] for his studies.] - Participant 6

The findings revealed that participants' continued engagement in the industry is less a matter of personal preference and more a reflection of intergenerational and familial obligations. The narratives demonstrate that economic necessity, coupled with the responsibility of supporting children, grandchildren, and siblings, positions sex work as a strategy to fulfill these duties. Family thus emerges as both a source of pressure and resilience, with participants enduring hardship while framing their work as purposeful, highlighting how survival and duty intersect within a context of structural and economic constraints. It further confirmed the study conducted by Wanjiru et al. (2022) that sex workers are mostly inspired to continue their work because of their children or as the sole provider of the family, which they often see as resiliency for their family.

4. Conclusion

The experiences of the eight participants reveal that sex work is not merely an individual choice but a response shaped by structural pressures, such as poverty, single parenthood, limited education, and the absence of stable employment opportunities. When viewed through Goffman's Stigma Framework, their narratives critically underscore how stigma operates at multiple levels: as public judgment, as internalized shame, and as a force that compels sex workers to conceal their identities and manage how they are perceived within their communities.



The study demonstrates that stigma is not only a social reaction but a lived burden that shapes daily decisions, emotional labor, and relationships. Participants adopt strategies of identity management, such as selective disclosure, secrecy, and reframing their work as a form of survival to safeguard themselves and their families from discrimination. Yet, their stories also complicate common assumptions: despite being stigmatized, the women display resilience, agency, and moral responsibility, particularly in their roles as mothers and economic providers. Their peer networks and certain client interactions show that acceptance, respect, and understanding exist even within a stigmatized occupation.

Socially, the findings suggest that it is stigma, rather than the nature of sex work itself, that intensifies vulnerability. Discrimination heightens their exposure to violence, limits their mobility, and reinforces social exclusion. Conversely, when sex workers encounter respect, fair treatment, or supportive relationships, their safety and well-being improve. This shows that social attitudes and institutional responses play a crucial role in either perpetuating harm or enabling stability.

The study thus aligns with broader calls for comprehensive interventions that address the structural roots of stigma. Reducing discrimination, expanding access to healthcare, providing economic alternatives, and ensuring community protection are essential steps toward improving the lives of sex workers. These findings also emphasize that such efforts must be grounded in a city-level approach that treats sex work as a public health and human rights issue rather than a criminal one, ensuring that support systems provide services rather than criminalization, as supported by Vaghela et al. (2021). By focusing on Puerto Princesa, a provincial Philippine setting, this study expands the literature on stigma and sex work, offering insights into how social norms, economic constraints, and local cultural factors uniquely shape the lived experiences of sex workers outside major urban centers. Ultimately, the participants' narratives highlight the need to recognize sex workers not as social deviants but as individuals navigating constrained circumstances with dignity, resilience, and agency.

5. Recommendations

As the findings exposed systemic issues surrounding this line of work, highlighting structural poverty and cultural norms that contribute to the internalization of stigma associated with sex work, the study recommends several actions to support the well-being and rights of female sex workers in Puerto Princesa.

First, the City Government, alongside NGOs such as the Puerto Princesa City Health Social Hygiene Clinic, Palawan State University, and Roots of Health, should provide free healthcare services, including regular checkups and mental health counseling, to address gaps in accessible healthcare. Providing free contraceptives is also suggested to enable sex workers to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies and diseases. As Potter et al. (2022) noted, the primary challenges in delivering healthcare to street-based sex workers include the inflexibility of services, limited resources, and a lack of trauma-informed approaches. Thus, adopting trauma-informed healthcare practices and flexible scheduling could improve healthcare access and quality for this group, along with including sex workers in policies focused on violence prevention and decriminalization. Inspired by New Zealand's Prostitution Reform Act (2003), the study also highlights how elements of a decriminalization model could be adapted to the Philippine context—such as focusing on health, safety, and non-discriminatory access to services—even if full legal reform is not immediately feasible. Emphasizing harm reduction, local ordinances can prioritize protection rather than punishment, ensuring sex workers can seek support without fear of arrest or stigma.

Employment alternatives should be made available, as many sex workers expressed interest in leaving the industry if provided with other job opportunities. Initiatives like the UNAIDS Solidarity Fund, which supports economic self-sufficiency for marginalized communities, demonstrate successful alternative employment programs. Future researchers are encouraged to explore interventions that reduce stigma and ensure fair access to essential services, addressing healthcare disparities noted in this study.

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The researchers declare that there is no conflict of interest involved in the study.

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Role of the Authors

All authors: Conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis, manuscript writing, submission, revision



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