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Whether Sex Trade Contributes to the Labor Force or Contaminates Society Through Sexual Anarchy: A Socio-Religious Study for Policy Approach

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Abstract

Sex work remains a strongly contested phenomenon located at the intersection of economic subsistence, gender inequity, moral regulation, and policy formulation. From a labor-based theoretical perspective, sex work is conceptualized as a form of informalized labor practice in response to poverty and limited livelihood opportunities. Alternatively, socio-religious perspectives, specifically in religiously conservative societies, conceptualize the phenomenon as a moral disturbance and social ill. The current research aims to explore how these competing perspectives interact to shape the social construction of sex work in Bangladeshi society. Utilizing a mixed-methods research methodology, the current study relies on the collection of both quantitative data from a survey of 100 participants and in-depth interviews of 15 participants representing key social groups, including sex workers, religious intellectuals, civil society organizations, trade unions, and service providers in the district of Kushtia. The quantitative data have been analyzed using descriptive statistics, whereas the qualitative data have been analyzed using thematic analysis to explore moral rationalities, social stigma, and policy attitudes.The current study reveals that poverty and gender inequity are widely accepted as the prime causes of women's involvement in the phenomenon of sex work. However, despite the acceptance of the economic compulsion of the phenomenon, the majority of participants do not consider it a legitimate form of labor practice. Rather, the phenomenon of sex work is largely conceptualized as a moral disturbance, social stigma, and social ill, largely because of religious interpretations and socio-cultural norms. The current study further reveals the existence of a policy paradox in the Bangladeshi context, where the phenomenon of sex work is largely denied its moral legitimacy; however, the participants largely view the phenomenon of sex work as a social ill in need of social protection.

1. Introduction

Sex work broadly refers to the exchange of sexual services for money or material compensation and is commonly situated within informal economic arrangements that operate outside formal labor regulation. As a social phenomenon, sex work is shaped not only by economic necessity but also by cultural values, gender relations, moral judgments, and systems of governance. Precisely because it sits at this volatile intersection of the economic and the moral, sex work has appeared among the most controversial issues in current societal and academic discourse. Experts, policymakers, civil society representatives, and religious leaders are profoundly divided on its fundamental nature: is it a form of economic survival and informal labor, or does it represent a profound threat to social and moral order? Labor approaches perceive sex work as being associated with the service industry, and this creates additional sources of livelihood for individuals in situations where there are limited formal employment opportunities (Weitzer, 2012). On the other hand, moral and religious talk often views sex work as a threat to society and is linked with family breakdown, moral decline, and disorder (Farley, 2004). This is where sex work is caught up in a struggle involving economics, morality, gender, and governance. Moral debates about sex work are most evident in a society where there is religious conservatism. Bangladesh is a good example of a society where economic needs and moral governance are at odds. Poverty, inequality, a lack of job opportunities for women, and exclusion drive women into sex work as a survival strategy (Kabeer, 2016;

Huda et al., 2022). At the same time, Bangladeshi society, which is primarily organized around Islam's moral values, views prostitution as a form of Zina, which is a grave moral offence threatening family and moral cohesion and integrity. This is why prostitution is hardly analyzed as a mere economic phenomenon; instead, it is embedded in a moral narrative.

This bifurcation can be seen in the current literature. Economic and sociological studies highlight the existence of sex work as informal economic activity that supports the household and provides survival income in the context of structural inequality (Weitzer, 2009; Islam and Smyth, 2012; O'Doherty and Bowen, 2023). These studies, as they highlight the issue of agency and economic survival, provide relatively less focus to the moral and religious structures that influence the understanding of sex work in the context of deeply devout societies. On the other hand, studies in the realm of the religious and socio-cultural provide focus to the moral censure and the influence of social contamination in the context of deeply devout societies where sex work can be seen as detrimental to the household structures and the societal foundations (Sultana and Rahman, 2022).

Such fragmentation has significant implications for policy formulation in the context of Bangladesh. The current debates about the proposal of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission regarding the extension of labor rights for sex workers indicate the extent of the policy paradox existing in the situation. Although the proposal was intended for the mitigation of exploitation and improvement in access to legal rights and health services for sex workers, it received severe criticism from the community of religious groups (Dhaka Tribune, 2025). The controversy that arose in the situation makes it clear that sex workers are considered in general as a community of people who need to be protected because of their vulnerabilities; at the same time, the profession is largely opposed because of immorality.

This paper will examine the perceptions of sex work in Bangladesh in terms of its socio-economic and socio-religious perspectives. Instead of treating sex work merely as labor or immorality, the paper will assess the interplay of these two perspectives. Employing a mixed-method research design, the study investigates (a) the socio-economic factors influencing women's entry into sex work, (b) public perceptions of sex work as a form of labor contribution, (c) dominant moral and religious interpretations that frame sex work as socially contaminating, and (d) the implications for policy and rehabilitation strategies.By framing Bangladesh within various international discourses and emphasizing its specific socio-religious context, this research seeks to contribute to informed and sophisticated scholarship and to guide policy-making efforts to balance and harmonize principles of social protection, morality, and gender justice. Research on sex work has been conducted across various paradigms and disciplines, including sociology, economics, gender studies, health studies, and religious studies. Notably, there is presently an intense divide in research literature in terms of how to define and evaluate sex work. Broadly, there are two major and conflicting approaches to research and analysis of sex work. Both will be discussed in this section to highlight their respective roles and identify the specific research gap this research aims to fill.

There has been a body of literature that considers sex work as informal or survival labor, especially in environments characterized by poverty, unemployment, and inequality of the sexes. Using this approach, sex work can no longer be seen as immoral behavior but rather the result of limited economic choices in environments where vulnerabilities abound and opportunities for survival through alternative sources of income are limited.

Weitzer (2009) offers a significant sociological analysis that disputes easy categorizations of sex workers as passive victims or as fully empowered actors. He observes that the experiences of those engaged with sex work differ significantly depending on whether such work is legalized or not and what working conditions exist for them. In a legalized or semi-legaized context, for example, sex work can be a fairly stable economic option, but a criminalized context can actually increase levels of precarity and vulnerability.

Feminist and political economy perspectives place sex work in the context of capitalist exploitation and gendered divisions of labor. Cruz and Hardy (2021), with a Marxist-feminist perspective, highlight that sex work has commonalities with other undervalued types of reproductive service labor. They emphasize that the marginalization of sex work conceals the economic aspect of this type of labor, contributing to the marginalization of women in the labor market. Such an interpretation is significant, for instance, in countries with patriarchal cultures that limit women’s access to the formal economy.

Empirical studies conducted in Bangladesh and similar contexts support the economic survival theme. Islam & Smyth (2012), using labor market analysis tools, identify that in the Bangladeshi sex market, variables such as appearance, demand, and vulnerability to risk impact one's income. While their findings indicate that economic logics similar to those of other informal sectors govern the sex market, their study overlooks stigma, religious disapproval, and moral regulation of prostitution, which have a strong influence on sex workers' lives in Bangladesh.

Scholarship that focuses on gender explains that poverty, abandonment, divorce, and the lack of social security systems are the main factors that cause women to resort to sex work. Huda et al. (2022) provide insight into the way in which women exercise limited choice in the context of economic necessity and social exclusion, as exemplified in the case of sex workers in Bangladesh. In this case, the researchers also make a distinction between forced and voluntary entry into sex work, thus problematizing the notion of victimhood. However, despite recognizing the role of choice, the research admits that the context in which it is made is significantly unequal.

Recently, there has been a focus on understanding the views of sex workers regarding their own labor. O’Doherty and Bowen (2023) show that sex workers in the Global North view their work as an economically productive activity that allows them to support families and maintain social relations. Despite such views challenging popular discourses of stigmatization, their relevance to the context of Bangladesh is limited by a range of legal and cultural factors that differ significantly between the two settings. In the context of Bangladesh, the ability of sex workers to construct identities out of their labor is significantly impaired by moral stigmatization and exclusion.

Nevertheless, the literature that focuses on labor provides critical perspectives on the economic role of prostitution and the underlying inequalities of women's entry into the profession. However, much of the literature overlooks the role of religion, morality, and social values in defining what constitutes legitimate labor. This means that economic studies overlook why, despite its role in generating income, prostitution is considered unacceptable in a religion-influenced society.

Unlike the labor perspective, another body of literature views sex work from a moral, religious, and socio-cultural perspective. This perspective views the social issues associated with prostitution, such as the breakdown of family and community, immorality, and the destruction of community cohesion. According to this perspective, sex work is not judged on its economic value but on its moral significance.

Religious discourses have a prominent role in constructing these interpretations. In Islamic discourses, for instance, prostitution is usually conceptualized under the term 'Zina,' which is considered the main immoral act that has individual as well as collective consequences. According to Islamic scholars, sexual acts performed before marriage are illegal in terms of divine law because they threaten the moral fabric of society. Such negative stances are equally prevalent in other religions where sex work is identified with immorality, pollution, and moral disorder (Mokhwelepa & Olivia, 2024). In these theological interpretations, the boundaries between consensual sex work and exploitation are often conflated into a single moral construct. Sociological research offers further observations about moral condemnation producing stigma and exclusion in society. Sultana's (2022) ethnographic study conducted in Bangladesh demonstrates that sex workers are usually considered 'polluting agents' who threaten family honor and community stability. The study shows that moral stigma is internalized by sex workers who experience it in terms of their own identity and restricted access to social resources. This internalization of stigma is further reflected in their family lives where it perpetuates boundaries between 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' groups in society. Classical sociological theories offer some useful perspectives for comprehending these developments. The concept of 'anomie' in Durkheim's sociology draws attention to the way in which moral deviations trigger moral anxieties in society at large. Although Durkheim's work did not directly discuss sex work, it offers significant assistance in comprehending the way in which moral surveillance is triggered in society in response to prostitution. The concept of moral legitimacy discussed in Wolff's (1970) work similarly draws attention to the way in which moral norms are considered vital for maintaining social order in society; in other words, moral norms are seen to be under constant threat from immoral acts.

The research concerning public health issues has been important in creating a discourse about the relation of prostitution to sexually transmitted diseases. Harm-reduction policies promoted by organizations such as the World Health Organization emphasize prevention, treatment, and health protection rather than moral judgment (World Health Organization, 2012). However, public discourse often frames health risks as immorality, depicting sex workers as sources of social peril rather than as individuals in need of health care.

The moral framing of these issues has implications that go beyond those who are sex workers. Research indicates that stigma affects multiple generations, including children of sex workers, through discrimination in education, health care, and social interaction (Willis et al., 2014). This research shows that moral stigma leads to long-term social inequities and contributes to perceptions of contamination as a group-level and long-term process.

Nevertheless, morality-based scholarship overlooks the structural economic factors that lead women to become sex workers. This is because morality-based scholarship focuses on issues of sin, disorder, and decay. This approach may overlook poverty and a lack of employment opportunities. This implies that morality-based scholarship may justify practices of exclusion while providing no economic solutions for women.

Together, the literature suggests a split between economic and moral approaches to sex work. On the one hand, economic studies focus on survival, agency, and the informal economy, but they downplay the role of religious and moral regulation. On the other side, the socio-religious studies focus on stigma and purity and the moral order, but they disregard the economic constraints and needs. There are very few studies that attempt to combine both approaches and investigate the coexistence and interaction between economic needs and moral disapproval in the same social space.

This is especially the case in the context of Bangladesh, where the entry of poor women into the world of sex work co-exists with religious opposition to its social legitimacy. The current study fills an existing research gap by using a socio-religious framework to locate the phenomenon of economic survival within the moral framework of the religiously grounded social order. The study aims to explore the perceptions of various social groups to attempt to provide a more integrated view of the phenomenon of sex work.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A mixed-method research design was applied in order to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methods enabling an exploration of the empirical patterns as well as the individual socio-religious meanings related to sex work in Bangladesh. The overall research design is illustrated in Fig. 1. Mixed methods are particularly well suited to socially sensitive and morally disputed topics, enabling validation between numeric patterns and interpretative details (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative part gives descriptive results about what the public thinks about sex work, whilst the qualitative component extends these findings by giving insights into moral reasoning, religious interpretations and personal experiences. Figure 1 illustrates the overall mixed-method research design adopted in this study.

2.2 Study Area

The research was conducted in Kushtia District, Bangladesh, selected for its proximity to Daulatdia, one of the largest brothel zones in the country, which makes sex work a visible and socially relevant phenomenon in the local context. Additionally, the district's strong religious and socio-cultural character provides an appropriate setting to examine the intersection of economic vulnerability, morality, and social norms in shaping public attitudes toward sex work. The geographical location of the study area is presented in Fig. 2.

2.3 Sampling and Participants

Purposive and convenience sampling was used. Purposeful sampling aimed to ensure varied voices and perspectives on the research questions from relevant key stakeholder groups, including sex workers, religious scholars, civil society actors, labor bodies, and NGO or service providers. These groups were selected because of their diverging moral, cultural, and organizational views concerning religiosity and sex work.

A form of convenience sampling was adopted to gain access to participants, particularly sex workers who constitute a stigmatized group and for whom concerns about disclosure make probability sampling unrealistic. A total of 100 participants were recruited for the quantitative survey, while an additional 15 respondents were interviewed in depth. This sample size was considered adequate to produce descriptive statistical trends and rich thematic findings within the constraints imposed by the sensitive nature of the study. The distribution of sample units and sample size for both quantitative and qualitative components is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
The distribution of sample units and size (N = 100 and 15)

Sample units	**Sample size (For quantitative)**	**Sample size (for qualitative)**
Religious scholar	19	03
Sex worker	15	04
Civil society actor	37	03
Labor representative	15	03
Service/NGO representative	14	02
Total	100	15

2.4 Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected via a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. This questionnaire had closed question items which indicate how people perceive the socio-economic drivers of prostitution, how they view contributions to labour, moral and social effects, and their attitude towards the intervention of policies. Online methods were used to help people feel comfortable giving honest

responses without fear of being judged by others, which is imperative for obtaining truthful results on sensitive moral topics (Evans & Mathur, 2018).

Qualitative data were collected through conducting in-depth semi-structured IDIs. The interview guide allowed participants to express their moral reasoning, religion, emotions, and experience. To collect and report varied views on issues arising from the IDIs, a representative from each stakeholder group within the target population of participants was interviewed. Whenever consent to record interviews was obtained, the interviews were recorded on audio; otherwise, extensive notes were taken to accurately document the information presented. An integrated overview of the research design, methods, data collection techniques, and respondents is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Integrated focus of research methodology

Research Design	Methods	Sample size	Data Collection techniques	Respondent
Quantitative	Structure via Google forms containing closed-ended items	Opinion survey (100)	Purposive and convenience sampling strategies	1. Religious scholar 2. Sex worker 3. Civil Society 4. Labor representatives 5. Service/NGO representatives
Qualitative	In-depth Interview (15) through semi structured and open-ended questionnaire	In-depth interview (15)	Purposive sampling procedure, In-depth Interview (IDI) through open-ended questionnaire	

2.5 Data Analysis

For the quantitative data collected in the study, descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentage analysis, were used to describe the data. Since the research was exploratory, the study aimed to determine prevailing trends rather than the causal relationship between the study variables.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step approach proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The transcripts were translated into English. The data was read several times to become familiar with the information. The initial coding was done. The coding was then grouped into higher-level themes. The categories include economic factors, religious condemnation, social stigma, family effects, and legalization versus prohibition. This approach enhanced the transparency of the qualitative results.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Because of the sensitive nature of the topic under study, ethical considerations played a prominent role in this research. The participants in this study were all volunteers, and consent was obtained from each prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the objectives of this research, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the confidentiality of their information.

To ensure anonymity, no personal identifying information was collected, and all data was reported in aggregate or as anonymous quotes. Particular care was taken in interacting with sex workers in such a way as to ensure that they were not placed in any possible danger or discomfort as a result of the interaction.

Online surveys further enhanced confidentiality by allowing private responses. All responses were saved and viewed only by the researchers. This project generally followed best practices in ethics for social science research involving human subjects, paying particular attention to protocols for vulnerable populations.

3. Result

The current section will focus on the empirical results of the research. The quantitative results are first presented in this section to describe the pattern of responses in terms of the perceptions of the respondents. The qualitative results are then presented in this section to describe the major themes identified in the in-depth interviews.

3.1 Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

The socio-demographic characteristics of the survey respondents are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (N = 100)

Variable	Category	Number of Respondent	Percentage
Age	25–35	42	42%
	45–55	23	23%
	35–45	16	16%
	19–25	11	11%
	Above 55	6	6%
	13–19	2	2%
Gender	Male	69	69%
	Female	31	31%
Marital status	Married	49	49%
	Single	45	45%
	Divorced	3	3%
	Widowed	3	3%
Occupation	Mass Public	37	37%
	Daily Labourer	15	15%
	Service/NGO representatives	14	14%
	Religious scholar	19	19%
	Sex worker	15	15%
Education	Higher	74	74%
	Secondary	16	16%
	No schooling	7	7%
	Primary	3	3%

Table 3 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents included in the study. The survey involved 100 respondents from Kushtia District, selected across various age groups, educational levels, and occupational categories. A majority of the respondents were male (69%), with the largest age group being 25–35 years (42%), followed by those aged 45–55 years (23%) and 35–45 years (16%). In terms of marital status, most respondents were married (49%) or single (45%). The majority of respondents had higher education (74%). Regarding occupation, respondents from the general public

constituted the largest group (37%), followed by religious scholars (19%), sex workers (15%), service/NGO representatives (14%), and daily laborers (15%).

3.2 Quantitative Findings

In this part of the study, quantitative and qualitative data relating to the study objectives are presented through various methods and simultaneously analyzed while maintaining consistency with the core research objectives.

Entry Factors: Poverty and Gender Inequality

Figure 3 presents respondents' perceptions of two major entry factors influencing women's involvement in sex work in Bangladesh: poverty as the primary economic driver and gender inequality as a structural constraint limiting women's access to alternative livelihood opportunities.

Table 4
Respondents' Perceptions of Entry Factors into Sex Work (Poverty and Gender Inequality)

Category	Poverty (%)	Gender Inequality (%)
Disagree	13.73%	20%
Neutral	4.90%	20%
Agree	81.37%	60%

Table-4 presents a consolidated view of respondents' opinion regarding two major determinants of women's entry into sex work

poverty *and* **gender inequality**. *When the Likert-scale responses are reorganized into three categories i.,e Agree, Neutral and Disagree and thereby developed a clear pattern emerges.*

Respondents' perceptions of the determinants of women's engagement in sex work are presented in Fig. 3 and Table 4 below. Poverty was identified as the key determinant, as 81.37% of respondents agreed that women get into sex work as a result of poverty, while 13.73% disagree and 4.9% were undecided. Gender inequality was also identified as a determinant, but not as widely: 60% agreed, 20% disagreed, and 20% were undecided.

This suggests that the main constraints identified by the subjects are structural socio-economic factors, such as poverty and gender inequality.

Perceptions of Labor Contribution

Table 5 presents respondents' attitudes toward whether sex work is a positive contribution to the country's overall economic well-being. Only 11% agreed that sex work is legitimate work, while 19% agreed that it is income for families. However, 77% to 87% disagreed with both questions.The data

indicate that despite the economic necessity of sex work, the respondents did not view it as legitimate work.

Perceptions of Moral Contamination

A large majority of respondents associated sex work with undesirable societal effects. High levels of agreement were found for the statements concerning the breakdown of family institutions (91%), rise in crime (87%), rise in social disorder (91%), and the transmission of venereal diseases (91%) (Table 5). This pattern illustrates the strong moral and social stigma associated with sex work. It should be noted that the activity was disapproved of in society, but the sympathies of the respondents lay with the women who practiced sex work due to economic necessity and the lack of other options.

Table 5

Percentage distribution of respondents' opinion on sex workers' contribution and contaminating roles

This table presents the percentage breakdown of respondents' views across three categories **Agree, Neutral, and Disagree** for six statements depend on two broad dimensions addressing whether sex work contributes positively (e.g., supporting family income) or contaminates society (e.g., harming morality, increasing crime, or causing social stigma).

Two dimensions	Statements	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
1. Contributor as domestic economic wellbeing	i)Sex work should be recognized as legitimate labor	11.0%	87.0%	2.0%
	ii)Sex work provides income that helps families survive	19.0%	77.0%	4.0%
2. Contamination agent for familial and social harms	i)Sex work weakens family structures	91.0%	5.0%	4.0%
	ii)Sex work increases crime in society	87.0%	5.0%	8.0%
	iii)Sex work increases social disorder	91.0%	7.0%	2.0%
	iv)Sex work spreads sexually transmitted diseases	91.0%	5.0%	4.0%

The findings in Table 5 *reveal a strong negative perception of sex work among respondents, with overwhelming agreement on statements highlighting harmful or contaminating effects. At the same time, responses to supportive or contribution-related items show significantly lower agreement levels, indicating that respondents largely reject the idea of sex work as a positive or legitimizable activity.*

3.3 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data was then analyzed in a thematic manner in accordance with the six-step approach proposed in Braun & Clarke (2006), facilitating the organization of the data in a systematic manner to be able to present the themes emerging from the data. Four major themes were derived from this analysis.

Theme 1: Economic Pressure, Gender Inequality, and Survival

Participants have consistently mentioned poverty as a principal driving force for women to enter into sex work. Poverty was often associated with inequality of women, patriarchal societies, violence against women, and lack of access to property and employment. Many of the respondents have reiterated that women's vulnerability to poverty limits their ability to earn a decent living.

As one respondent stated:

“Poverty is the main reason. When a family cannot eat, women get trapped.” (Labor leader)

Several participants highlighted that entry into sex work often occurs through coercion, deception, or trafficking, rather than voluntary choice:

“For most of us, it starts with poverty, but also betrayal; many were tricked, sold, or promised jobs.” (Sex worker)

Others emphasized the structural nature of labor exclusion:

“Lack of jobs forces women into this profession; the poor are always the victims.” (Religious scholar)

Gendered labor norms were repeatedly mentioned as a constraint:

“Men can work anywhere, but women get judged.” (NGO representative)

“Gendered social structure, cultural expectations, and patriarchal values of rural society deprive women of their legal rights to inherited property and push them into abandonment.” (Civil society actor)

In addition to survival-driven entry, participants identified the emergence of digital sex work, particularly among young and educated women. This sub-theme reflects changing economic strategies enabled by technology. University students are turning to online sex work… They use IMO, Telegram, OnlyFans—quick money and independence.” (Student)

“For me personally, it was also about freedom and easy income. Digital work gave me quick money compared to other student jobs.” (Online sex worker)

Some respondents also noted the coexistence of poverty and consumer aspirations: some do it for survival, others for smartphones or luxury. Poverty and consumerism are now mixed.” (Civil society member)

Overall, participants consistently described economic pressure and gender inequality as interconnected forces shaping women’s vulnerability to sex work.

Theme 2: Religious and Moral Condemnation

Religious and moral condemnation emerged as a dominant theme across interviews. Participants from diverse religious backgrounds described sex work as sinful, immoral, and incompatible with religious

teachings. Islamic discourse was particularly prominent, reflecting the study area's religious composition.

Several Islamic scholars emphasized the religious prohibition of sex work:

“This is Zina; society will face Allah’s wrath.” (Islamic scholar)

“Islam is clear: this is Zina (forbidden act), not labor.” (Islamic scholar)

“Sex work brings Allah’s anger upon society. It’s not only a personal sin—it’s a collective sin.” (Imam)

Moral condemnation was not limited to Islam. Participants referenced religious norms across traditions:

“In Hindu dharma, it is paap (sin)—it destroys karma and family honor.” (Hindu priest)

“No religion accepts prostitution as honest work. It is against divine law.” (Christian pastor)

One respondent summarized the interfaith consensus:

“Islam forbids Zina; Christianity condemns immorality; Hinduism prescribes righteous living; Buddhism discourages sexual misconduct; Judaism condemns prostitution.” (Interfaith scholar)

These narratives indicate that religious morality serves as a strong boundary against recognizing sex work as legitimate labor, framing it as a violation of divine and social order.

Theme 3: Family, Community, and Social Impact

Participants overwhelmingly portrayed sex work as socially corrosive, emphasizing its perceived impact on families, children, and community cohesion. Stigma and exclusion were recurring motifs, extending beyond individual sex workers to their relatives and neighborhoods.

Sex workers described experiences of rejection and social isolation:

“Families reject us, marriages collapse, and society spits on us.” (Sex worker)

“Society looks at us as if we are dirty. Even in death, our bodies are refused in the graveyard.” (Former sex worker)

Participants repeatedly emphasized the consequences for children:

“Children of sex workers are bullied, excluded, and treated as outcasts from birth.” (Civil society activist)

“Children of sex workers are rejected in schools and society. They carry stigma through no fault of their own.” (Teacher)

Religious and community leaders linked sex work to family breakdown:

“Sex work destroys families; the husband leaves, the wife hides, and children grow up in silence and shame.” (Religious leader)

Concerns were also raised about community safety:

“In brothel areas, crime and drugs are common. It’s not safe for children or women to live nearby.” (Daily laborer)

“Sex work increases crime, drug use, and insecurity in communities.” (Community resident)

Collectively, these narratives depict sex work as a phenomenon perceived to generate enduring social stigma, family disruption, and insecurity at the community level.

Participants expressed sharply divided views regarding the legalization or prohibition of sex work. A majority supported complete prohibition, viewing sex work as incompatible with religious, moral, and cultural values. stated:

“The government must ban sex work to protect morality.” (General public respondent)

“Society should reject it completely and enforce strong laws.” (Religious leader)

Others expressed conditional or pragmatic views:

“Regulate it secretly, due to immorality.” (Community member)

Sex workers and NGO representatives emphasized protection rather than moral recognition:

“Legal recognition could protect us from police harassment, but society will never respect us.” (Sex worker)

“Banning will not end it—it will just push it underground. We need safer systems.” (NGO worker)

Some respondents opposed legalization while supporting human protection:

“Sex workers should be protected as human beings, but sex work itself should not be legalized.” (Social activist)

These responses illustrate a tension between moral rejection and humanitarian concern, with many participants supporting protection and harm reduction measures without granting legitimacy to sex work as labor.

4.Discussion

This paper explores whether sex work in Bangladesh is viewed as a contribution within a labor framework or as a source of moral contamination within society. It is evident that there is a great

imbalance within these perspectives. Even though it is recognized that economic factors such as poverty and inequality contribute greatly to women engaging in sex work, it is not recognized as a source of economic contribution within society. On the contrary, it is viewed as a source of moral degradation and societal disorientation. This is because it is measured within a socio-religious framework, where economic activities that sustain life must be understood in their moral and spiritual contexts.

4.1 Economic necessity without labor legitimacy

Evidence from quantitative data reveals the existence of broad agreement among participants in recognizing poverty as the main factor pushing women into sex work, while a large percentage of participants also agree on the role of inequality in shaping women's experiences in sex work. This supports similar research conducted in Bangladesh and similar environments, in which economic deprivation and patriarchal societies have emerged as core factors in women's involvement in sex work (Kabeer, 2016; Huda et al., 2022). This can also be verified through participants' narratives.

Despite the acknowledgment of economic compulsion, the majority do not agree that sex work can be considered labor. Only a few agree to consider it legitimate work or an important part of survival. This is at odds with more labor-focused views, which consider it to be part of the service economy (Weitzer, 2009; O'Doherty & Bowen, 2023). The reality in Bangladesh is that economic functionality does not necessarily render it legitimate. Labor is not simply measured by its ability to earn money, but by its acceptability as moral and within the frameworks of religion and culture.

4.2 Moral framing and the logic of social contamination

One of the key findings emerging from the research is the strength of moral condemnation that is consistently shown towards the practice of sex work. A large number of respondents perceive the practice of sex work as contributing towards weak family structures, high levels of crime, social disorganization, and the growth of sexually transmitted diseases. These perceptions go beyond the moral norms of the individual respondents and represent a social construction of the practice of sex work as 'tainted.'

Religious discourse is a crucial aspect of this moral framing. For instance, in the case of Bangladesh, which has strong Islamic values, the act of sex work is often framed using the notion of Zina, which views this act not as a conditional economic strategy but rather as a morally reprehensible act. The qualitative findings have pointed out that this act of sex work is viewed not only as an individual act with moral implications but rather as one that has the ability to produce social or spiritual implications that go beyond the individual.

This moral construct also applies to the families and children of sex workers. In many cases, the stigma was seen as intergenerational. The impact was felt in terms of education, acceptance, and opportunities. These results align with previous research showing that stigma is an enduring social process that

perpetuates exclusion and marginalization (Sultana, 2022; Willis et al., 2014). In the given scenario, social contamination is not only metaphorical but also reflects social reality.

4.3 The policy paradox: protection without legitimization

One of the major contributions of this research is to highlight this policy paradox. While most respondents are opposed to sex work being considered legitimate, they are also concerned with the welfare of sex workers. This paradox is reflected in their attitudes towards legalization and regulation. While most respondents are opposed to sex work due to moral reasons, there is recognition in their narratives that criminalization increases their vulnerability.

This paradox is a representation of what is at stake in Bangladeshi policy debates, especially those involving proposals to extend labor rights to sex workers. The results of this study have shown that opposition to such proposals is based not on a disregard for the problems of sex workers, but rather a belief that to recognize sex work as a form of labor is to condone it. In a religious country, policies that condone practices deemed illegal by moral values can lead to a loss of legitimacy, regardless of their positive implications.

Instead of a dichotomous approach to this problem that focuses on a policy of legalization versus criminalization, what emerges from these results is a more complex logic at work: sex workers are seen as a group of people deserving of protection as a matter of principle, while sex work as a legitimate occupation within a society is unacceptable. Such a policy approach is congruent with a body of literature that focuses not merely on economic or legal imperatives for policy acceptance but rather on moral economies within a religiously based society.

4.4 Implications for theory and policy

In this way, the results contribute to theoretical discourse by showing how the relationships between labor and morality, and between morality and religion, shape the public understanding of contentious forms of labor. In particular, whereas in other settings the value of labor may be assessed in terms of economic contribution, the Bangladeshi example suggests the significance of moral legitimacy as a precursor to the social validation of labor.

Regarding policies, the study's implications are that solutions must balance economic and moral considerations. Eradicating poverty, gender equity in labor markets, and education can reduce women’s vulnerability to sex work. Meanwhile, messaging in policies must include religious and community leaders to ensure that support policies are not misconstrued as condoning immorality. Solutions that center on rehabilitation, harm reduction without normalization, and religious sensitivity may provide better alternatives than labor rights recognition alone.

4.5 Limitations of the Study

The study yields useful information on the socio-religious construction of sex work in Bangladesh; nevertheless, there are some aspects of the investigation that need to be considered.

First, the research was carried out in Kushtia District alone. While this location gives access to one of the biggest brothel areas in the country and has unique socio-religious characteristics, it represents only one geographical location. This implies that the results cannot necessarily be generalized to other parts of the country, where the demographics of the region, religious traditions, and living conditions might vary widely.

Second, the sample size of survey respondents is 100 people, and 15 more people participated in in-depth interviews. The number of participants was dictated by the nature of the research topic – it required conducting surveys and interviews with members of a stigmatized group in order to ensure valid findings. Despite being sufficient for the analysis performed in the study, it relatively small for statistical generalization of the results to the entire Bangladeshi population.

Third, purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used in selecting respondents, especially in relation to sex workers. The reason for that is connected to the difficulties related to applying random sampling in studies of hidden populations. As a result, certain selection biases might occur since individuals who agreed to take part in the research might differ from those who refused.

Fourth, social desirability bias is likely to affect participants' answers, especially in the case of the survey, because discussing religion and sex is usually not socially acceptable in Bangladesh. Thus, respondents would have presented themselves as conforming to the dominant religious values, even if they held different opinions.

Fifth, the study applies a cross-sectional design, meaning that it captures the current situation and does not provide information regarding changes over time. For example, attitudes toward prostitution might shift during discussions about new policies (e.g., those suggested by the Women's Affairs Reform Commission), but the results would miss that information.

Lastly, thematic analysis used to analyze interview responses is based on interpretation performed by the researcher. Further reliability can be achieved if two researchers conduct independent coding of responses, or if member checking is applied.

Despite these limitations, the study still makes an important contribution to the existing literature by combining socio-economic and socio-religious perspectives and offering contextualized findings relevant to policy discussions.

Future research may consider larger, multi-regional samples and longitudinal designs to build upon the findings of this study.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following are proposed strategies to address the social, moral, and economic issues related to sex work in Bangladesh:

5.1. Poverty Reduction and Alternative Livelihoods

- Enhance the available flexible income-generating initiatives for the vulnerable sections of society, especially widowed women, single parents, and physically or mentally handicapped women, especially in rural areas.
- Offering vocational training in textiles, information and communication technology, handicrafts, and services in order to provide safe and socially acceptable alternatives for sex work.
- Enhance the coordination of micro-finance institutions and non-governmental organizations in facilitating women's self-employment through easily accessible micro-credits and technological mentorship.

5.2. Gender Inequality and Patriarchal Structures

- Ensure the provision of free and accessible education for girls and women of all ages with a focus on education and skills in areas such as leadership and economic independence.
- Implement strong anti-trafficking laws and gender violence laws to protect women within institutions of learning, workplaces, and public spaces.
- Ensure that marginalized women are well represented in both local and national formal sectors to promote social inclusion and women's empowerment.

5.3. Religious and Community Engagement

- Link all reform initiatives to societal norms and religious values, recognizing religion as a transnational moral tool rather than a penal one.
- Engage Imams, pastors, and other religious leaders in a constructive dialogue focused on compassion, rehabilitation, and justice.
- Create faith-based social reintegration initiatives in partnership with community-based organizations that offer counseling, legal, and vocational services, as well as social reintegration support.
- Urge religious institutions to emphasize the importance of mercy, dignity, and safeguarding the welfare of the most vulnerable in society, to alter public attitudes away from punitive models of redemption.

5.4. Policy Reform and Rehabilitation

- Implement harmonized legal standards for coerced and voluntary sex workers while arguing that sex work is not considered a legal occupation.
- Create regulations for the benefit of protection for the existing sex workers, including access to justice, health, and rehabilitation without legalizing the occupation.

- Combine economic support with moral and socio-cultural considerations in policy formulation, avoiding approaches that might distance the majority while continuing to address the humanitarian goal.
- Enhance shelters, counseling, and educational facilities for the existing sex workers who want to quit the industry.

5.5. Research, Advocacy, and Public Awareness

- Encourage interdisciplinary research that brings together theology, sociology, and gender studies to shed light on the moral economies at play in Muslim-majority countries.
- Urge civil society groups and scholars to fight for social justice while maintaining sound moral values.
- Encourage the media to practice moral reporting on the subject of sex work, humanizing the lives of sex workers instead of using sensationalistic themes that are often materialistic.

In summary, the proposals not only address the legal and economic changes needed in the context but also the moral, cultural, and spiritual issues that shape the community's views on sex work in Bangladesh. It is important to have an integrated approach to achieve a humane and sustainable solution to the issues related to sex work.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the views of the general populace in Bangladesh in regard to the phenomenon of sex work in the context of economic necessity and socio-religious morality. Through the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the research results suggest a paradox acknowledging economic necessity and gender inequality as the fundamental factors in women’s engagement in sex work, while simultaneously condemning it as a form of legitimate economic activity.

Contributing to the existing literature, this study finds that labor legitimacy in Bangladesh is not exclusively linked to income production or survival imperatives. Instead, moral acceptability, which is largely influenced by religious ideologies, can be considered a precursor to the recognition of labor. Such findings call into question the universal applicability of the labor paradigm in contexts where moral legitimacy shapes the social recognition of work.

From a policy point of view, there seems to exist a paradox in that the occupation of sex work is largely disapproved of, but there is a great concern for the welfare of the sex workers. A policy that solely targets workers' welfare may face resistance, but a strategy that aims at protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration could gain society's acceptance. Addressing poverty, gender inequality, and limited livelihood opportunities may offer pathways to reduce women's economic vulnerability to sex work without endorsing the occupation itself. Future studies may be conducted on comparable cases within Muslim-majority countries or target policymakers and religious leaders to elicit contextually appropriate

responses. The integration of socio-economic and moral approaches may help policymakers devise appropriate responses to one of the most controversial debates in social policy today.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted with human participants and their data. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Public Administration, Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh. The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Freely given, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. No personal identifying information was collected, and strict confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. All participants were adults above the age of 18.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests relevant to the content of this article.

Author Contribution

B.R.M. conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, supervised data collection, and provided overall academic guidance. M.M.R. conducted the literature review, carried out data analysis, and drafted the initial manuscript. B.R.M. and M.M.R. jointly interpreted the findings, revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content, and approved the final version for submission. All authors reviewed and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

Availability of Data and MaterialThe data generated and analysed during this study cannot be made publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and the need to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. The study draws on primary data collected through a structured survey (n = 100) and in-depth interviews (n = 15) conducted with participants from vulnerable and stigmatised groups, including sex workers, in Kushtia District, Bangladesh. Disclosure of this data could risk re-identification of participants and cause harm. Secondary data referenced in this study are drawn from published sources cited in the reference list, all of which are publicly accessible via their respective DOIs. Anonymised primary data may be made available upon reasonable written request to the

corresponding author (drbegumroksanamili@gmail.com), subject to ethical review and institutional data governance requirements.

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Figures

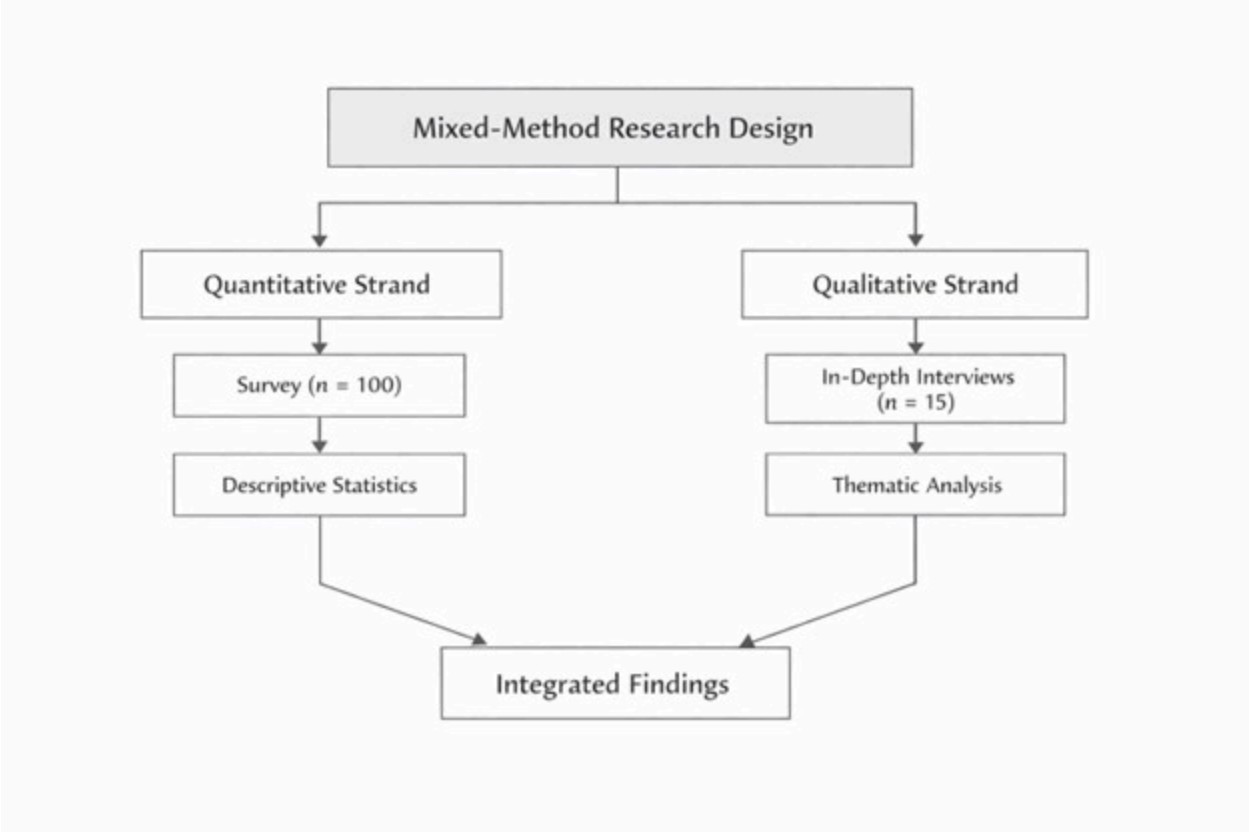


Figure 1

Flow diagram of the mixed-method research design adopted in the study illustrating the integration of quantitative survey data (n = 100) and qualitative in-depth interviews (n = 15)

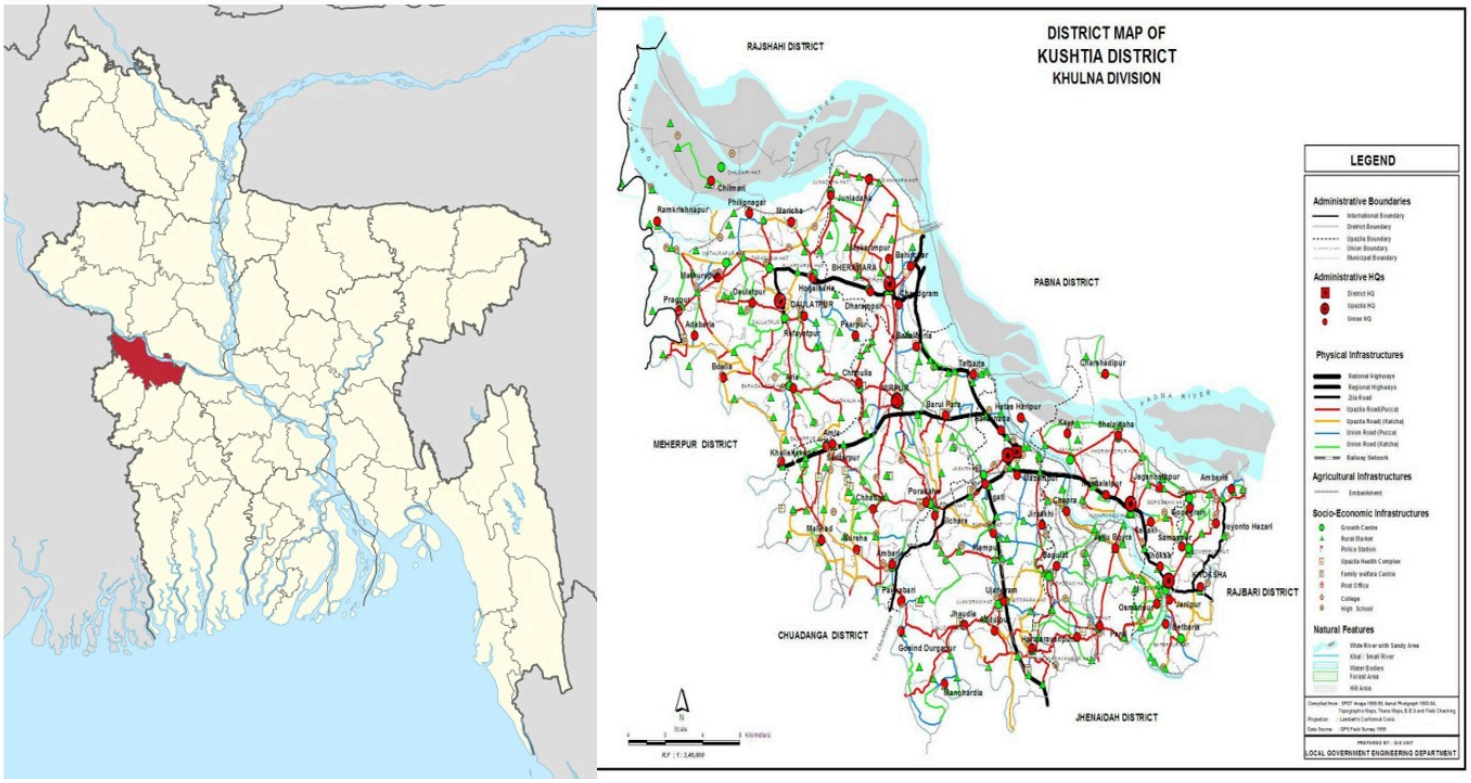


Figure 2

Geographical location of the study area in Kushtia District Khulna Division Bangladesh

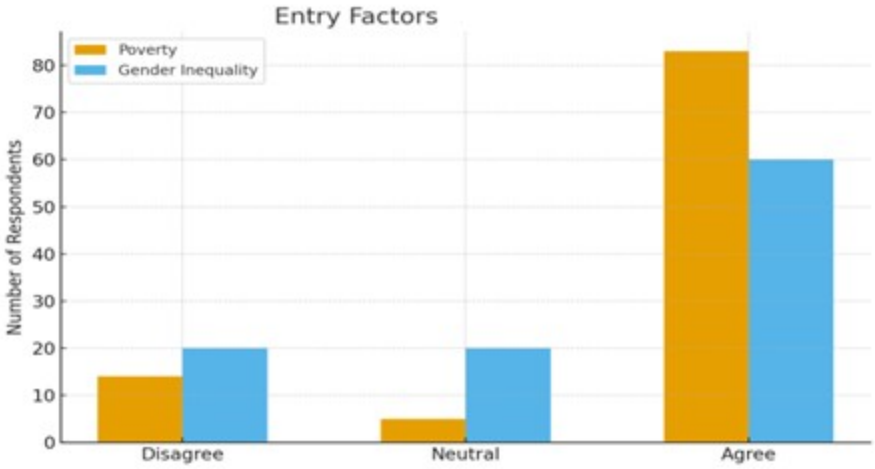


Figure 3

Respondents' perceptions of entry factors into sex work in Bangladesh including poverty and gender inequality